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UNEARTHLY

CYNTHIA HAND

HARPER TEEN

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Unearthly

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www.harperteen.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Neely, Cynthia.

Unearthly / Cynthia Hand. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: Sixteen-year-old Clara Gardner's purpose as an angel-blood begins to manifest itself, forcing her family to pull up stakes and move to Jackson, Wyoming, where she learns that danger and heartbreak come with her powers.

ISBN 978-0-06-199616-0

[1. Angels—Fiction. 2. Supernatural—Fiction. 3. High schools—Fiction. 4. Schools—Fiction. 5. Moving, Household—Fiction. 6. Family life—Wyoming—Fiction. 7. Jackson (Wyo.)—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.N35Une 2011

2010017849

[Fic]—dc22

CIP

AC

Typography by Andrea Vandergrift

11 12 13 14 15 LP/RRDB 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



First Edition

For John

*The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—
and also afterward—when the angels went
to the daughters of men and had children by them.*

They were the heroes of old, men of renown.

—Genesis 6:4



PROLOGUE

In the beginning, there's a boy standing in the trees. He's around my age, in that space between child and man, maybe all of seventeen years old. I'm not sure how I know this. I can only see the back of his head, his dark hair curling damply against his neck. I feel the dry heat of the sun, so intense, drawing the life from everything. There's a strange orange light filling the eastern sky. There's the heavy smell of smoke. For a moment I'm filled with such a smothering grief that it's hard to breathe. I don't know why. I take a step toward the boy, open my mouth to call his name, only I don't know it. The ground crunches under my feet. He hears me. He starts to turn. One more second and I will see his face.

That's when the vision leaves me. I blink, and it's gone.



1

ON PURPOSE

The first time, November 6 to be exact, I wake up at two a.m. with a tingling in my head like tiny fireflies dancing behind my eyes. I smell smoke. I get up and wander from room to room to make sure no part of the house is on fire. Everything's fine, everybody sleeping, tranquil. It's more of a campfire smoke, anyway, sharp and woodsy. I chalk it up to the usual weirdness that is my life. I try, but can't get back to sleep. So I go downstairs. And I'm drinking a glass of water at the kitchen sink, when, with no other warning, I'm in the middle of the burning forest. It's not like a dream. It's like I'm *physically* there. I don't stay long, maybe all of thirty seconds, and then I'm back in the kitchen,

standing in a puddle of water because the glass has fallen from my hand.

Right away I run to wake Mom. I sit at the foot of her bed and try not to hyperventilate as I go over every detail of the vision I can remember. It's so little, really, just the fire, the boy.

"Too much at once would be overwhelming," she says. "That's why it will come to you this way, in pieces."

"Is that how it was when you received your purpose?"

"That's how it is for most of us," she says, neatly dodging my question.

She won't tell me about her purpose. It's one of those off-limits topics. This bugs me because we're close, we've always been close, but there's this big part of her that she refuses to share.

"Tell me about the trees in your vision," she says. "What did they look like?"

"Pine, I think. Needles, not leaves."

She nods thoughtfully, like this is an important clue. But me, I'm not thinking about the trees. I'm thinking about the boy.

"I wish I could have seen his face."

"You will."

"I wonder if I'm supposed to protect him."

I like the idea of being his rescuer. All angel-bloods have purposes of different types—some are messengers, some witnesses, some meant to comfort, some just doing things that cause other things to happen—but *guardian* has a nice ring to

it. It feels particularly angelic.

“I can’t believe you’re old enough to have your purpose,” Mom says with a sigh. “Makes me feel old.”

“You *are* old.”

She can’t argue with that, being that she’s over a hundred and all, even though she doesn’t look a day over forty. I, on the other hand, feel exactly like what I am: a clueless (if not exactly ordinary) sixteen-year-old who still has school in the morning. At the moment I don’t feel like there’s any angel blood in me. I look at my beautiful, vibrant mother, and I know that whatever her purpose was, she must have faced it with courage and humor and skill.

“Do you think . . . ,” I say after a minute, and it’s tough to get the question out because I don’t want her to think I’m a total coward. “Do you think it’s possible for me to be killed by fire?”

“Clara.”

“Seriously.”

“Why would you say that?”

“It’s just that when I was standing there behind him, I felt so sad. I don’t know why.”

Mom’s arms come around me, pull me close so I can hear the strong, steady beating of her heart.

“Maybe the reason I’m so sad is that I’m going to die,” I whisper.

Her arms tighten.

“It’s rare,” she says quietly.

“But it does happen.”

“We’ll figure it out together.” She hugs me closer and smooths the hair away from my face the way she used to when I had nightmares as a kid. “Right now you should rest.”

I’ve never felt more awake in my life, but I stretch out on her bed and let her pull the covers over us. She puts her arm around me. She’s warm, radiating heat like she’s been standing in sunshine, even in the middle of the night. I inhale her smell: rosewater and vanilla, an old lady’s perfume. It always makes me feel safe.

When I close my eyes, I can still see the boy. Standing there waiting. For me. Which seems more important than the sadness or the possibility of dying some gruesome fiery death. He’s waiting for me.

I wake to the sound of rain and a soft gray light seeping through the blinds. I find Mom standing at the kitchen stove scraping scrambled eggs into a serving bowl, already dressed and ready for work like any other day, her long, auburn hair still wet from the shower. She’s humming to herself. She seems happy.

“Morning,” I announce.

She turns, puts down the spatula, and crosses the linoleum to give me a quick hug. Her smile is proud, like that time I won the district spelling bee in third grade: proud, but like she never expected anything less.

“How are you doing this morning? Hanging in there?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“What’s going on?” my brother, Jeffrey, says from the doorway.

We turn to look at him. He’s leaning against the door-jamb, still ruffled with sleep and smelly and grumpy as usual. He’s never been what you might call a morning person. He stares at us. A flicker of fear crosses his face, like he’s bracing for horrible news, like someone we know has died.

“Your sister has received her purpose.” Mom smiles again, but it’s less jubilant than before. A cautious smile.

He looks me up and down like he’ll be able to find evidence of the divine somewhere on my body. “You had a vision?”

“Yeah. About a forest fire.” I shut my eyes and see it all again: the hillside crowded with pine trees, the orange sky, the smoke rolling past. “And a boy.”

“How do you know it wasn’t just a dream?”

“Because I wasn’t asleep.”

“So what does it mean?” he asks. All this angel-related information is new to him. He’s still in that time when the supernatural stuff can be exciting and cool. I envy him that.

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “That’s what I’ve got to find out.”

I have the vision again two days later. I’m in the middle of jogging laps around the outside edge of the Mountain View High School gymnasium, and suddenly it hits me, just like

that. The world as I know it—California, Mountain View, the gym—promptly vanishes. I’m in the forest. I can actually *taste* the fire. This time I see the flames cresting the ridge.

And then I almost crash into a cheerleader.

“Watch it, dorkina!” she says.

I stagger to one side to let her pass. Breathing hard, I lean against the folded-up bleachers and try to get the vision back. But it’s like trying to return to a dream after you’re fully awake. It’s gone.

Crap. No one’s ever called me a dorkina before. Derivative of dork. Not good.

“No stopping,” calls Mrs. Schwartz, the PE teacher. “We want to get an accurate record of how fast you can run a mile. That means you, Clara.”

She must have been a drill sergeant in another life.

“If you don’t make it in less than ten minutes you’ll have to run it again next week,” she hollers.

I start running. I try to focus on the task at hand as I swoop around the next corner, keeping my pace quick to make up some of the time I’ve lost. But my mind wanders back to the vision. The shapes of the trees. The forest floor under my feet strewn with rocks and pine needles. The boy standing there with his back to me as he watches the fire approach. My suddenly so-very-rapidly-beating heart.

“Last lap, Clara,” says Mrs. Schwartz.

I speed up.

Why is he there? I wonder, not closing my eyes but still

seeing his image like it's burned onto my retinas. Will he be surprised to see me? My mind races with questions, but underneath them all there is only one:

Who is he?

At that point I blow past Mrs. Schwartz, sprinting hard.

"Good, Clara!" she calls. And then, a minute later, "That can't be right."

Slowing to a walk, I circle back to find out my time.

"Did I get it under ten minutes?"

"I clocked you at five forty-eight." She sounds truly shocked. She looks at me like she's having visions too, of me on the track team.

Whoops. I wasn't paying attention, wasn't holding back. I'm going to catch some major flack if Mom finds out.

I shrug.

"The watch must have been messed up," I explain, trying for laid-back, hoping she'll buy it even though it means I'll have to run the stupid thing again next week.

"Yes," she says, nodding distractedly. "I must have started it wrong."

That night when Mom gets home she finds me slouched on the couch watching reruns of *I Love Lucy*.

"That bad, huh?"

"It's my fallback when I can't find *Touched by an Angel*," I reply sarcastically.

She pulls a pint of Ben and Jerry's Chubby Hubby out of a

paper sack. Like she read my mind.

“You’re a goddess,” I say.

“Not quite.”

She holds up a book: *Trees of North America, A Guide to Field Identification*.

“Maybe my tree’s not in North America.”

“Let’s just start with this.”

We take the book to the kitchen table and bend over it together, searching for the exact type of pine tree from my vision. To someone on the outside we’d look like nothing more than a mother helping her daughter with her homework, not a pair of part-angels researching a mission from heaven.

“That’s it,” I say at last, pointing to a picture in the book and then rocking back in my chair, feeling pretty pleased with myself. “The lodgepole pine.”

“Twisted yellowish needles found in pairs,” Mom reads from the book. “Brown, egg-shaped cone?”

“I didn’t get a close look at the pinecones, Mom. It’s just the right shape, with the branches starting partway up the trunk like that, and it feels right,” I answer around a spoonful of ice cream.

“Okay.” She consults the book again. “It looks like the lodgepole pine is found exclusively in the Rocky Mountains and the northwestern coast of the U.S. and Canada. The Native Americans liked to use the trunks for the main supports in their wigwams. Hence the name *lodgepole*. And,”

she continues, “it says here that the cones require extreme heat—like, say, from a forest fire—to open and release their seeds.”

“This is *so* educational,” I quip. Still, the idea of a tree that only grows in burned places sends a quiver of excitement through me. Even the tree has a kind of predestined meaning.

“Good. So we know roughly where this will happen,” says Mom. “Now all we have to do is narrow it down.”

“And then what?” I examine the picture of the pine tree, suddenly imagining the branches in flames.

“Then we’ll move.”

“Move? As in leave California?”

“Yes,” she says. Apparently she’s serious.

“But—” I sputter. “What about school? What about my friends? What about your job?”

“You’ll go to a new school, I imagine, and make new friends. I’ll get a new job, or find a way to do my job from home.”

“What about Jeffrey?”

She gives a little laugh and pats my hand like it’s a silly question. “Jeffrey will come, too.”

“Oh yeah, he’ll love that,” I say, thinking about Jeffrey with his army of friends and his never-ending parade of baseball games, wrestling matches, football practices, and everything else. We have lives, Jeffrey and I. For the first time it occurs to me that I’m in for so much more than I’ve anticipated. My

purpose is going to change everything.

Mom closes the book about trees and meets my eyes solemnly across the kitchen table.

“This is the big stuff, Clara,” she says. “This vision, this purpose—it’s why you’re here.”

“I know. I just didn’t think we’d have to move.”

I look out the window into the yard I’ve grown up playing in, my old swing set that Mom has never gotten around to taking down, the row of rosebushes against the back fence that have been there for as long as I can remember. Behind the fence I can barely make out the hazy outline of the distant mountains that have always been the edges of my world. I can hear the Caltrain rumble as it crosses Shoreline Boulevard, and, if I concentrate hard enough, the faint music from Great America two miles away. It seems impossible that we would ever leave this place.

A corner of Mom’s mouth quirks up into a sympathetic smile.

“You thought you could just fly in somewhere for the weekend, complete your purpose, and fly back?”

