



HALLOWED



CYNTHIA HAND

HARPER TEEN

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Hallowed

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First Edition



PROLOGUE

In the dream, there's sorrow. I feel it over everything else, a terrible grief that chokes me, blurs my sight, weighs down my feet as I move through the tall grass. I walk among pine trees up a gentle slope. It's not the hillside from my vision, not the forest fire, not anyplace I've seen before. This is something new. Overhead the sky is a pure, cloudless blue. Sun shining. Birds singing. A warm breeze stirring the trees.

A Black Wing must be nearby, *really* nearby, if the raging grief is any indication. I glance around. That's when I see my brother walking beside me. He's wearing a suit, black jacket and everything: dark gray button-down shirt, shiny shoes, a striped silver tie. He gazes straight ahead, his jaw set in determination or anger or something else I can't identify.

“Jeffrey,” I murmur.

He doesn’t look at me. He says, “Let’s just get this over with.”

I wish I knew what he meant.

Then someone takes my hand, and it’s familiar, the heat of his skin, the slender yet masculine fingers enfolding mine. Like a surgeon’s hand, I once thought. Christian’s. My breath catches. I shouldn’t let him hold my hand, not now, not after everything, but I don’t pull away. I look up the sleeve of his suit to his face, his serious green gold-flecked eyes. And for an instant the sorrow eases.

You can do this, he whispers in my mind.



1

LOOKING FOR MIDAS

Bluebell's not blue anymore. The fire has transformed Tucker's 1978 Chevy LUV into a mix of black, gray, and rusty orange, the windows shattered by the heat, the tires missing, the interior a sickening blackened twist of metal and melted dashboard and upholstery. It's hard to believe, looking at it now, that a few weeks ago one of my favorite things in the world was riding around in this old truck with the windows rolled down, letting my fingers trail through the air, sneaking glances over at Tucker just because I liked looking at him. This is where everything happened, pressed against Bluebell's beat-up, musty seats. This is where I fell in love.

And now it's all burned up.

Tucker's staring at what's left of Bluebell with grief in his stormy blue eyes, one hand resting on the scorched hood like he's saying his final good-byes. I take his other hand. He hasn't said a lot since we got here. We've spent the afternoon wandering through the burned part of the forest, searching for Midas, Tucker's horse. Part of me thought this was a bad idea, coming out here again, looking, but when Tucker asked me to bring him here I said yes. I get it—he loved Midas, not only because he was a champion rodeo horse, but because Tucker had been there the night Midas was born, watched him take his first shaky steps, raised him and trained him and rode him on practically every horse trail in Teton County. He wants to know what happened to him. He wants closure.

I know the feeling.

At one point we came across the carcass of an elk, burned nearly to ash, which for an awful moment I thought was Midas until I saw the antlers, but that was all we found.

“I'm sorry, Tuck,” I say now. I know I couldn't have saved Midas, no way I could have flown carrying Tucker and a full-grown horse out of the burning forest that day, but it still feels like my fault, somehow.

His hand tightens in mine. He turns and shows me a hint of dimple.

“Hey, don't be sorry,” he says. I loop an arm around his

neck as he pulls me closer. “I’m the one who should be sorry for dragging you out here today. It’s depressing. I feel like we should be celebrating or something. You saved my life, after all.” He smiles, a real smile this time, full of warmth and love and everything I could ask for. I tug his face down, finding all kinds of solace in the way his lips move over mine, the thump of his heart against my palm, the sheer steadiness and strength of this boy who stole my heart. For a minute I let myself get lost in him.

I failed at my purpose.

I try to push the thought away, but it lingers. Something twists inside me. A sharp gust of wind hits us, and the rain, which was drizzling on us before, starts to come down harder. It’s been raining for three solid days, ever since the fires. It’s cold, that kind of chilly damp that passes right through my coat. Fog rolls between the blackened trees.

Reminds me of hell, actually.

I pull away from Tucker, shivering.

God, I need therapy, I think.

Right. As if I can picture telling my story to a shrink, stretched out on a sofa talking about how I’m part angel, how all angel-bloods have this purpose we’re put on earth to fulfill, how on the day of my purpose I happened to bump into a fallen angel. Who literally took me to hell for about five minutes. Who tried to kill my mother. And how I fought him with a type of magical holy light. Then I had to fly off to save

a boy from a forest fire, only I didn't save him. I saved my boyfriend instead, but it turns out that the original boy didn't need saving, anyway, because he's part angel, too.