“Yeah, maybe.” I glance away sheepishly. “When are you going to tell Jeffrey?”

“I think that should wait until we know where we’re going.”

“Can I be there when you tell him? I’ll bring popcorn.”

“Jeffrey’s turn will come,” she says, a muted sadness coming up in her eyes, that look she gets when she thinks we’re

growing up too fast. “When he receives his purpose you’ll have to deal with that too.”

“And then we’ll move again?”

“We’ll go where his purpose leads us.”

“That’s crazy,” I say, shaking my head. “This all seems crazy. You know that, right?”

“Mysterious ways, Clara.” She grabs my spoon and digs a big chunk of Chubby Hubby out of the carton. She grins, shifting back into mischievous, playful Mom right before my eyes. “Mysterious ways.”

Over the next couple weeks the vision repeats every two or three days. I’ll be minding my own business and then bang—I’m in a service announcement for Smokey the Bear. I come to expect it at odd times, on the ride to school, in the shower, eating lunch. Other times I get the sensation without the vision itself. I feel the heat. I smell smoke.

My friends notice. They stick me with an unfortunate new nickname: Cadet, as in Space Cadet. I guess it could be worse. And my teachers notice. But I get the work done, so they don’t give me too much grief when I spend the class period scribbling away in my journal on what can’t possibly be class notes.

If you looked at my journal a few years ago, that fuzzy pink diary I had when I was twelve with Hello Kitty on the cover, locked with a flimsy gold key I kept on a chain around

my neck to keep it safe from Jeffrey's prying eyes, you'd see the ramblings of a perfectly normal girl. There are doodles of flowers and princesses, entries about school and the weather, movies I liked, music I danced around to, my dreams of playing the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*, or how Jeremy Morris sent one of his friends to ask me to be his girlfriend and of course I said no because why would I want to go out with someone too cowardly to ask me out himself?

Then comes the angel diary, which I started when I was fourteen. This one's a midnight blue spiral-bound notebook with a picture of an angel on it, a serene, feminine angel who looks eerily like Mom, with red hair and golden wings, standing on the sliver of the crescent moon surrounded by stars, beams of light radiating from her head. In it I jotted down everything Mom ever told me about angels and angel-bloods, every fact or piece of speculation I could coax out of her. I also recorded my experiments, like the time I cut my forearm with a knife just to see if I would bleed (which I did, *a lot*) and carefully noted how long it took to heal (about twenty-four hours, from when I made the cut to when the little pink line completely disappeared), the time I spoke Swahili to a man in the San Francisco airport (imagine the surprise for both of us), or how I could do twenty-five *grands jetés* back and forth across the floor of the ballet studio without getting winded. That was when my mom started seriously lecturing me about keeping it cool, at least in public. That's when I started to

find myself, not just Clara the girl, but Clara the angel-blood, Clara the supernatural.

Now my journal (simple, black, moleskin) focuses entirely on my purpose: sketches, notes, and the details of the vision, especially when they involve the mysterious boy. He constantly lingers at the edges of my mind—except for those disorienting moments when he moves blindingly to center stage.

I grow to know him through his shape in my mind's eye. I know the sweep of his broad shoulders, his carefully disheveled hair, which is a dark, warm brown, long enough to cover his ears and brush against his collar in the back. He keeps his hands tucked into the pockets of his black jacket, which is kind of fuzzy, I notice, maybe fleece. His weight is always shifted slightly to one side, as if he's getting ready to walk away. He looks lean, but strong. When he begins to turn I can see the faintest outline of his cheek, and it never fails to make my heart beat faster and my breath hitch in my throat.

What will he think of me? I wonder.

I want to be awe-inspiring. When I appear to him in the forest, when he finally turns and sees me standing there, I want to at least *look* the part of an angel. I want to be all glowy and floaty like my mom. I'm not bad looking, I know. Angel-bloods are a fairly attractive bunch. I have good skin and my lips are naturally rosy so I never wear anything but gloss. I have very nice knees, or so I'm told. But I'm too tall

and too skinny, and not in the willowy supermodel sort of way but in a storklike, all-arms-and-legs sort of way. And my eyes, which come across as storm-cloud gray in some lights and gunmetal blue in others, seem a bit too big for my face.

My hair is my best feature, long and wavy, bright gold with a hint of red, trailing behind me wherever I go like an afterthought. The problem with my hair is that it's also completely unruly. It tangles. It catches in things: zippers, car doors, food. Tying it back or braiding it never works. It's like a living thing trying to break free. Within moments of wrestling it down, there are strands in my face, and within the span of an hour it usually slides out of its confines completely. It takes the word *unmanageable* to a whole new level.

So with my luck, I'll never make it in time to save the boy in the forest because my hair will have snagged on a tree branch a mile back.

"Clara, your phone's ringing!" Mom hollers from the kitchen. I jump, startled. My journal lays open on my desk in front of me. On the page is a careful sketch of the back of the boy's head, his neck, his tousled hair, the hint of cheek and eyelashes. I don't remember drawing it.

"Okay!" I yell back. I close the journal and slide it under my algebra textbook. Then I run downstairs. It smells like a bakery. Tomorrow's Thanksgiving, and Mom's been making

pies. She's wearing her fifties housewife apron (which she's had since the fifties, although she wasn't a housewife back then, she assures us) and it's dusted with flour. She holds the phone out to me.

"It's your dad."

I raise an eyebrow at her in a silent question.

"I don't know," she says. She hands me the phone, then turns and discreetly exits the room.

"Hi, Dad," I say into the phone.

"Hi."

There's a pause. Three words into our conversation and he's already out of things to say.

"So what's the occasion?"

For a moment he doesn't say anything. I sigh. For years I used to practice this speech about how mad I was at him for leaving Mom. I was three years old when they split. I don't remember them fighting. All I retained from the time they were together are a few brief flashes. A birthday party. An afternoon at a beach. Him standing at the sink shaving. And then there's the brutal memory of the day he left, me standing with Mom in the driveway, her holding Jeffrey on her hip and crying brokenheartedly as he drove away. I can't forgive him for that. I can't forgive him for a lot of things. For moving clear across the country to get away from us. For not calling enough. For never knowing what to say when he does call. But most of all I can't get past the way Mom's face

pinches up whenever she hears his name.

Mom won't discuss what happened between them any more than she'll dish about her purpose. But here's what I do know: My mother is as close to being the perfect woman as this world is likely to see. She's half *angel*, after all, even though my dad doesn't know that. She's beautiful. She's smart and funny. She is magic. And he gave her up. He gave us all up.

And that, in my book, makes him a fool.

"I just wanted to know if you're okay," he says finally.

"Why wouldn't I be okay?"

He coughs.

"I mean, it's rough being a teenager, right? High school. Boys."

Now this conversation has gone from unusual to downright strange.

"Right," I say. "Yeah, it's rough."

"Your mom says your grades are good."

"You talked to Mom?"

Another silence.

"How's life in the Big Apple?" I ask, to steer the conversation away from myself.

"The usual. Bright lights. Big city. I saw Derek Jeter in Central Park yesterday. It's a terrible life."

He can be charming, too. I always want to be mad at him, to tell him that he shouldn't bother trying to bond with me,

but I can never keep it up. The last time I saw him was two years ago, the summer I turned fourteen. I'd been practicing my "I-hate-you" speech big-time in the airport, on the plane, out of the gate, in the terminal. And then I saw him waiting for me by the baggage claim, and I filled up with this bizarre happiness. I launched myself into his arms and told him I'd missed him.

"I was thinking," he says now. "Maybe you and Jeffrey could come to New York for the holidays."

I almost laugh at his timing.

"I'd like to," I say, "but I kind of have something important going on right now."

Like locating a forest fire. Which is my one reason for being on this Earth. Which I will never be able to explain to him in a thousand years.

He doesn't say anything.

"Sorry," I say, and I shock myself by actually meaning it. "I'll let you know if things change."

"Your mom also told me you passed Driver's Ed." He's clearly trying to change the subject.

"Yes, I took the test and parallel parked and everything. I'm sixteen. I'm legal now. Only Mom won't let me take the car."

"Maybe it's time we see about getting you a car of your own."

My mouth drops open. He's just full of surprises.

And then I smell smoke.

The fire must be farther away this time. I don't see it. I don't see the boy. A hot gust of gritty wind sends my hair flying out of its ponytail. I cough and turn away from the blast, swiping hair out of my face.

That's when I see the silver truck. I'm standing a few steps away from where it's parked on the edge of a dirt road. AVA-LANCHE, it says in silver letters on the back. It's a huge truck with a short, covered bed. It's the boy's truck. Somehow I just know.

Look at the license plate, I tell myself. Focus on that.

The plate is a pretty one. It's mostly blue: the sky, with clouds. The right side is dominated by a rocky, flat-topped mountain that looks vaguely familiar. On the left is the black silhouette of a cowboy astride a bucking horse, waving his hat in the air. I've seen it before, but I don't automatically know it. I try to read the numbers on the plate. At first all I can make out is the large number stacked on the left side: 22. And then the four digits on the other side of the cowboy: 99CX.

I expect to feel crazy happy then, excited to have such an enormously helpful piece of information handed to me as easily as that. But I'm still in the vision, and the vision is moving on. I turn away from the truck and walk quickly into the trees. Smoke drifts across the forest floor. Somewhere close by I hear a crack, like a branch falling. Then I see the boy, exactly the same as he's always been.

His back turned. The fire suddenly licking the top of the ridge. The danger so obvious, so close.

The crushing sadness descends on me like a curtain dropping. My throat closes. I want to say his name. I step toward him.

“Clara? You okay?”

My dad’s voice. I float back to myself. I’m leaning against the refrigerator, staring out the kitchen window where a hummingbird hovers near my mom’s feeder, a blur of wings. It darts in, takes a sip, then flits away.

“Clara?”

He sounds alarmed. Still dazed, I lift the phone to my ear.

“Dad, I think I’m going to have to call you back.”



2

YONDER IS JACKSON HOLE

On the road to Wyoming, there are lots of signs. Most of them warn of some kind of danger: WATCH FOR DEER. WATCH FOR FALLING ROCK. TRUCKS, CHECK YOUR BRAKES. TUNE IN FOR ROAD CLOSURES. ELK CROSSING NEXT 2 MILES. SNOW SLIDE AREA, NO PARKING OR STOPPING. I drive my car behind Mom's the whole way from California with Jeffrey in the passenger seat, trying not to freak out about how all the signs point to the fact that we're headed someplace wild and dangerous.

At the moment I'm driving through a forest made up entirely of lodgepole pines. Talk about surreal. I can't get over the sight of all the Wyoming license plates on the cars speeding past, many with the fateful number 22 on the left

side. That number has brought us a long way, through six short weeks of crazy preparation, selling our house, saying good-bye to the friends and neighbors I've known my entire life, and packing up and moving to a place where none of us knows a single solitary soul: Teton County, Wyoming, which according to Google is county number 22, population just over 20,000. That's roughly five people per every square mile.

We're moving to the boonies. All because of me.

I've never seen so much snow. It's terrifying. My new Prius (courtesy of dear old Dad) is getting a real workout on the snowy mountain road. But there's no turning back now. The guy at the gas station assured us that the pass through the mountains is perfectly safe, so long as a storm doesn't come up. All I can do is clutch the steering wheel and try not to pay attention to the way the mountainside plunges off a few feet from the edge of the road.

I spot the WELCOME TO WYOMING sign.

"Hey," I say to Jeffrey. "This is it."

He doesn't answer. He slumps in the passenger seat, angry music pounding from his iPod. The farther we get from California and his sports teams and his friends, the more sulen he becomes. After two days on the road, it's getting old. I grab the wire and yank one of his earbuds out.

"What?" he says, glaring at me.

"We're in Wyoming, doofus. We're almost there."

“Woo freaking hoo,” he says, and stuffs the earbud back in.