Yeah, somehow I have the feeling that my first visit to a therapist would end with me in a straitjacket getting comfy in my new padded cell.

"You okay?" Tucker asks quietly.

I haven't told him about hell. Or the Black Wing. Because Mom says that when you know about Black Wings you're more likely to draw their attention, however that works.

I haven't told him about a lot of things.

"I'm fine. I'm just . . ." What? What am I? Hopelessly confused? Completely screwed up? Eternally doomed?

I go with: "Cold."

He hugs me, rubs his hands up and down my arms, trying to warm me. For a second I see that worried, slightly offended look he gets when he knows I'm not telling him the entire truth, but I stretch up and give him another kiss, a soft one, at the corner of his mouth.

"Let's never break up again, okay?" I tell him. "I don't think I could handle it."

His eyes soften. "It's a deal. No more breaking up. Come on," he says, taking my hand and leading me back to where my car is parked at the edge of the burned clearing. He opens my door for me, then runs around to the passenger side and gets in. He grins. "Let's get the heck out of here."

I love that he says heck.

I've totally had enough of hell.

It's a different girl this year, sitting in the silver Prius in the parking lot of Jackson Hole High School on her first day of class. First off, this girl's a blonde: long, wavy gold hair with subtle tints of red. She wears her hair in a tight ponytail at the base of her neck, and on top of that she's crammed a gray fedora, which she hopes will come off as cool and vintage and will take some of the attention away from her hair. She looks sun-kissed—not tan exactly, but with a very definite glow. But it's not the hair or the skin that I don't quite recognize as my own when I peer into the rearview mirror. It's the eyes. In those large blue-gray eyes is a brand-new knowledge of good and evil. I look older. Wiser. I hope that's true.

I get out of the car. Overhead the sky is gray. Still raining. Still cold. I can't help but scan the clouds, search around inside my own consciousness for any hint of sorrow that could mean there's a bad angel lurking, even though Mom said Samjeeza's unlikely to come after us right away. I injured him, and apparently it takes a while for Black Wings to heal, something to do with the way time works in hell. A day is a thousand years, a thousand years a day, something like that. I don't pretend to understand it. I'm just glad we don't have to hightail it out of Jackson and leave my entire life behind. At least for the time being.

No bad-angel vibes, so I look around the parking lot hoping to see Tucker, but he's not here yet. Nothing left to do but head inside. I straighten the fedora one last time and start for the door.

My senior year awaits.

"Clara!" calls a familiar voice before I even make it three steps. "Wait up."

I turn to see Christian Prescott climbing out of his brand-new pickup truck. This one is black, huge, glinting silver at the wheels, the words *MAXIMUM DUTY* stamped onto the back. The old truck, the silver Avalanche that used to be permanently parked on the edges of my visions, burned up in the forest too. That was not a good day to be a truck.

I wait as he jogs over to me. Just looking at him makes me feel weird, nervous, like I'm losing my balance. The last time I saw him was five nights ago when we were standing on my front porch, both of us drenched with rain and smeared with soot, trying to work up the nerve to go inside. We had so much craziness to figure out, but we never ended up doing it, which, I confess, is not Christian's fault. He did call. A lot, those first couple days. But whenever I saw his name light up on my phone, part of me always froze, the proverbial deer in the headlights, and I wouldn't pick up. By the time I finally did, we didn't seem to know what to say to each other. It all boiled down to: "So, you didn't need me to save you." "Nope. And you didn't need me to save you." And we laughed

awkwardly as if this whole purpose thing was some kind of a prank, and then we both fell silent, because really what is there to say? I'm sorry, I blew it, it looks like I messed up your divine purpose? My bad?

"Hi," he says now, sounding out of breath.

"Hi."

"Nice hat," he says, but his eyes go straight to my hair, like every time he sees me with the correct hair color it confirms that I'm the girl from his visions.

"Thanks," I manage. "I'm going for incognito here."

He frowns. "Incognito?"

"You know. The hair."

"Oh." His hand lifts like he's going to touch the obnoxious strand of hair that's already sprung loose from my ponytail, but instead closes into a fist, drops. "Why don't you just dye it again?"

"I've tried." I take a step back, tuck the runaway strand behind my ear. "The color won't take anymore. Don't ask me why."

"Mysterious," he says, and the corner of his mouth quirks up into a tiny smile that would have melted my heart to butter last year. He's hot. He knows he's hot. I'm taken. He knows I'm taken, and yet here he goes smiling and stuff. This irritates me. I try not to think about the dream I keep having this week, the way that Christian seems to be the only thing in the entire dream that keeps me from completely losing my

mind. I try not to think about the words *we belong together*, those words that used to come to me over and over in my vision.

I don't want to belong to Christian Prescott.

The smile fades, his eyes going serious again. He looks like he wants to say something.

"So, see you around," I say, maybe a little too brightly, and start off toward the building.

"Clara—" He trots along after me. "Hey, wait. I was thinking that maybe we could sit together at lunch?"

I stop and stare at him.

"Or not," he says with that laugh/exhale thing he does. My heart kicks into high gear. I'm not interested in Christian anymore, but my heart doesn't seem to have gotten that message. Crap. Crap. Crap.

Some things change. Some things don't, I guess.

Everybody notices my hair. Of course. I was hoping that they'd notice in a quiet way, a few whispers, some gossip for a couple days, then it'd blow over. But I'm two minutes into first-period French when the teacher makes me take off the hat, and then it's like a nuclear blast. "So pretty, so pretty," Miss Colbert keeps saying, an eyelash away from coming right up and stroking my head. I stick with the story that Mom and I came up with earlier about Mom finding an amazing colorist in California this summer and paying some astronomical

fee for her to transform me from orange nightmare to strawberry fabulous. Saying all that in high school–level French while pretending I don’t speak the language perfectly is an especially fun part of the morning. I’m ready to go home before nine a.m. Then I duck into AP Calculus, the bell rings, and it’s like the whole fiasco starts all over again. *Your hair, your hair, so pretty.* Then again, in third period art class, like they could all start drawing me and my amazing hair.

And fourth period, AP Government, is worse. Christian is there.

“Hi again,” he says as I stand in the doorway gawking at him.

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. There are only around six hundred students at Jackson Hole High School, so the odds are in favor of us having a class together. Tucker’s supposed to be in this class too, last time I checked.

Where the—*heck* is Tucker this morning? Come to think of it, I haven’t seen Wendy either.

“You going to come in?” Christian asks.

I slide into the seat next to him and rummage around in my bag for my notebook and a pen. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, roll my head from one side to the other to try to release some of the tension in my neck.

“Long day already?” he asks.

“You have no idea.”

Right then, Tucker breezes in.

“I’ve been looking for you all day,” I say as he claims the desk on the other side of me. “Did you just get to school?”

“Yeah. Car trouble,” he says. “We have this old crap car that we use around the ranch, and it wouldn’t start this morning. If you thought my truck was junk, you should see this thing.”

“I never thought Bluebell was junk,” I tell him.

He clears his throat, smiles. “How about that? We’re in a class together, you and I, and I didn’t even have to bribe anybody this year.”

I laugh. “You bribed somebody last year?”

“Not officially,” Tucker admits. “I asked Mrs. Lowell, the lady in the office in charge of scheduling, real nice if she could get me into Brit. History. At the last minute, too, I mean like ten minutes before class started. I’m friends with her daughter, which helped.”

“But why . . . ?”

He laughs. “You’re cute when you’re slow.”

“Because of me? No way. You hated me. I was that yuppie California chick who insulted your truck.”

He grins. I shake my head in bewilderment.

“You’re crazy, you know that.”

“Aw, and here I thought I was being sweet and romantic and stuff.”

“Right. So, you’re friends with Mrs. Lowell’s daughter? What’s her name?” I ask with mock jealousy.

“Allison. She’s a nice girl. She was one of the girls I took to prom last year.”

“Pretty?”

“Well, she’s got red hair. I kind of have a thing for red hair,” he says. I punch him lightly on the arm. “Hey. I kind of have a thing for tough girls, too.”