He’s going to hate me for a while.

Jeffrey was a pretty easygoing kid before he found out about the angel stuff. But I know how that goes. One minute you’re a happy fourteen-year-old—good at everything you try, popular, fun—the next you’re a freak with wings. It takes some adjustment. And it was only like a month after he got the news that I received my little mission from heaven. Now we’re dragging him off to Nowheresville, Wyoming, in January, no less, right smack in the middle of the school year.

When Mom announced the move, he yelled, “I’m not going!” with his fists clenched at his sides like he wanted to hit something.

“You are going,” Mom replied, looking up at him coolly. “And I wouldn’t be surprised if you find your purpose in Wyoming, too.”

“I don’t care,” he said. Then he turned and glared at me in a way that makes me cringe every time I remember it.

Mom, for her part, obviously digs Wyoming. She’s been back and forth a few times scouting for a house, enrolling Jeffrey and me in our new school, smoothing out the transition between her job at Apple in California and the work she’ll be doing for them from home after we move. She has chattered for hours about the beautiful scenery that will now be a part of our everyday lives, the fresh air, the wildlife, the weather, and how much we’ll love the winter snow.

That's why Jeffrey is riding with me. He can't stand to listen to Mom blather on about how great it's all going to be. The first time we stopped for gas on the trip he got out of her car, grabbed his backpack, walked over to mine, and got in. No explanation. I guess he decided that he currently hates her more than he does me.

I grab the earbud again.

"It's not like I wanted this, you know," I tell him. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"Whatever."

My cell rings. I dig around in my pocket and toss the phone to Jeffrey. He catches it, startled.

"Could you get that?" I ask sweetly. "I'm driving."

He sighs, opens the phone, and puts it to his ear.

"Yeah," he says. "Okay. Yeah."

He flips the phone closed.

"She says we're about to come up on Teton Pass. She wants us to pull over at the lookout."

Right on cue we come around a corner and the valley where we'll be living opens up below a range of low hills and jagged blue-and-white mountains. It's an amazing view, like a scene from a calendar or a postcard. Mom pulls into a turnoff for the "scenic overlook" and I come to a careful stop next to her. She practically bounds out of the car.

"I think she wants us to get out," I say to Jeffrey.

He just stares at the dashboard.

I open the door and swing out into the mountainy air. It's like stepping into a freezer. I tug my suddenly-much-too-thin Stanford hoodie over my head and jam my hands deep into the pockets. I can literally see my breath floating away from me every time I exhale.

Mom walks up to Jeffrey's door and taps on the window.

"Get out of the car," she commands in a voice that says she means business.

She waves me toward the ridge, where a large wooden sign shows a cartoon cowboy pointing into the valley below. HOWDY STRANGER, it reads. YONDER IS JACKSON HOLE. THE LAST OF THE OLD WEST. There's a scattering of buildings on either side of a gleaming silver river. That's Jackson, our new hometown.

"Over there is Teton National Park and Yellowstone." Mom points toward the horizon. "We'll have to go there in the spring, check it out."

Jeffrey joins us on the ridge. He isn't wearing a jacket, just jeans and a T-shirt, but he doesn't look cold. He's too mad to shiver. His expression as he surveys our new environment is carefully blank. A cloud moves over the sun, casting the valley in shadow. The air instantly feels about ten degrees colder. I'm suddenly anxious, like now that I've officially arrived in Wyoming the trees will burst into flame and I'll have to fulfill my purpose on the spot. So much is expected of me in this place.

“Don’t worry.” Mom puts her hands on my shoulders and squeezes briefly. “This is where you belong, Clara.”

“I know.” I try to muster a brave smile.

“You,” she says, moving to Jeffrey, “are going to love the sports here. Snow skiing and waterskiing and rock climbing and all kinds of extreme sports. I give you full permission to hurl yourself off stuff.”

“I guess,” he mutters.

“Great,” she says, seemingly satisfied. She snaps a quick picture of us. Then she moves briskly back to the car. “Now let’s go.”

I follow her as the road twists down the mountain. Another sign catches my eye. WARNING, it says, SHARP CURVES AHEAD.

Right before we reach Jackson we turn onto Spring Gulch Road, which takes us to another long, winding road, this one with a big iron gate we need a pass code to get through. That’s my first inkling that our humble abode is going to be fairly posh. My second clue is all the enormous log houses I see tucked away in the trees. I follow Mom’s car as she turns down a freshly plowed driveway and makes her way slowly through a forest of lodgepole pine, birch, and aspen trees, until we reach a clearing where our new house poses on a small rise.

“Whoa,” I breathe, gazing up at the house through the windshield. “Jeffrey, look.”

The house is made of solid logs and river rock, the roof

covered with a blanket of pure white snow like what you see on a gingerbread house, complete with a set of perfect silver icicles dangling along the edges. It's bigger than our house in California, but cozier somehow, with a long, covered porch and huge windows that look out on a mind-bogglingly spectacular view of the snow-covered mountain range.

"Welcome home," Mom says. She's leaning against her car, taking in our stunned reactions as we step out into the circular drive. She is so pleased with herself for finding this house she's practically bursting into song. "Our nearest neighbor is almost a mile away. This little wood is all ours."

A breeze stirs the trees so that wisps of snow drift down through the branches, like our house is in a snow globe resting on a mantelpiece. The air feels warmer here. It's absolutely quiet. A sense of well-being washes over me.

This is home, I think. We're safe here, which comes as a huge relief because, after weeks of nothing but visions and danger and sorrow, the uncertainty of moving and leaving everything behind, the insanity of it all, I can finally picture us having a life in Wyoming. Instead of only seeing myself walking into a fire.

I glance over at Mom. She's literally glowing, getting brighter and brighter by the second, a low vibrating hum of angelic pleasure rolling off her. Any second now and we'll be able to see her wings.

Jeffrey coughs. The sight is still new enough to weird him out.

“Mom,” he says. “You’re doing the glory thing.”

She dims.

“Who cares?” I say. “There’s no one around to see it. We can be ourselves here.”

“Yes,” says Mom quietly. “In fact, the backyard would be perfect for practicing some flying.”

I stare at her in dismay. Mom has tried to teach me to fly exactly two times, and both were complete disasters. In fact, I’ve essentially given up on the idea of flight altogether and accepted that I’m going to be an angel-blood who stays earthbound, a flightless bird, like an ostrich maybe, or, in this weather, a penguin.

“You might need to fly here,” Mom says a bit stiffly. “And you might want to try it out,” she adds to Jeffrey. “I bet you’d be a natural.”

I can feel my face getting hot. Sure, Jeffrey will be a natural when I can’t even make it off the ground.

“I want to see my room,” I say, and escape to the safety of the house.

That afternoon we stand for the first time on the boardwalk of Broadway Avenue in Jackson, Wyoming. Even in January, there are plenty of tourists. Stagecoaches and horse-drawn carriages pass by every few minutes, along with

a never-ending string of cars. I can't help but scan for one particular silver truck: the mysterious Avalanche with the license plate 99CX.

"Who knew there'd be so much traffic?" I remark as I watch the cars go by.

"What would you do if you saw him right now?" Mom asks. She's wearing a new straw cowboy hat that she was unable to resist in the first gift shop we went into. A cowboy hat. Personally I think she's taking this Old West thing a bit too far.

"She'd probably pass out," says Jeffrey. He bats his eyelashes wildly and fans himself, then pretends to collapse against Mom. They both laugh.

Jeffrey has already bought himself a T-shirt with a snowboarder on it and is deliberating on a real, honest-to-goodness snowboard he liked in a shopwindow. He's been in a much better mood since we arrived at the house and he saw that all is not completely lost. He's acting a lot like the old Jeffrey, the one who smiles and teases and occasionally speaks in full sentences.

"You two are hilarious," I say, rolling my eyes. I jog ahead toward a small park I notice on the other side of the street. The entrance is a huge arch made of elk antlers.

"Let's go this way," I call back to Mom and Jeffrey. We hurry across the crosswalk right as the little orange hand starts to flash. Then we linger for a minute under the arch,

gazing up at the latticework of antlers, which vaguely resemble bones. Overhead the sky darkens with clouds, and a cold wind picks up.

“I smell barbecue,” says Jeffrey.

“You’re just a giant stomach.”

“Hey, can I help it if I have a faster metabolism than normal people? How about we eat there.” He points up the street where a line of people stand waiting to get into the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar.

“Sure, and I’ll buy you a beer, too,” Mom says.

“Really?”

“No.”

As they bicker about it, I’m struck with the sudden urge to document this moment, so I’ll be able to look back and say, this was the beginning. Part one of Clara’s purpose. My chest swells with emotion at the thought. A new beginning, for us all.

“Excuse me, ma’am, would you mind taking our picture?” I ask a lady walking past. She nods and takes the camera from Mom. We strike a pose under the arch, Mom in the middle, Jeffrey and me on either side. We smile. The woman tries to snap a picture, but nothing happens. Mom steps over to show her how to work the flash.

That’s when the sun comes out again. I suddenly become super aware of what’s going on around me, like it’s all slowing down for me to encounter piece by piece: the voices of

the other people on the boardwalk, the flash of teeth when they speak, the rumble of engines and the tiny squeal of brakes as cars stop at the red light. My heart is beating like a slow, loud drum. My breath drags in and out of my lungs. I smell horse manure and rock salt, my own lavender shampoo, Mom's splash of vanilla, Jeffrey's manly deodorant, even the faint aroma of decay that still clings to the antlers above us. Classical music pours from underneath the glass doors of one of the art galleries. A dog barks in the distance. Somewhere a baby is crying. It feels like too much, like I'll explode trying to take it all in. Everything's too bright. There's a small, dark bird perched in a tree in the park behind us, singing, fluffing its feathers against the cold. How can I see it, if it's behind me? But I feel its sharp black eyes on me; I see it angle its head this way and that, watching me, watching, until suddenly it takes off from the tree and swirls up into the wide-open sky like a bit of smoke, disappearing into the sun.

"Clara," Jeffrey whispers urgently close to my ear. "Hey!"

I jerk back to earth. Jackson Hole. Jeffrey. Mom. The lady with the camera. They're all staring at me.

"What's going on?" I'm dazed, disconnected, like some part of me is still up in the sky with the bird.

"Your hair's, like, shining," murmurs Jeffrey. He glances away like he's embarrassed.

I look down. Gasp. Shining is not the word. My hair is an iridescent silvery-gold riot of light and color. It blazes.

It catches the light like a mirror reflecting the sun. I slide my hand down the warm, luminous strands, and my heart, which seemed to beat so slowly a few moments before, begins to thump painfully fast. What's happening to me?

"Mom?" I call weakly. I look up into her wide blue eyes. Then she turns toward the lady, all perfectly composed.

"Isn't it a beautiful day?" Mom says. "You know what they say: You don't like the weather in Wyoming, wait ten minutes."

The lady nods distractedly, still staring at my supernaturally radiant hair like she's trying to figure out a magician's trick. Mom crosses to me and briskly gathers the length of my hair into her hand like a piece of rope. She shoves it into the collar of my hoodie and pulls the hood up over my head.

"Just stay calm," she whispers as she moves into place between Jeffrey and me. "All right. We're ready now."

The lady blinks a few times, shakes her head like she's trying to clear it. Now that my hair is covered, it's like everything returns to normal, like nothing unusual has happened. Like we imagined it all. The lady lifts the camera.

"Say cheese," she instructs us.

I do my best to smile.

We end up at Mountain High Pizza Pie for dinner, because it's the easiest, closest place. Jeffrey scarfs his pizza while Mom and I pick at ours. We don't talk. I feel like I've been caught

doing something terrible. Something shameful. I wear my hood over my hair the entire time, even in the car as we make our way slowly back to the house.

When we get home Mom goes straight into her office and closes the door. Jeffrey and I, for lack of anything better to do, start to hook up the TV. He keeps looking over at me like I'm about to burst into flames.

"Would you stop gawking?" I exclaim finally. "You're freaking me out."

"That was weird, back there. What did you do?"

"I didn't *do* anything. It just happened."

Mom appears in the doorway with her coat on.

"I have to go out," she says. "Please don't leave the house until I get back." Then, before we can question her, she's gone.

"Perfect," mutters Jeffrey.

I toss him the remote and retreat upstairs to my room. I still have a lot of unpacking to do, but my mind keeps flashing back to that moment under the archway when it felt like the whole world was trying to crawl inside my head. And my hair! Unearthly. The look on the lady's face when she saw me that way: puzzled at first, confused, then a little frightened, like I was some kind of alien creature who belonged in a lab with scientists looking at my dazzling hair under a microscope. Like I was a freak.

I must have fallen asleep. The next thing I know Mom's standing in the doorway to my bedroom. She tosses a box of Clairol hair dye on my bed. I pick it up.

“Sedona Sunset?” I read. “You’re kidding me, right? Red?”

“Auburn. Like mine.”

“But why?” I ask.

“Let’s fix your hair,” she says. “Then we’ll talk.”

“It’s going to be this color for school!” I whine as she works the dye into my hair in the bathroom, me sitting on the closed toilet with an old towel around my shoulders.

“I love your hair. I wouldn’t ask you if I didn’t think it was important.” She steps back and examines my head for spots she might have missed. “There. All done. Now we have to wait for the color to set.”

“Okay, so you’re going to explain this to me now, right?”

For all of five seconds she looks nervous. Then she sits down on the edge of the bathtub and folds her hands into her lap.

“What happened today is normal,” she says. It reminds me of when she told me about my period, or how she approached the topic of sex, all clinical and rational and perfectly spelled out for me, like she’d been rehearsing the speech for years.

“Um, hello, how was today normal?”

“Okay, not *normal*,” she says quickly. “Normal for us. As your abilities begin to grow, your angelic side will start to manifest itself in more noticeable ways.”

“My angelic side. Great. Like I don’t have enough to deal with.”

“It’s not so bad,” Mom says. “You’ll learn to control it.”

“I’ll learn to control my hair?”

She laughs.

“Yes, eventually, you’ll learn how to hide it, to tone it down so that it can’t be perceived by the human eye. But for now, dyeing seems the easiest way.”

She always wears hats, I realize. At the beach. At the park. Almost any time we go out in public, she wears a hat. She owns dozens of hats and bandanas and scarves. I’d always assumed it was because she was old school.

“So it happens to you?” I ask.

She turns toward the door, smiling faintly.

“Come in, Jeffrey.”

Jeffrey slinks in from my room, where he’s been eavesdropping. The guilt on his face doesn’t last long. He shifts straight to rampant curiosity.

“Will I get it, too?” he asks. “The hair thing?”

“Yes,” she answers. “It happens to most of us. For me the first time was 1908, July, I believe. I was reading a book on a park bench. Then—” She lifts her fist up to the top of her head and opens her hand like a kind of explosion.

I lean toward her eagerly. “And was it like everything slowed down, like you could hear and see things that you shouldn’t have been able to?”

She turns to look at me. Her eyes are the deep indigo of the sky just after darkness falls, punctuated with tiny points of light as if she’s literally being lit up from within. I can see myself in them. I look worried.

“Was that what it was like for you?” she asks. “Time slowed down?”

I nod.

She makes a thoughtful little *hmm* noise and lays her warm hand over mine. “Poor kid. No wonder you’re so shaken up.”

“What did you do, when it happened with you?” Jeffrey asks.

“I put on my hat. In those days, proper young ladies wore hats out of doors. And luckily, by the time that wasn’t true anymore, hair dye had been invented. I was a brunette for almost twenty years.” She wrinkles up her nose. “It didn’t suit me.”

“But what *is* it?” I ask. “Why does it happen?”

She pauses like she’s considering her words carefully. “It’s a part of glory breaking through.” She looks slightly uncomfortable, as if we can’t quite be trusted with this information. “Now, that’s enough class for today. If this kind of thing happens again, in public I mean, I find it works best to just act normally. Most of the time, people will convince themselves that they didn’t really see anything, that it was a trick of the light, an illusion. But it wouldn’t be a bad idea for you to wear a hat more often now, Jeffrey, to be safe.”

“Okay,” he says with a smirk. He practically sleeps in his Giants cap.

“And let’s try not to call attention to ourselves,” she continues, looking at him pointedly, clearly referring to

the way he feels the need to be the best at everything: quarterback, pitcher, the all-star varsity kind of guy. “No showing off.”

His jaw tightens.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” he says. “There’s nothing to go out for in January, is there? Wrestling tryouts were in November. Baseball’s not until spring.”

“Maybe that’s for the best. It gives you some time to adjust before you pick up anything extracurricular.”

“Right. For the best.” His face is a mask of sullenness again. Then he retreats to his room, slamming the door behind him.

“Okay, so that’s settled,” Mom says, turning to me with a smile. “Let’s rinse.”

My hair turns out orange. Like a peeled carrot. The moment I see it I seriously consider shaving my head.

“We’ll fix it,” Mom promises, trying hard not to laugh. “First thing tomorrow. I swear.”

“Good night.” I close the door in her face. Then I throw myself down on the bed and have a good long cry. So much for my shot at impressing Mystery Boy with his gorgeous wavy brown hair.

After I calm down I lie in bed listening to the wind knock at my window. The woods outside seem huge and full of darkness. I can feel the mountains, their massive presence looming behind the house. There are things happening now

that I can't control—I'm changing, and I can't go back to the way things were before.

The vision comes to me then like a familiar friend, sweeping my bedroom away and depositing me in the middle of the smoky forest. The air is so hot, so dry and heavy, difficult to breathe. I see the silver Avalanche parked along the edge of the road. Automatically I turn toward the hills, orienting myself to where I know I will find the boy. I walk. I feel the sadness then, a grief like my heart's being cut out, growing with every step I take. My eyes fill with useless tears. I blink them away and keep walking, determined to reach the boy, and when I see him, I stop for a minute and simply take him in. The sight of him standing there so unaware fills me with a mix of pain and yearning.

I think, I'm here.



3

I SURVIVED THE BLACK PLAGUE

The first thing that catches my eye as I drive into the parking lot of Jackson Hole High School is a large silver truck parked in the back of the lot. I squint to see the license plate.

“Whoa!” yells Jeffrey as I nearly rear-end another much-older, much-rustier blue truck in front of me. “Learn to drive already!”

“Sorry.” I try to wave apologetically to the guy driving the blue truck, but he yells something out his window that I’m pretty sure I don’t want to understand and screeches away across the parking lot. I park the Prius carefully in an empty space and sit for a minute, trying to get myself together.

Jackson Hole High doesn’t resemble a school so much as

a resort, a large brick building framed by a series of huge log beams along the front, kind of like pillars but with a more rustic feel. Like everything else in our new hometown, it's postcard perfect, all shining windows and evenly spaced, white-trunked trees that are beautiful even without leaves, not to mention the gorgeous towering mountains in the background on three sides. Even the fluffy white clouds in the sky look deliberately placed.

"Later," says Jeffrey, jumping out of the car. He grabs his backpack and swaggers toward the front door of the school like he owns the place. A few girls in the parking lot turn to check him out. He flashes them an easy smile, which immediately starts up the whisper/giggle thing that always trailed him at our old school.

"So much for not calling attention to ourselves," I mutter. I apply another coat of lip gloss and inspect my reflection in the rearview mirror, cringing at my humiliating hair color. In spite of my mom's and my best efforts over the past week, it's still orange. We've tried everything, re-dyed it like five times, even tried to dye it jet-black, but the color always washes out to the same horrendous, eye-stabbing orange. It's like some kind of cruel cosmic joke.

"You can't always rely on your looks, Clara," Mom said after failed-attempt number five. Like she's one to talk. Like she's ever looked less than gorgeous a day in her life.

"I've *never* relied on my looks, Mom."

“Sure you have,” she said a bit too cheerfully. “You aren’t vain about it, but still. You knew that when the other students at Mountain View High looked at you, they saw this pretty strawberry blonde.”

“Yeah, so now I’m not strawberry blonde *or* pretty,” I said miserably. Yes, I was wallowing. But the hair is just so horrifically orange.

Mom put a finger under my chin and forced my head up to look at her.

“You could have neon green hair, and it wouldn’t take away how beautiful you are,” she said.

“You’re my mother. You’re legally required to say that.”

“Let’s try to remember that you’re not here to win a beauty pageant. You’re here for your purpose. Maybe this hair problem means that things aren’t going to be as easy for you here as they were in California. And maybe there’s a reason for that.”

“Right. A very good reason, I’m sure.”

“At least the dye will cover the bright stuff. So you won’t have to worry about keeping your hair covered.”

“Yay for me.”

“You’ll just have to make the best of it, Clara,” she said.

So here I am, making the best of it, like I really have a choice. I get out of the car and sneak to the back of the parking lot to inspect the silver truck. **AVALANCHE**, it reads in silver letters across the back fender. License plate 99CX.

He's here. I force myself to breathe. He's really here.

Now there's nothing left to do but walk into the school with my crazy, unruly, insanely bright-orange hair. I watch the other students stream into the building in their little groups, laughing and talking and goofing around. All total strangers, every single one of them. Except one. Although I'm a stranger to him. My hands are simultaneously sweaty and clammy. A flock of butterflies flaps around in my stomach. I've never been more nervous in my life.

You've got this, Clara, I think. Next to your purpose, this school thing should be a snap.

So I straighten my shoulders, trying for Jeffrey's confidence, and head for the door.

My first mistake, I realize almost immediately, was assuming that even with the designer exterior, this high school would be essentially like any other. Boy, was I ever wrong. The school is as high-end on the inside as it appears on the outside. Almost all of the classrooms have tall ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows with mountain views. The cafeteria is a cross between the inside of a ski lodge and an art museum. There are paintings, murals, and collages in practically every nook and cranny of the place. It even smells better than regular schools: pine and chalk and a fragrant mix of expensive perfumes. My old cinder-block school in California seems like a prison in comparison.

I've stumbled into the land of pretty people. And here I thought I'd come from the land of pretty people. You know how sometimes on TV they'll show you a picture of a celebrity from high school, and that person looks perfectly normal, not really any more attractive than anyone else? And you think, what happened? Why is Jennifer Garner so hot now? I'll tell you: money happened. Facials, fancy haircuts, designer clothes, and personal trainers happened. And the kids at Jackson Hole High had that celebrity polish, except for the few here and there who looked like genuine cowboys, complete with Stetsons, pearl buttons on their western-style plaid shirts, too-tight Wranglers, and scuffed cowboy boots.

Plus, the curriculum is fancy. Sure, you can take an art class, if you feel like learning to draw, but you can also take AP Studio Art, which prepares you to enter Jackson Hole's lively art scene. There's a class called Power Sports, which teaches you how to tune up your motorcycle, ATV, or snowmobile. You can learn how to start your own business, draft your dream house, develop your passion for French cuisine, or take your first steps toward becoming an engineer. Just in case you want to get your pilot's license, the school offers a couple courses in aerodynamics. The world is your oyster at Jackson Hole High.

It's definitely going to take some getting used to.

I thought the other students would be excited to see me, or curious at the very least. I'm fresh meat, after all, and

from California, and maybe I have some big-city wisdom to offer the natives. Wrong again. For the most part, they completely ignore me. After I make it through three periods (trigonometry, French III, College Prep Chemistry) where nobody even bothers with a simple howdy, I'm ready to dash for my car and drive straight back to California, where I've known everybody for forever and they've known me, where right this minute my friends and I would be dishing about our holidays and comparing schedules, and I'd be pretty and popular. Where life is ordinary.

But then I see him.