I laugh again. That’s when I feel the surge of frustration, so strong it wipes the smile right off my face.

Christian.

This kind of thing’s been happening lately. Sometimes, usually when I least expect it, it’s as if I’m allowed access into other people’s heads. Like now, for instance, I can perceive Christian’s presence on the other side of me so keenly that it’s like he’s boring holes into me with his eyes. I don’t get what he’s thinking in words so much as what he feels—he notices how natural it is for me to fall into this easy conversation with Tucker. He wishes that I would joke around with him that way, that we could finally speak to each other, finally connect. He wants to make me laugh like that.

Knowing this, by the way, totally sucks. Mom calls it empathy, says that it’s a rare gift among angel-bloods. Rare gift, ha. I wonder if there’s a return policy.

Tucker looks over my shoulder and seems to notice Christian for the first time.

“How you doing, Chris? Have a nice summer?” he asks.

“Yeah, fantastic,” answers Christian, and his mind

suddenly retreats from mine into a wave of forced indifference. “How about you?”

They stare at each other, one of those high-testosterone stares. “Amazing,” Tucker says. There’s a challenge in his voice. “Best summer of my life.”

I wonder if it’s too late to get out of this class.

“Well, that’s the thing about summers, isn’t it?” says Christian after a minute. “They have to end sometime.”

It’s a relief when class is over. But then I have to stand at the doorway of the cafeteria and decide what to do about lunch.

Option A: My usual. Invisibles table. Wendy. Chitchat. Maybe some awkward talk about how I’m dating her twin brother now, and maybe her asking about what exactly happened out there in the woods the day of the fire, which I don’t know how to answer. Still, she’s one of my best friends, and I don’t want to keep avoiding her.

Option B: Angela. Angela likes to eat alone, and people usually give her a lot of space. Maybe, if I sat with her, they would give me a lot of space. But then I’d have to answer Angela’s questions and listen to her theories, which she’s pretty much been bombarding me with for the past few days.

Option C (not really an option): Christian. Standing casually in the corner, deliberately not looking at me. Not expecting anything, not pressuring me, but there. Wanting

me to know he's there. Hopeful.

No way I'm going in that direction.

Then the decision kind of gets made for me. Angela looks up. She tilts her head to indicate the empty seat next to her. When I don't hop to it, she mouths, "Get over here."

Bossy.

I go over to her corner and sink into a seat. She's reading a small, dusty book. She closes it and slides it across the table to me.

"Check this out," she says.

I read the title. "*The Book of Enoch*?"

"Yep. A really, really, ridiculously old copy, so watch the pages. They're delicate. We're going to need to talk about this ASAP. But first—" She looks up, then calls loudly, "Hey, Christian."

Oh. My. God. What is she doing?

"Angela, wait a second, don't—"

She waves him over. This could be bad.

"What's up?" he says, cool and composed as ever.

"You're going out to lunch, right?" Angela asks. "You always go out."

His eyes flicker over to mine. "I was considering it."

"Right, well, I don't want to mess up your plans or anything, but I think you and me and Clara should have a meeting after school. At my mom's theater, the Pink Garter, in town."

Christian looks confused. "Um, sure. Why?"

“Let’s just call it a new club I’m starting,” says Angela.
“The Angel Club.”

He glances at me again, and yep, there’s betrayal in his green eyes, because obviously I’ve gone and blabbed his biggest secret to Angela. I want to explain to him that Angela is like a bloodhound when it comes to secrets, virtually impossible to get anything by her, but it doesn’t matter. She knows. He knows she knows. Damage is done. I glare at Angela.

“She’s one too,” I say simply, mostly because I know Angela wanted to spring it on him herself, and it makes me feel better to ruin her plans. “And she’s crazy, obviously.”

Christian nods, like this revelation comes as no surprise.

“But you’re going to be there, at the Pink Garter,” he says to me.

“I guess so.”

“Okay. I’m in,” he tells Angela, but he’s still looking at me.
“We need to talk, anyway.”

Awesome.

“Awesome,” says Angela cheerfully. “See you after school.”

“See you,” he says, then wanders out of the cafeteria.

I turn to Angela. “I hate you.”

“I know. But you need me, too. Otherwise nothing would ever get done.”