He's standing with his back to me near my locker. A surge of electricity zings through me as I recognize his shoulders, his hair, the shape of his head. In a flash I'm in the vision, seeing him both in the black fleece jacket among the trees and for real, just down the hall simultaneously, like the vision is a thin veil laid on top of reality.

I take a step toward him, my mouth opening to call his name. Then I remember that I don't know it. Like always, it's as if he hears me anyway and starts to turn, and my heart skips a beat when I don't wake up but see his face now, his mouth curling up in a half smile as he jokes with the guy next to him.

He glances up and his eyes meet mine. The hallway melts away. It's only him and me now, in the forest. The vision comes from behind him, the fire on the hillside roaring toward us, faster than it could ever possibly happen.

I have to save him, I think.

That's when I faint.

I wake to a girl with long, golden brown hair sitting on the floor next to me, her hand on my forehead, talking in a low voice like she's trying to calm an animal.

"What happened?" I look around for the boy, but he's gone. Something hard pokes into my back, and I realize I'm lying on my chemistry book.

"You fell," says the girl, as if that isn't obvious. "Do you have epilepsy or something? It looked like you were having some kind of seizure."

People are staring. I feel the heat rising in my cheeks.

"I'm okay," I say, sitting up.

"Easy." The girl jumps up and reaches down to help me. I take her hand and let her haul me to my feet.

"I'm kind of a klutz," I say, like that explains it.

"She's okay. Go to class," the girl says to the kids who are still gawking. "Did you eat this morning?" she asks me.

"What?"

"Could be a blood sugar thing." She puts her arm around me and steers me down the hallway. "What's your name?"

"Clara."

"Wendy," she says in response.

"Where are we going?"

"The nurse."

"No," I object, breaking free of her arm. I straighten and

attempt to smile. "I'm fine, really."

The bell rings. Suddenly the hallway's deserted. Then from around the corner bustles a plump, yellow-haired woman wearing blue nursing scrubs, walking fast. Behind her is the boy. *My* boy.

"There she goes again," Wendy says as I wobble into her.

"Christian," orders the nurse quickly as they rush toward me.

Christian. His name.

His arm comes under my knees, and he lifts me. My arm is around his shoulder, my fingers inches away from the spot where his neck meets his hair. His smell, a mixture of Ivory soap and some wonderful, spicy cologne, washes over me. I look up into his green eyes, so close that I can see flecks of gold in them.

"Hi," he says.

Heaven help me, I think as he smiles. It's just too much.

"Hi," I murmur, looking away, flushing to the roots of my loose, very-orange hair.

"Hold on to me," he says, and then he's carrying me down the hall. Over his shoulder I see Wendy watching me, before she turns and walks the other way.

When we reach the nurse's office he puts me down gently onto a cot. I do my best not to gape at him.

"Thank you," I stammer.

“No problem.” He smiles again in a way that makes me glad I’m sitting down. “You’re pretty light.”

My jumbled brain tries to make sense of these three words and put them in order, with little success.

“Thank you,” I say again, lamely.

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Prescott,” says the nurse. “Now get to class.”

Christian Prescott. His name is Christian Prescott.

“See ya,” he says, and just like that, he’s walking away.

I wave as he rounds the corner, then feel like an idiot.

“Now,” says the nurse, turning to me.

“Really,” I say. “I’m fine.”

She looks unconvinced.

“I could do jumping jacks—that’s how fine I am,” I say, and I can’t wipe the stupid smile off my face.

Thus I arrive at Honors English late. The students have pulled their chairs into a circle. The teacher, an older man with a short, white beard, motions for me to come in.

“Pull up a chair. Miss Gardner, I presume?”

“Yes.” I feel the whole class staring directly at me as I grab a desk from the back of the room and drag it toward the circle. I recognize Wendy, the girl who helped me in the hall. She scoots her desk over to make room for me.

“I’m Mr. Phibbs,” says the teacher. “We’re in the middle of an exercise that’s largely for your benefit, so I’m glad

you could join us. Everyone must give three unique facts about themselves. If anyone else in the circle has one in common, they raise their hand, and the person whose turn it is has to choose something else. We're currently on Shawn, who was finishing up by claiming that he has the most . . . rocking snowboard in Teton County. . . ." Mr. Phibbs raises his bushy eyebrows. "Which Jason here contested."

"I ride the beautiful pink lady," brags the boy who I assume is Shawn.

"No one can argue that's unique," says Mr. Phibbs with a cough. "So now we're on to Kay. And say your name, please, for the new girl."

Everyone looks to a petite brunette with large brown eyes. She smiles as if it's the most natural thing in the world for her to be the center of attention.

"I'm Kay Patterson," she says. "My parents own the oldest fudge shop in Jackson. I've met Harrison Ford lots of times," she adds as her second thing, "because our fudge is his favorite. He said that I look like Carrie Fisher from *Star Wars*."

So she's vain, I think. Although if you dressed her up in a white gown and put the cinnamon-roll buns on either side of her head, she really could pass for Princess Leia. She's very attractive, definitely one of the pretty people, with a peaches-and-cream complexion and brown hair that falls past her shoulders in perfect curls, so shiny that it

almost doesn't look like hair.

"And," Kay adds as her final touch, "Christian Prescott is my boyfriend."

I dislike her already.

"Very good, Kay," says Mr. Phibbs.

Next is Wendy. She's blushing, obviously mortified to be speaking in front of the entire class about herself.

"I'm Wendy Avery," she says with a shrug. "My family manages a ranch outside Wilson. I don't know what else is that unique about me. I want to be a veterinarian, not a big surprise because I love horses. And I've made my own clothes since I was six years old."

"Thank you, Wendy," says Mr. Phibbs. She rocks back with a small sigh of relief. From the desk next to hers, Kay stifles a yawn. It's a small, ladylike gesture, but it makes me dislike her even more.

Silence.

Oh crap, I realize, they're waiting for me.

All the things I've been considering fly out of my brain. Instead I think of all the things I can't tell them, like *I can speak any language on Earth fluently. I have wings that appear when I ask them to, and I'm supposed to be able to fly, but I suck at it. I'm a natural blonde. I have an impeccable sense of direction, which I think is supposed to help with the flying thing, but it doesn't. Oh, and I'm here on a mission to save Kay's boyfriend.*

I clear my throat. "So I'm Clara Gardner, and I moved

here from California.”

The other students snicker as a guy across the circle raises his hand.

“That’s one of Mr. Lovett’s unique facts,” says Mr. Phibbs, “only you weren’t here when he said it. You’ll find that there are quite a few students here who have migrated from the Golden State.”

“Okay, well, let me try again.” Specificity is obviously the key here. “I moved here from California about a week ago, because I heard such great things about the fudge.”

The class laughs, even Kay, who seems pleased. I suddenly feel like a stand-up comedian who’s just told the opening bit. But anything’s better than being known as the redheaded dorkina who passed out in the middle of the hall after third period. So jokes it will be.

“Birds are weirdly attracted to me,” I continue. “They kind of stalk me wherever I go.” This is true. My current theory about this is because they smell my feathers, although it’s impossible to know for sure.

“Are you raising your hand, Angela?” asks Mr. Phibbs.

Startled, I glance to my right, where a raven-haired girl in a violet-colored tunic dress over black leggings is quickly lowering her hand.

“No, just stretching,” she says casually, looking at me with grave amber eyes. “I like the bird thing, though. That’s funny.”

But nobody's laughing this time. They're staring at me. I swallow.

"Okay, one more, right?" I say a little desperately. "My mom is a computer programmer, and my dad is a physics professor at NYU, which probably means that I should be good at math." I make a pained face. The idea that I can't do math is bogus of course. I'm good at math. It's a language after all, which is why Mom understands the way computers talk to one another without having to work at it. And probably why she was attracted to Dad to begin with, who's like a human calculator even without a drop of angel blood running through his veins. Jeffrey and I both find it ridiculously easy.

This doesn't get a laugh, either, just a pity chuckle from Wendy. I'm apparently not cut out to be a stand-up comedian.

"Thank you, Clara," says Mr. Phibbs.

The last student to name her three things is the black-haired girl who looked at me so attentively when I mentioned the weird thing with the birds. Her name, she says, is Angela Zerbino. She tucks her side-swept bangs behind her ear and lists her three unique things quickly.

"My mother owns the Pink Garter. I've never met my father. And I'm a poet."

Another awkward silence. She looks around the circle like she's daring someone to challenge her. Nobody meets her eyes.

"Good," says Mr. Phibbs, clearing his throat. He peruses his notes. "Now we know each other better. But how do

people really get to know each other? Is it with facts, the specifics about ourselves that distinguish us from the other six and a half billion people on this planet? Is it our brains that make us different, the way each person is like a computer programmed with a different mix of software, memories, habits, and genetic makeup? Is it what we do, the actions we take? What would your three things have been, I wonder, if I'd told you to name the most defining actions you have taken in your life?"

I see a flash of the fire in my mind's eye.

"This spring we'll be spending a lot of time discussing what it is to be unique," continues Mr. Phibbs. He stands and hobbles over to the small table at the back of the room, where he picks up a stack of books and begins to pass them out.

"Our first book of the semester," he says.

Frankenstein.

"It's alive!" yells the guy with the pink lady on his snowboard, holding up his book as if he expects it to be struck by lightning. Kay Patterson rolls her eyes.

"Ah, you're channeling Dr. Frankenstein already." Mr. Phibbs turns to the whiteboard and writes the name *Mary Shelley* in black marker, along with the year *1817*. "This book was written by a woman not much older than you are now, who was reflecting on the battle between science and the natural world."

He launches into a lecture about Jean-Jacques Rousseau

and the impact his ideas had on art and literature at the time that Mary Shelley was writing. I try not to stare at Kay Patterson. I wonder what kind of girl she is, to snag a guy like Christian. And then, since I don't know anything about him other than what the back of his head looks like, and that he likes to rescue girls who pass out in the hall, I wonder what kind of guy Christian is.

I realize that I'm chewing on my pencil eraser. I put my pencil down.

"Mary Shelley wanted to explore what it is that makes us human," Mr. Phibbs concludes. He glances over at me, meets my eyes like he knows I haven't been listening to a thing he's said for the past ten minutes, then looks away.

"I guess we'll find out," he says as he holds up the book, and then the bell rings.

"You can sit at my table for lunch, if you want," Wendy offers as we're leaving the classroom. "Did you pack your lunch? Or were you planning to go off campus?"

"No, I thought I'd get something here."

"Well, I think today it's chicken-fried steak." I make a face. "But you can always get pizza, or a peanut butter sandwich. Those are the JHHS staples."

"Healthy."

I shuffle through the line to get my food and follow Wendy over to her table, where a bunch of nearly identical-looking

girls peer up at me expectantly. Wendy rattles off their names: Lindsey, Emma, and Audrey. They seem friendly enough. Definitely not pretty people, all wearing T-shirts and jeans, braids and ponytails, not a lot of makeup. But nice. Normal.

“So, you’re like a group?” I ask as I sit down.

Wendy laughs.

“We call ourselves the Invisibles.”

“Oh . . . ,” I say, unsure of whether she’s joking or how to respond.

“We’re not freaks or geeks,” says Lindsey, Emma, or Audrey, I can’t tell which. “We’re just, well, you know, *invisible*.”

“Invisible to—”

“The popular people,” says Wendy. “They don’t see us.”

Great. I fit right in with the Invisibles.

Across the cafeteria I catch a glimpse of Jeffrey sitting with a bunch of guys in letterman jackets. A little blond girl is gazing up at him adoringly. He says something. Everybody at his table laughs.

Unbelievable. In less than one day, he’s Mr. Popular.

Someone pulls a chair up next to me. I turn. There is Christian, straddling the chair. For a moment all I can focus on is his green eyes. Maybe I’m not so invisible after all.

“So I hear you’re from California,” he says.