“I still hate you,” I say, even though she’s right. Kind of. This whole Angel Club thing actually sounds like a great idea, if it can help me figure out what it means that Christian and

I didn't fulfill our purpose, since my mom still isn't exactly forthcoming on the subject. Angela's stellar with research. If anyone could uncover the consequences for angel-blood purpose-failure, it's her.

"Oh, you know you love me," she says. She pushes the book at me again. "Now take this and go eat lunch with your boyfriend."

"What?"

"Over there. He's clearly pining for you." She gestures behind us, where, sure enough, over at the Invisibles table, Tucker is chatting with Wendy. They're both staring at me with identical expectant expressions.

"Shoo. You're dismissed," says Angela.

"Shut up." I take the book and tuck it into my backpack, then head to the Invisibles table. Ava, Lindsey, and Emma, my other fellow Invisibles, all smile up at me and say hello, along with Wendy's boyfriend, Jason Lovett, who I guess is eating with us this year instead of his usual computer-games pals.

It's weird, us having boyfriends.

"What was that all about?" asks Wendy, peering over at Angela with curious eyes.

"Oh, just Angela being Angela. So, what's on the Jackson High menu for today?"

"Sloppy Joes."

"Yummy," I say without enthusiasm.

Wendy rolls her eyes and says to Tucker, “Clara never likes the food here. I swear, she eats like a bird.”

“Huh,” he says, eyes twinkling, because that’s not his experience with me at all. Around him I’ve always eaten like a horse. I slide into the seat next to his, and he scoots his chair closer to mine and puts his arm around me. Perfectly G-rated, but I can almost feel the topic of discussion shift in the cafeteria. I guess I’m going to be that girl who holds her boyfriend’s hand as they stroll down the halls, who steals kisses between classes, who makes the moony eyes across the crowded cafeteria. I never thought I’d be that girl.

Wendy snorts, and we both turn to look at her. Her eyes dart from me to Tucker and back again. She knows about us, of course, but she’s never seen us together like this before.

“You guys are kind of disgusting,” she says. But then she scoots her chair closer to Jason’s and slips her hand in his.

Tucker smiles in a mischievous way I know too well. I don’t have time to protest before he leans over for a kiss. I push at him, embarrassed, then melt and forget where I am for a minute. Finally he lets go. I try to catch my breath.

I am *so* that girl. But being that girl has its perks.

“Ew, get a room,” Wendy says, stifling a smile. It’s hard to read her, but I think she’s trying to be cool with this whole best-friend-dating-my-brother thing by acting completely nauseated. Which I think means that she approves.

I notice that the cafeteria has gone momentarily silent.

Then suddenly everything starts up again in a flurry of conversation.

“You do know we’re now officially the talk of the town,” I say to Tucker. He might as well have taken a marker to my forehead and written PROPERTY OF TUCKER in big black letters.

His eyebrows lift. “Do you mind?”

I reach for his hand and lace his fingers with mine.

“Nope.”

I’m with Tucker. In spite of my failed purpose and everything, it looks like I’m actually going to get to keep him. I’m the luckiest girl in the world.



2

FIRST RULE OF ANGEL CLUB

Mr. Phibbs, my teacher for AP English, which happens to be—thank God!—my last class of the day, immediately gets us started on our first “College English” assignment, a personal essay on where we see ourselves in ten years.

I take out a notebook, click my pen to the write position. And stare at the blank page. And stare. And stare.

Where do I see myself in ten years?

“Try to visualize yourself,” Mr. Phibbs says, like he’s spotted me back here in the corner and knows that I’m floundering. I always liked Mr. Phibbs; he’s kind of our own personal Gandalf or Dumbledore or somebody cool like that, complete with round, wire glasses and long white ponytail

sticking out of the back of his collar. But right now he's killing me.

Visualize myself, he says. I close my eyes. Slowly, a picture starts to materialize in my mind. A forest beneath an orange sky. A ridge. Christian, waiting.

I open my eyes. Suddenly I'm furious.

No, I think at no one in particular. That is not my future. That's past. My future is with Tucker.