“Yes,” I murmur, hurrying to chew and swallow a bite of

peanut butter sandwich. The room is quieter now. The girls at the Invisibles table are gazing at him with wide eyes, as if he's never crossed into their territory before. As a matter of fact, pretty much everyone in the cafeteria is looking at us, a curious and almost predatory stare.

I take a quick sip of milk and give him what I hope is a food-free smile.

"We moved here from Mountain View. That's south of San Francisco," I manage.

"I was born in L.A. We lived there until I was five, although I don't really remember much."

"Nice." My mind races for the right response to this information, some way to acknowledge this amazing thing we have in common. But I've got nothing. The most I can come up with is a nervous giggle. A *giggle*, for crying out loud.

"I'm Christian," he says suavely. "I didn't get the chance to introduce myself before."

"Clara." I put my hand out to shake, a gesture he seems to find charming. He takes my hand, and it's like my vision and the real world clap together at this moment. He smiles this stunning, lopsided smile. He's real. His hand around mine is warm and confident, just the right amount of pressure. I'm instantly dizzy.

"Nice to meet you, Clara," he says, shaking my hand.

"Totally."

He smiles again. *Hot* is really not an adequate enough word for this guy. He is crazy beautiful. And it's more than his

looks—the intentionally messy waves of his dark hair; the strong eyebrows that make his expression a bit serious, even when he smiles; his eyes, which I notice can look emerald in one light and hazel in another; the sweetly sculpted angles of his face; the curve of his full lips. I’ve been seeing him from the front for all of ten minutes total and already I’m obsessing about his lips.

“Thank you for before,” I say.

“You’re very welcome.”

“Hey, ready to go?” Kay walks up and puts her hand on the back of his neck in a decidedly possessive gesture, spearing her fingers through his hair. Her expression is so carefully neutral it could have been sprayed on, like she couldn’t care less who her boyfriend’s talking to. Christian turns to look up at her, his face practically even with her breasts. Around her neck dangles a shiny silver half heart with the initials C.P. stamped into it. He smiles.

Spell effectively broken.

“Yeah, just a sec,” he says. “Kay, this is—”

“Clara Gardner,” she says, nodding. “She’s in my English class. Moved here from California. Doesn’t like birds. No good at math.”

“Yeah, that’s me in a nutshell,” I say.

“What? Did I miss something?” asks Christian, confused.

“Nothing. Just a stupid exercise we did in Phibbs’s class. We better go if we want to get back before next period,” she says, then turns to me and smiles, a flash of perfect white

teeth. I'd bet money that she wore braces at some point. "There's this great Chinese place we like to hit for lunch about a mile from here. You'll have to try it sometime with your friends." Translation: *You and I will never be friends.*

"I like Chinese," I say.

Christian hops up from the chair. Kay tucks her arm in his and smiles at him from under her lashes and starts to lead him out of the cafeteria.

"Nice to meet you," he calls back to me. "Again."

And then he's gone.

"Wow," remarks Wendy, who's been sitting right next to me the entire time without making a sound. "Impressive attempt at flirtation."

"I guess I was inspired," I say a bit dazedly.

"Well, I don't think there are many girls here who aren't inspired by Christian Prescott," she says, which makes the other girls titter.

"Freshman year I had this fantasy that he'd ask me to the prom and I'd be crowned queen," sighs the one I think is Emma, who then flushes bright red. "I'm over it now."

"I'd put money on Christian being prom king this year." Wendy scrunches up her nose. "But Kay's the queen. You'd better watch your back."

"Is she that bad?"

Wendy laughs, then shrugs.

"She and I were good friends in grade school, had

sleepovers and tea parties with our dolls and all of that, but when we hit junior high, it was like . . .” Wendy shakes her head sadly. “She’s spoiled. But she’s nice enough when you get to know her, I guess. She can be really sweet. But don’t get on her bad side.”

I’m pretty sure I’m already on Kay Patterson’s bad side. I could tell by the way she’d kept her voice light, friendly, but beneath it was an undercurrent of contempt.

I glance around the cafeteria. I notice the black-haired girl from English, Angela Zerbino. She’s sitting by herself, her lunch untouched in front of her, reading a thick black book. She looks up. She nods, just the tiniest bob of her head, like she wants to acknowledge me. I hold her gaze for a moment, then look away. She goes back to reading her book.

“What about her?” I ask Wendy, tilting my head to indicate Angela.

“Angela? She’s not a social reject or anything. It’s like she prefers to be alone. She’s sort of intense. Focused. She’s always been that way.”

“What’s the Pink Garter? It sounds like a . . . you know, a place where . . . you know . . .”

Wendy laughs. “A whorehouse?”

“Yeah,” I say, embarrassed.

“It’s a dinner theater in town,” says Wendy, still laughing. “Cowboy melodramas, a few musicals.”

“Oh,” I say, finally getting it. “I thought it was strange

when she said in class that her mother owned a whorehouse and she didn't know her father. A little TMI, if you know what I mean."

Now everyone at the table is laughing. I look again at Angela, who has turned a bit so I can't see her face.

"She seems nice," I backpedal.

Wendy nods.

"She is. My brother had a crush on her for a while."

"You have a brother?"

She snorts like she wishes she could give a different answer.

"Yes. He's my twin, actually. He's also a pain."

"I know the feeling." I gaze over at Jeffrey in his circle of new friends.

"And speak of the devil," says Wendy, grabbing the sleeve of a boy who's passing by our table.

"Hey," he protests. "What?"

"Nothing. I was just telling the new girl about my awesome brother and now here you are." She flashes a huge smile at him, the kind that says she might not be telling the whole truth.

"Behold, Tucker Avery," she says to me, gesturing up at him.

Her brother resembles her in nearly every way: same hazy blue eyes, same tan, same golden brown hair, except his hair is short and spiky and he's about a foot taller. He is definitely part of the cowboy group, although toned down from some of the others, wearing a simple gray tee, jeans,

and cowboy boots. Also hot, but in a completely different way than Christian, less refined, more tan and muscle and a hint of stubble along his jaw. He looks like he's been working under the sun his whole life.

"This is Clara," says Wendy.

"You're the girl with the Prius who almost rear-ended my truck this morning," he says.

"Oh, sorry about that."

He looks me up and down. I feel myself blush for probably the hundredth time that day.

"From California, right?" The word *California* seems like an insult coming from him.

"Tucker," Wendy warns, pulling at his arm.

"Well, I doubt that I would have done any damage to your truck if I'd hit you," I retort. "It looks like the back end is about to rust off."

Wendy's eyes widen. She seems genuinely alarmed.

Tucker scoffs. "That rusty truck will probably be towing you out of a snowbank next time there's a storm."

"Tucker!" exclaims Wendy. "Don't you have a rodeo team meeting or something?"

I'm busy trying to think of a comeback involving the incredible amount of money I will save this year driving my Prius as opposed to his gas-guzzling truck, but the right words aren't forming.

"You're the one who wanted to chat," he says to Wendy.

"I didn't know you were going to act like a pig."

“Fine.” He smirks at me. “Nice to meet you, Carrots,” he says, looking directly at my hair. “Oh, I mean Clara.”

My face flames.

“Same to you, Rusty,” I shoot back, but he’s already striding away.

Great. I’ve been at this school for less than five hours and I’ve already made two enemies simply by existing.

“Told you he was a pain,” says Wendy.

“I think that might have been an understatement,” I say, and we both laugh.

The first person I see when I come into my next class is Angela Zerbino. She’s sitting in the front row, already bent over her notebook. I take a seat a few rows back, looking around the classroom at all the portraits of the British monarchy that are stapled to the top of the walls. A large table at the front of the room displays a Popsicle-stick model of the Tower of London and a papier mâché replica of Stonehenge. In one corner is a mannequin wearing a suit of chain mail, in another, a large wooden board with three holes in it: real stockades.

This looks like it could be interesting.

The other students trickle in. When the bell rings, the teacher ambles out from a back room. He’s a scrawny guy with long hair pulled back in a ponytail and thick glasses, but he somehow comes off as cool, wearing his dress shirt and tie

over black jeans and cowboy boots.

“Hi, I’m Mr. Erikson. Welcome to spring semester of British History,” he says. He grabs a jar off the table and shakes the papers inside. “First I thought we’d start by dividing up into British citizens. In this canister are ten pieces of paper with the word *serf* on it. If you draw one of those, you’re basically a slave. Deal with it. There are three pieces of paper with the word *cleric*; if you draw those, you’re part of the church, a nun or a priest, whichever is appropriate.”

He glances toward the back of the room where a student has just slipped in the door. “Christian, nice of you to join us.”

It takes all of my willpower not to turn around.

“Sorry,” I hear Christian say. “Won’t happen again.”

“If it does you’ll spend five minutes in the stocks.”

“Definitely won’t happen again.”

“Excellent,” says Mr. Erikson. “Now where was I? Oh yes. Five pieces of paper have the words *lord/lady*. If you draw one of these, congratulations, you own land, maybe even a serf or two. Three say *knight*—you get the idea. And there is one, and only one, paper with the word *king*, and if you draw that one, you rule us all.”

He holds the jar out to Angela.

“I’m going to be queen,” she says.

“We shall see,” says Mr. Erikson.

Angela draws a paper from the jar and reads it. Her smile fades. “Lady.”

“I wouldn’t whine about it,” Mr. Erikson tells her. “It’s a good life, relatively speaking.”

“Of course, if I want to be sold off to the richest man who offers to marry me.”

“Touché,” says Mr. Erikson. “Lady Angela, everybody.”

He makes his way around the room. He already knows the students and calls them by name.

“Hmmm, red hair,” he says when he gets to me. “Could be a witch.”

Someone snickers behind me. I steal a quick look over my shoulder to see Wendy’s obnoxious brother, Tucker, sitting in the seat behind mine. He flashes me a devilish grin.

I draw a paper. Cleric.

“Very good, Sister Clara. Now you, Mr. Avery.”

I turn to watch Tucker draw from the jar.

“A knight,” he reads, looking pleased with himself.

“Sir Tucker.”

The role of king goes to a guy I don’t know, Brady, who is, judging by the muscles and the way he accepts his rule like he deserves it instead of drawing it by chance, a football player.

Christian goes last.

“Ah,” he says faux mournfully, reading his paper. “I’m a serf.”

Mr. Erikson follows this up by going around the room

with a set of dice and making us roll to see if we survive the Black Plague. The odds of surviving are not good for serfs, or clerics, since they tended the sick, but miraculously I survive. Mr. Erikson rewards me with a laminated badge that reads, I SURVIVED THE BLACK PLAGUE.

Mom will be so proud.

Christian doesn't make it. He receives a badge decorated with a skull and crossbones, which reads, I PERISHED IN THE BLACK PLAGUE. Mr. Erikson marks his death down in a notebook he has to keep track of our new lives. He assures us that the usual rules of life and death don't apply as far as this exercise is concerned.

Still, I can't help but take Christian's immediate demise as a bad sign.

Mom is waiting for us at the front door when we get home.

"Tell me everything," she commands as soon as I cross the threshold. "I want to know all the details. Does he go to your school? Did you see him?"

"Oh, she saw him," Jeffrey says before I can answer. "She saw him and she passed out in the middle of the hallway. The whole school was talking about it."

Her eyes widen. She turns to me. I shrug.

"I told you she'd pass out," says Jeffrey.

"You're a genius." Mom moves to ruffle his hair but he dodges her and says, "Too fast for you," before her hand

lands. "I put some chips and salsa out for you in the kitchen," she says.

"What happened?" she asks after Jeffrey goes to stuff his face.

"Pretty much what Jeffrey said. Just keeled over in front of everybody."

"Oh, honey." She offers me a sympathetic pout.

"When I woke up, there was this girl who helped me. I think she could be a friend. And then . . ." I swallow. "He came back with the nurse and carried me to the nurse's office."

Her mouth drops open. I've never seen her look so astonished. "He carried you?"

"Yes, like some lame damsel in distress."

She laughs. I sigh.

"Did you tell her his name yet?" comes Jeffrey's voice from the kitchen.

"Shut up," I call.

"His name is Christian," he calls back. "Can you believe that? We came all this way so Clara could save a guy named Christian."

"I'm aware of the irony."

"But you know his name now," Mom says softly.

"Yes." I'm unable to hold back a smile. "I know his name."

"And it's all happening. The pieces are coming together." She looks more serious now. "Are you ready for this, kiddo?"

It's all I've thought about for weeks, and I've known for the past two years that my time would come. But still, am I ready?

“I think so?” I say.

I hope.



4

WINGSPAN

I was fourteen when Mom told me about the angels. One morning at breakfast she announced that she was keeping me out of school for the day and we were going on a mother-daughter outing, just she and I. We dropped Jeffrey off at school and drove about thirty miles from our house in Mountain View to Big Basin Redwoods State Park, in the mountains near the ocean. My mom parked in the main lot, slung a backpack over her shoulder, said, “Last one up is a slowpoke,” and headed straight off along a paved trail. I had to practically jog to keep up with her.

“Some mothers take their daughters to get their ears pierced,” I called after her. There was no one else on the trail.

Fog shifted through the redwoods. The trees were as much as twenty feet in diameter, and so tall you couldn't see where they stopped, only the small gaps between the branches, where beams of light slanted onto the forest floor.

"Where are we going?" I asked breathlessly.

"Buzzards Roost," Mom said over her shoulder. Like that helped.

We hiked past deserted campgrounds, splashed across creeks, ducked under gigantic mossy beams where trees had fallen across the path. Mom was quiet. This wasn't one of those mother-daughter bonding times like when she took me to Fisherman's Wharf or the Winchester Mystery House or IKEA. The stillness of the forest was punctuated only by our breathing and the scuff of our feet on the trail, a silence so heavy and suffocating that I wanted to yell something just to shatter it.

She didn't speak again until we reached a huge outcropping of rock jutting out of the mountainside like a stone finger pointing to the sky. To get to the top we had to climb about twenty feet of sheer rock face, which Mom did quickly, easily, without looking back.

"Mom, wait!" I called, and scrambled after her. I'd never climbed so much as the rock wall in a gym. Her shoes flicked a spray of rubble down the slope. She disappeared over the top.

"Mom!" I yelled.

She peered down at me.

“You can do this, Clara,” she said. “Trust me. It will be worth it.”

I didn't really have a choice. I reached up and grabbed at the cliff face and started to climb, telling myself not to look down where the mountain dropped off beneath me. Then I was at the top. I stood next to Mom, panting.

“Wow,” I said, looking out.

“Pretty amazing, right?”

Below us stretched the valley of redwoods rimmed by the distant mountains. This was one of those top-of-the-world places, where you could see for miles in every direction. I closed my eyes and spread my arms, letting the wind move past me, smelling the air—a heady combination of trees and moss and growing things, a hint of dirt and creek water and pure, clean oxygen. An eagle turned in a slow circle over the forest. I could easily imagine what that would feel like, to glide through the air, nothing between you and endless blue heaven but little tufts of cloud.

“Have a seat,” Mom said. I opened my eyes and turned to see her sitting on a boulder. She patted the space beside her. I sat down next to her. She rummaged in her pack for a bottle of water, opened it, and drank deeply, then offered the bottle to me. I took it and drank, watching her. She was distracted, her eyes distant, lost in thought.

“Am I in trouble?” I asked.

She started, then laughed nervously.

“No, honey,” she said. “I just have something important to tell you.”

My head spun with all of the things that she might be about to spring on me.

“I’ve been coming to this spot for a really long time,” she said.

“You’ve met a guy,” I guessed. It seemed like a distinct possibility.

“What are you talking about?” Mom asked.

Mom had never dated much, even though everyone who met her liked her immediately, and men followed her around the room with their eyes. She liked to say that she was too busy for a steady relationship, too wrapped up with her job at Apple as a computer programmer, too occupied with being a single mom the rest of the time. I thought she was still hung up on Dad. But maybe she had some secret passionate affair she was about to confess to me. Maybe within a couple of months I’d be standing in a pink dress with flowers in my hair, watching her marry some guy I was supposed to call Dad. It’d happened to a couple of my friends.

“You brought me out here to tell me about this guy you met, and you love him, and you want to marry him or something,” I said quickly, not looking at her because I didn’t want her to see how much I hated the idea.

“Clara Gardner.”

“Really, I’d be okay with it.”

“That’s very sweet, Clara, but wrong,” she said. “I brought you out here because I think you’re old enough to know the truth.”

“Okay,” I said anxiously. That sounded big. “What truth?”

She took a deep breath and let it out, then leaned toward me.

“When I was about your age I lived in San Francisco with my grandmother,” she began.

I knew a little about this. Her father was out of the picture before she was born, and her mother died giving birth to her. I always thought it sounded like a fairy tale, like my mom was the orphaned, tragic heroine in one of my books.

“We lived in a big white house on Mason Street,” she said.

“Why haven’t you taken me there?” We’d been to San Francisco many times, at least two or three times a year, and she’d never said anything about a house on Mason Street.

“It burned down years ago,” she said. “There’s a souvenir shop there now, I think. Anyway, early one morning I woke up to the house violently shaking. I had to grab on to the bedpost so I wouldn’t be tossed right out of bed.”

“Earthquake,” I assumed. Growing up in California, I’d been through a few earthquakes, none that lasted more than a few seconds or done any real damage, but still pretty scary.

Mom nodded. “I could hear the dishes falling out of the china cabinet and windows breaking all over the house. Then there was a loud groaning sound. The wall of my bedroom

gave way, and the bricks from the chimney crashed down on top of me in bed.”

I stared at her in horror.

“I don’t know how long I lay there,” Mom said after a minute. “When I opened my eyes again I saw the figure of a man standing over me. He leaned down and said, ‘Be still, child.’ Then he lifted me in his arms, and the bricks slid off my body like they weighed nothing. He carried me to the window. All the glass was broken out, and I could see people running out of their houses into the street. And then a strange thing happened, and we were someplace else. It still resembled my room, only different somehow, like someone else was living there, undamaged as if the quake had never happened. Outside the window there was so much light, so bright it hurt to look.”

“Then what happened?”

“The man set me on my feet. I was amazed that I could stand. My nightgown was a mess, and I was a bit dizzy, but aside from that I was fine.

“‘Thank you,’ I said to him. I didn’t know what else to say. He had golden hair that gleamed in the light like nothing I’d ever seen before. And he was tall, the tallest man I’d ever seen, and very handsome.”

She smiled at the memory. I rubbed at the goose bumps that had jumped up along my arms. I tried to picture this tall, fine-looking guy with shiny blond hair, like some kind

of Brad Pitt sweeping in to rescue my mom. I frowned. The image made me uneasy, and I couldn't put my finger on why.

"He said, 'You're welcome, Margaret,'" Mom said.

"How did he know your name?"

"I wondered that myself. I asked him. He told me that he was a friend of my father's. They served together, he said. And he said that he'd been watching me from the day that I was born."

"Whoa. Like your own personal guardian angel."

"Exactly. Like my guardian angel," Mom said, nodding. "Although he wouldn't call himself that, of course."

I waited for her to go on.

"That's what he was, Clara. I want you to understand. He was an angel."

"Right," I said. "An angel. Like with wings and everything, I'm sure."

"I didn't see his wings until later, but yes."

She looked dead serious.

"Uh-huh," I said. I pictured the angel in the stained-glass window at church, wearing a halo and purple robes, huge golden wings fanned out behind him. "Then what happened?"

This really can't get any weirder, I thought.

And then it did.

"He told me that I was special," she said.

"Special how?"

"He said that my father was an angel and my mother human, and I was Dimidius, which means half."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "Come on. You're kidding, right?"

"No." She looked at me steadily. "It's not a joke, Clara. It's the truth."

I stared at her. The thing was, I trusted her. More than anybody. As far as I knew, she'd never lied to me before, not even those little white lies that so many parents tell their kids to get them to behave or believe in the tooth fairy or whatever. She was my mom, sure, but she was also my best friend. Cheesy but true. And now she was telling me something crazy, something impossible, and she was looking at me like everything depended on my reaction.

"So you're saying . . . you're saying that you're half angel," I said slowly.

"Yes."

"Mom, really, come on." I wanted her to laugh and tell me that the angel stuff was some kind of dream she had, like in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy wakes up and finds out the whole Oz thing was a big, colorful hallucination from getting conked on the head. "So then what happened?"

"He brought me back to Earth. He helped me find my grandmother, who was by that point hysterical, convinced I'd been crushed. And when the fires burned through our neighborhood, he helped us evacuate to Golden Gate Park. He stayed with us for three days, and then I didn't see him again for years."

I was quiet, bothered by the details of her story. About

a year before, my class had gone on a field trip to a San Francisco museum because they opened up a new exhibit about the great San Francisco earthquake. We'd looked at all the pictures of the broken buildings, the cable cars thrown off their tracks, the blackened skeletons of the burned up houses. We'd listened to old recordings of people who'd been there, their voices sharp and quivery as they described the terrible disaster.

Everybody had been making such a huge deal out of it that year because it was the hundred-year anniversary of when the quake had happened.

"You said there were fires?" I asked.

"Terrible fires. My grandmother's house burned to the ground."

"And *when* was this?"

"It was April," she said. "1906."

I felt like I was going to throw up. "That would make you what, a hundred and ten?"

"A hundred and sixteen, this year."

"I don't believe you," I stammered.

"I know it's hard."

I stood up. Mom reached for my hand, but I jerked it away. Hurt flashed in her eyes. She stood up too and took a step back, giving me some space, nodding slightly as if she completely understood what I was going through. Like she knew that she was unraveling everything.

I couldn't get enough air in my lungs.

She was crazy. That was the only explanation that made sense. My mom, who up to that point seemed like the best mother ever, my own personal version of the *Gilmore Girls*, the envy of all my friends with her beautiful auburn hair and fabulous dewy skin and quirky sense of humor, was actually a raving lunatic.

“What are you doing? Why are you telling me this?” I asked, blinking back furious tears.

“Because you need to know that you’re special, too.”

I stared at her incredulously.

“I’m special,” I repeated. “Because if you’re a half angel then that would make me what, a quarter angel?”

“Quarter angels are called Quartarius.”

“I want to go home now,” I said dully. I needed to call Dad. He might know what to do. I needed to find my mom some help.

“I wouldn’t have believed it either,” she said. “Not without proof.”

At first I thought that the sun must have come out from behind the clouds, suddenly brightening the ledge where we stood looking out, but then I understood, slowly, that this light was stronger than that. I turned and shielded my eyes from the sight of my mom with light beaming off her. It was like looking at the sun, so intense my eyes watered. Then she dimmed slightly and I saw that she had wings—enormous snowy wings unfurling behind her.

“This is glory,” she said, and I understood the words she

said even though she wasn't speaking English, but a strange language like two notes of music played on every syllable, so eerie and alien it made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

"Mom," I breathed helplessly.

Her wings extended like they were literally catching the air and pushed down once. The sound they made was like a single heartbeat low in the earth. My hair blew back with the force. She lifted off the ground slowly, impossibly graceful and light, still glowing all over. Then she suddenly shot out over the tree line, tucking her body up and moving fast across the entire length of the valley until she was only a bright speck on the horizon. I was left stunned and alone, the rock ledge empty and silent, darker now that she wasn't there to light it.

"Mom!" I called.

I watched her circle around and glide her way back to me, more slowly this time. She swept right up where the mountain dropped off and hovered, treading the air gently.

"I think I believe you," I said.

Her eyes sparkled.

For some reason I couldn't stop crying.

"Honey," she said, "it's going to be all right."

"You're an angel," I gasped through the tears. "And that means that I—"

I couldn't get the words out.