It's not hard to imagine it. I close my eyes again, and with a bit of effort I can see the outline of the big red barn at the Lazy Dog, the sky overhead empty and blue. There's a man walking a horse in a pasture. It looks like Midas, a beautiful glossy chestnut. And there's—this is the part where the breath suddenly hitches in my throat—a small boy riding the horse, a tiny dark-haired boy giggling as Tucker—the man is definitely Tucker; I'd know that butt anywhere—leads him around the pasture. The boy sees me, waves. I wave back. Tucker walks the horse over to the fence.

“Look at me, look at me,” says the boy.

“I see you! Hi there, handsome,” I say to Tucker. He leans over the fence to kiss me, taking my face between his hands, and that's when I see the glint of the plain gold band on his finger.

We're married.

It's the best daydream of all time. I know somewhere deep down that it's only a daydream, the combination of my

active imagination and wishful thinking. Not a vision. Not the future that's been set for me. But it's the one I want.

I open my eyes, tighten my fingers around my pen, and write: "In ten years, I will be married. I will have a child. I will be happy."

I click the pen closed and stare at the words. They surprise me. I've never been one of those girls, either, who dreamed of getting married, never forced a boy to say vows with me on the playground or dressed up in bedsheets and pretended to walk down the aisle. When I was a kid I fashioned swords out of tree branches, and Jeffrey and I chased each other around the backyard yelling, "Surrender or die!" Not that I was a tomboy. I liked the color purple and nail polish and sleepovers and writing my crush's name in the margins of my notebooks at school as much as any other girl. But I never honestly considered being married. Being Mrs. Somebody. I guess I assumed that I'd get married eventually. It just seemed like it was too far away to worry about.

But maybe I am one of those girls.

I look at the page again. I've got three sentences. Wendy is obviously writing an entire book on how awesome her life is going to turn out, and I've got three sentences. I have a feeling they're not the kind of sentences that Mr. Phibbs is going to appreciate.

"Okay, five more minutes," says Mr. Phibbs. "Then we'll share."

Panic sets in. I'm going to have to make something up. What should I want to be? Angela's going to be a poet, Wendy's a vet, Kay Patterson over there is head of a sorority house and marries a senator, Shawn is an Olympic-gold snowboarder, Jason's one of those computer programmers who makes a gazillion dollars coming up with some new way to Google, and I'm—I'm—I'm a cruise ship director. I'm a famous ballerina for the New York City Ballet. I'm a heart surgeon.

I go with heart surgeon. My pen flies across the page.

"Time's up," says Mr. Phibbs. "Finish your sentence and then we'll share."

I read back over what I've written. It's good stuff. Completely bogus, but something. "There's nothing more inspiring than the complexity and beauty of the human heart," I write as my last sentence, and I can nearly make myself believe it. The daydream about Tucker has almost faded from my mind.

"Heart surgeon, huh?" says Angela as we walk together up the boardwalk on Broadway in Jackson.

I shrug. "You went with lawyer. You really think you're going to be a lawyer?"

"I'd make an excellent lawyer."

We step under the archway that says PINK GARTER, and Angela fishes out her keys to unlock the door. As usual for this time of day, the theater looks completely deserted.

“Come on.” She puts her hand on my shoulder and pushes me through the empty lobby.

For a minute we stand there in the dark. Then Angela slips away, disappearing into the black, and a moment later a halo of light appears on the stage, which is still decked out with the set of *Oklahoma!*, a fake farmhouse and corn. I wander reluctantly down the aisle, past the rows of red velvet seats and up to the line of clean white tables in front of the orchestra pit, where all last year Angela and I sat with Angela’s notebooks and stacks of dusty old books and talked angels, angels, angels until sometimes I thought my brain would melt.

Angela practically skips up to the front of the theater. She climbs the stairs at the edge of the stage and stands looking out, so she can get a clear view of anybody coming in. Under the lights her long black hair glows a shade of deep blue that isn’t entirely natural. She sweeps her bangs behind her ear and looks down at me with this super-pleased-with-herself expression. I swallow.

“So what’s this all about?” I ask, trying to sound like I don’t care. “I’m dying to know.”

“Patience is a virtue,” she quips.

“I’m not that virtuous.”

She smiles mysteriously. “You think I haven’t guessed that already?”

A figure appears in the back of the theater, and I get that panicky tightness in my chest. Then the figure comes into the

light, and my breath catches for a different reason.

It isn't Christian. It's my brother.

I glance up at Angela. She shrugs. "He deserves to know everything we know, right?"

I turn back and look at Jeffrey. He shifts uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

Jeffrey's been hard to figure out lately. Something is definitely up with him. First, there was the night of the fire, when he came tearing out of the trees like the devil was chasing him, his wings the color of lead. I don't know if that means anything, the state of his spiritual well-being or whatnot, since my wings at that time were pretty dark too, on account of the soot. He said he was out there looking for me, which I don't buy. But one thing's for sure, he was out there. In the forest. During the fire. Then the next day he was glued to the television, watching every minute of the news. Like he was expecting something. And later we had this conversation:

Me (after spilling the beans about finding Christian in the forest and him being an angel-blood): "So it was kind of a good thing that I saved Tucker instead."

Jeffrey: "Well, what were you supposed to do, if your purpose wasn't about saving Christian?"

The million-dollar question.

Me (miserably): "I don't know."

Then Jeffrey did the oddest thing. He laughed, a bitter

laugh, false, which instantly rubbed me the wrong way. I'd just confessed that I'd messed up the most important thing I was ever supposed to do in my life, my reason for being on this earth, and he laughed at me.

"What?" I barked at him. "What's so funny?"

"Man," he said. "This is like a freaking Greek tragedy." He shook his head in disbelief. "You saved Tucker instead."

I may have called him a jerk-face or something. But he kept laughing, until I seriously wanted to smack him, and then Mom caught wind of the impending violence in that uncanny way she has and said, "Enough, both of you," and I'd stalked off to my room.

Just thinking about it now makes me want to slug him.

"So what do you think?" Angela asks. "Can he join us?"

Tough call. But mad or not, I'm pretty curious to find out what exactly he knows. Since we don't seem to be communicating well these days, this might be the best way. I turn to Angela with a shrug. "Sure. Why not?"

"We have to make this quick," Jeffrey says, slinging his backpack down onto one of the chairs. "I've got practice."

"No problem." Angela suppresses another smile. "We're just waiting for—"

"I'm here."

And there is Christian, striding down the aisle with his hands in his pockets. His eyes roam over the theater like he's considering making an offer on the place, inspecting the

stage, the seats, the tables, the lights and riggings in the rafters. Then his gaze lands on me.

“So let’s do this,” he says. “Whatever it is.”

Angela doesn’t waste any time. “Come join me up here.”

Slowly we all make our way onto the stage and stand in a circle with Angela.

“Welcome to Angel Club,” she says melodramatically.

Christian does his laugh/exhale thing. “First rule of Angel Club, you do not talk about Angel Club.”

“Second rule of Angel Club,” chimes in Jeffrey. “Do not talk about Angel Club.”

Oh boy. Here we go.

“Hilarious. You’re bonding already.” Angela is not amused. “Seriously, though. I do think we should have rules.”

“Why?” Jeffrey wants to know. Always with the attitude, my sweet little brother. “Why do we need rules for a club?”

“Maybe if we knew what the point of the club was,” adds Christian.

Angela’s eyes flare in a way I’m familiar with—this is not going according to her carefully constructed plan. “The point,” she says in a clipped tone, “is to find out all we can about this angel-blood stuff, so we don’t like, you know, end up dead.” Again with the melodrama. She claps her hands together. “Okay, let’s make sure we’re all on the same page. Last week our girl Clara here stumbled upon a Black Wing in the mountains.”

“Crashed is more like it,” I mutter.

Angela nods. “Right. Crashed. Because this guy puts out a kind of toxic sorrow, which, because of all Clara’s touchy-feely skills, took away the lightness she needed to fly, so she fell, dropped out of the sky, right where he wanted her.”

Jeffrey and Christian are looking at me.

“You fell?” asks Jeffrey. I must have left out this part of the story when I told it at home.

“Touchy-feely skills?” asks Christian.

“I have a theory that Black Wings are incapable of flight, by the way,” Angela continues. Clearly this is not the question-and-answer part of this event. “Their sorrow weighs them down too much to get airborne. It’s only a theory at this point, but I’m kind of liking it. It means, if you ever came across a Black Wing, you might be able to escape by flying off, because he couldn’t chase you.”