"That means you're part angel, too," she said.



That night I stood in the middle of my bedroom with the door locked and willed my wings to appear. Mom had assured me that I'd be able to summon them, in time, and even use them to fly. I couldn't imagine. It was too wild. I stood in front of the full-length mirror in my cami and underwear and thought of the Victoria's Secret models in the Angel commercials, their wings curled sexily around them. No wings appeared. I wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of the whole idea. Me, with wings sprouting from my shoulder blades. Me, part angel.

The thing about my mother being a half angel made total sense—as much as my mother being some kind of supernatural being made sense, anyway. She'd always seemed suspiciously beautiful to me. Unlike me with my brooding stubbornness, my flares of temper, my sarcasm, she was so graceful and even-tempered. Perfect to the point of being irritating. I couldn't name one flaw.

Unless you count lying to me for my entire life, I thought, allowing myself a flash of bitterness. Shouldn't there be some kind of rule, anyway, that angels can't lie?

Only she hadn't actually lied. Not once had she ever said to me, "You know what? You're *not* different from other people." She'd always told me exactly the opposite, in fact. She'd always said I was special. I'd just never believed her until now.

"You're better at things," she'd told me as we stood at the

top of Buzzards Roost. “Stronger, faster, smarter. Haven’t you noticed?”

“Um, no,” I said quickly.

But that wasn’t true. I’d always had a sense that I was different from other people. Mom has a video of me walking when I was only seven months old. I learned to read by the age of three. I was always the first in my class to master the multiplication tables and memorize the fifty states, that kind of thing. Plus I was good at the physical stuff. I was fast and quick on my feet. I could jump high and throw hard. Everybody always wanted me on their team when we played games in PE.

Still, I wasn’t like a child prodigy or anything. I wasn’t exceptional at any one thing. As a toddler I didn’t golf like Tiger Woods, or write my own symphonies by age five, or play competitive chess. Generally, things just came a little easier for me than they did for other kids. I noticed, sure, but I never really gave it much thought. If anything, I’d assumed I was better at stuff because I didn’t spend too much time sitting around watching crap on TV. Or because my mom is one those parents who made me practice, and study, and read books.

Now I didn’t know what to think. Everything was falling into place. And out of place, at the same time.

Mom smiled. “So often we only do what we think is expected of us,” she said. “When we are capable of so much more.”

At that point, I got so dizzy that I had to sit down. And

Mom had started talking again, telling me the basics. Wings: check. Stronger, faster, smarter: check. Capable of so much more. Something about languages. And there were a couple rules: *Don't tell Jeffrey—he's not old enough. Don't tell humans—they won't believe you and even if they did, they couldn't handle it.* My neck still tingled when I remembered the way she'd said "humans," like the word suddenly didn't apply to us. Then she had spoken about purpose and how, soon enough, I'd receive mine. It was important, she'd said, but it wasn't something she could easily explain. After that she'd basically shut up and stopped answering my questions. There were some things, she'd told me, that I had to learn over time. By experience. And then there were other things I didn't need to know quite yet.

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?" I'd asked her.

"Because I wanted you to live a normal life for as long as you could," she'd answered. "I wanted you to be a normal girl."

Now I would never be normal again. That much was clear.

I looked at my reflection in the bedroom mirror. "Okay," I said. "Show me . . . *the wings!*"

Nothing.

"Faster than a speeding bullet!" I announced to the reflection, striking my best Superman pose. Then my smile in the mirror faded and the girl on the other side stared back at me skeptically.

"Come on," I said, spreading my arms. I rotated my shoulders

forward so that my shoulder blades stuck out and squeezed my eyes shut and thought hard about wings. I imagined them erupting out of me, piercing the skin, unfolding themselves behind me the way that Mom's had on the mountaintop. I opened my eyes.

Still no wings.

I sighed and flopped down on my bed. I switched off the lamp. There were glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling, which seemed so silly now, so juvenile. I glanced over at my alarm clock. It was after midnight. School tomorrow. I had to make up a spelling test I'd missed in third period, which seemed even more ridiculous.

"Quartarius," I said, my mom's name for a quarter angel.

Q-U-A-R-T-A-R-I-U-S. Clara is a Quartarius.

I thought about my mom's strange language. Angelic, she'd called it. So uncanny and beautiful, like notes of a song.

"Show me my wings," I said.

My voice sounded strange that time, like there were other higher and lower echoes around my words. I gasped.

I could speak it.

And then I felt my wings under me, lifting me upward slightly, one folded beneath the other. They stretched nearly to my heels, glowing white even in the darkness.

"Holy crap!" I exclaimed, then clapped both of my hands over my mouth.

Very slowly, afraid that I'd make the wings go away again,

I got up and turned on the light. Then I stood in front of the bedroom mirror and looked at my wings for the first time. They were real—real wings with real feathers, weighty and tingling and absolute proof that what happened earlier with my mom was no joke. They were so beautiful it made my chest tight to look at them.

Gently, I touched them. They were warm, alive. I could move them, I found, the same way I could move my arms. Like they were truly a part of me, an extra set of limbs that I'd been oblivious to my whole life up to now. I would have guessed that I had a good ten- to twelve-foot wingspan, but it was hard to be sure. All that wing simply didn't fit in the mirror.

Wingspan, I thought, shaking my head. I have a wingspan. This is insane.

I examined the feathers. Some were very long, smooth and sharp, others softer, more rounded. The shortest feathers, the ones closest to my body where my wings connected at the shoulder, were small and downy, about the size of my thumb. I grabbed one of them and pulled until it came free, which stung so fiercely my eyes teared up. I gazed intently at that feather in my hand, trying to get my head around the fact that it came from me. For a moment it just lay there in my palm, and then, slowly, it started to dissolve, like it was evaporating into the air, until there was nothing left.

I had wings. I had feathers. I had angel blood in me.

What happens now? I wondered. I learn to fly? I dangle from a cloud strumming a harp? I'll receive messages from God? Dread uncurled itself in my gut. Our family was hardly what you'd call religious, but I'd always believed in God. But I was finding out then that there was a big difference between believing in God and knowing that he exists and apparently has some great master plan for my life. It was pretty freaky, to say the least. My understanding of the universe and my place in it had been turned completely upside down in less than twenty-four hours.

I didn't know how to make the wings go away again, so I folded them against my back as tightly as I could and lay down on my bed, angling my arms so I could feel the wings underneath me. The house was quiet. It felt like everyone else on the Earth was asleep. Everyone else was the same, and I had changed. All I could do that night was lie there with this knowledge, amazed and frightened, stroking the feathers under me gently, until I fell asleep.



5

HOT BOZO

Christian and I only have one class together, so catching his attention is no easy task. Every day I try to pick my seat in British History so there's a chance that he'll sit next to me. And so far in the span of two weeks, the stars align exactly three times and he ends up in the desk next to mine. I smile and say hello. He smiles back and says hi. For a moment, an undeniable force seems to draw us together like magnets. But then he opens his notebook or checks his cell phone under his desk, signifying that our *Nice weather we're having* chit-chat is over. It's like, in those few crucial seconds, one of the magnets gets flipped around and pulls him away from me. He's not rude or anything; he just isn't all that interested in

getting to know me. And why should he be? He has no idea the future that awaits us.

So for an hour each day I secretly watch him, trying to memorize everything I can, unsure of what might be useful to me someday. He likes to wear button-down dress shirts with the sleeves rolled casually to his elbow and the same version of Seven jeans in slightly different shades of black or blue. He uses notebooks made from recycled paper and writes with a green ballpoint pen. He almost always knows the right answer when Mr. Erikson calls on him, and if he doesn't he makes a joke about it, which means that he's smart plus humble plus funny. He likes Altoids. Every so often he reaches into his back pocket for the little silver tin and pops a mint into his mouth. To me that says he expects to be kissed.

On that note, Kay meets him right outside class every day. Like she saw the way the new girl looked at her man that first day in the cafeteria, and she never wants him vulnerable to that again. So all I have are the precious pre-class minutes, and so far nothing I've done or said has elicited a significant response from Christian.

But tomorrow is T-Shirt Day. I need a shirt that will start a conversation.

"Don't stress about it," says Wendy after school as I parade a line of T-shirts in front of her. She's sitting on the floor of my room by the window, legs curled under her, the very picture of the BFF helping to make a huge fashion decision.

“Should it be a band?” I ask. I hold out a black tee from a Dixie Chicks tour.

“Not that one.”

“Why?”

“Trust me.”

I pick up one of my favorites, forest green with a print of Elvis on it that I got on a trip to Graceland a few years before. Young Elvis, dreamy Elvis, bending over his guitar.

Wendy makes a noncommittal noise.

I hold up a hot-pink shirt that reads, EVERYONE LOVES A CALIFORNIA GIRL. This could be the winner, a chance to play up what Christian and I have in common. But it will also clash with my orange hair.

Wendy scoffs. “I think my brother is planning on wearing a shirt that says, ‘Go back to California.’”

“Shocker. What’s his deal with Californians, anyway?”

She shrugs. “It’s a long story. Basically my grandpa owned the Lazy Dog Ranch, and now some rich Californian owns it. My parents only manage it for him, and Tucker has rage issues. Plus, you insulted Bluebell.”

“Bluebell?”

“Around these parts, you can’t disrespect a man’s truck without dire consequences.”

I laugh. “Well, he should get over himself. He tried to get me burned at the stake in Brit History yesterday. Here I am minding my own business, taking notes like a good little girl,

and out of the blue Tucker raises his hand and accuses me of being a witch.”

“Sounds like something Tucker would do,” admits Wendy.

“Everybody had to vote on it. I barely escaped with my nun’s life. Obviously I’ll have to return the favor.”

Christian, I remember happily, voted against burning me. Of course his vote doesn’t count much because he’s a serf. But still, he didn’t want to see me dead, even in theory. That has to count for something.

“You know that’ll just encourage him, right?” Wendy says.

“Eh, I can handle your brother. Besides, there’s some kind of prize for the students who can last the whole semester. And I’m a survivor.”

Now it’s Wendy’s turn to laugh. “Yeah, well, so is Tucker.”

“I can’t believe you shared a womb with him.”

She smiles. “There are definitely moments I can’t believe it either,” she says. “But he’s a good guy. He just hides it well sometimes.”

She gazes out the window, her cheeks pink. Have I offended her? For all her playful talk about how much of a pain Tucker is, is she sensitive about him? I guess I can understand why. I can make fun of Jeffrey all I want, but if somebody else messes with my little brother, they better watch out.

“So, Elvis then? I’m running out of options here.”

“Sure.” She leans back against the wall and stretches her arms over her head, as if the conversation has exhausted her. “Nobody really cares.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve been here forever,” I remind her. “You’re accepted. I feel like if I make one wrong move, I might get chased off school property by an angry mob.”

“Oh please. You’ll be accepted. I accepted you, didn’t I?”

That she had. After two weeks I’m still eating lunch at the Invisibles lunch table.

So far I’ve identified two basic groups at Jackson Hole High School: the Haves—the pretty people, comprised of the wealthy Jackson Holers, whose parents own restaurants and art galleries and hotels; and the much smaller and less conspicuous Have-Nots—the kids whose parents work for the rich Jackson Holers. To see the great divide between these groups, you only have to look from Kay, in all her coiffed perfection and French-tipped manicured fingernails, to Wendy, who, though undeniably pretty, usually wears her sun-streaked hair in a simple braid down her back, and her fingernails are polish free and sports clipped.

So where do I fit in?

I’m quickly starting to figure out that our large house with a mountain view means that we have the big bucks, money Mom never mentioned back in California. Apparently we’re loaded. Still, Mom raised us without any idea of wealth. She lived through the Great Depression, after all, insists that Jeffrey and I save a portion of our allowance each week, makes us eat every morsel of food on our plates, darns our socks and mends our clothes, and sets the thermostat to low because we can always put on another sweater.