What she needs, I think, is a chalkboard. Then she could really go to town.

“So Clara was incapacitated simply by being in the presence of a Black Wing,” she says. “We should learn if there’s anything we can do about that, some way to block the sorrow out.”

I’m definitely on board with that idea.

“And since Clara and her mom defeated the Black Wing using glory, I think that’s our key.”

“My uncle says glory takes years to be able to control,” Christian says then.

Angela shrugs. “Clara did it, and she’s only a Quartarius. What level are you?”

“Only a Quartarius,” he replies with a hint of sarcasm.

Angela gets this glint in her eye. She’s the only Dimidius in our group, then. She has the highest concentration of angel blood. I guess that makes her our natural leader.

“Okay, so where was I?” she says. She ticks it off on her fingers. “Objective one, find a way to block the sorrow. That’s mostly a job for Clara since she seems to be extra sensitive to it. I was with her when we saw the Black Wing at the mall last year, and I didn’t get anything from him but a mild case of the creeps.”

“Hold up,” interrupts Jeffrey. “You two saw a Black Wing at the mall last year? When?”

“We were shopping for prom dresses.” Angela heaves a meaningful look at Christian, as if the whole incident was his fault somehow because he was my date.

“And why did I not hear about this?” Jeffrey asks, turning to me.

“Your mom said it would put you in danger, knowing about them. According to her, when you’re aware of Black Wings, they become more aware of you,” Angela answers for me.

He looks skeptical.

“So she must think you’re all grown-up, since she told you about them now, right?” Angela offers helpfully.

I think about the stony look on Mom's face the morning after the fire, when she told Jeffrey about Samjeeza. "That, or she thought it might be necessary for Jeffrey to have a clue about Black Wings in case one of them shows up at the house wanting revenge," I add.

"Which brings us to objective two," Angela segues smoothly. She glances at me. "Did you finish the book I gave you?"

"Ange, you just gave it to me at lunch."

She sighs and gives me a look that conveys what an amateur she thinks I am. "Can you get it, please?"

I hop down to fetch the book out of my backpack. Angela decides that maybe a table would be more comfortable to get down and dirty with the research, which she evidently means to jump right into. We reconvene around a table, and Angela takes *The Book of Enoch* from me.

She flips through the pages. "Listen to this." She clears her throat. "*It happened after the sons of men had multiplied in those days, that daughters were born to them, elegant and beautiful. And when the Watchers, the sons of heaven, beheld them, they became enamored of them, saying to each other, 'Come, let us select for ourselves wives from the progeny of men, and let us beget children.'*"

"Okay. Enter angel-bloods," I comment.

"Just wait for it. I'm getting to the good part. . . . *Then their leader, Samyaza, said to them, 'I fear that you perhaps may be indisposed to the performance of this enterprise; and that I alone shall*

suffer for so grievous a crime.' Does that name sound familiar?"

A shiver zings its way down my spine.

"That's him, then, Samjeeza? The angel who attacked Mom and Clara?" Jeffrey asks.

Angela sits back. "I think so. It goes on to talk about how they married the human women and taught mankind how to make weapons and mirrors, and showed them sorcery and all kinds of taboo stuff. They had tons of kids, which the book describes as evil giants—the Nephilim—who were abominations in the sight of God, until there were so many of them and the earth became so evil that God sent the flood to wipe them all out."

"So we're evil giants," repeats Jeffrey. "Dude, we're not that tall."

"People back then were shorter," Angela says. "Poor nutrition."

"But that doesn't make sense," I say. "How could we be abominations? How is it our fault if we're born with angel blood in our veins? I thought the Bible describes the Nephilim as heroes."

"It does," Angela answers. "*The Book of Enoch* isn't in the Bible. I have a theory that it might be some kind of anti-angel-blood propaganda. But it's interesting, right? Worth looking into. Because this Samjeeza fellow is right in the middle of it. He's the leader of this group of Black Wings called the Watchers, which, according to some other research I've

been doing, is a band of fallen angels whose basic job is to seduce human women and produce as many angel-bloods as possible.”

Fabulous.

“Okay, so objective two is finding out more about Samjeeza,” I say. “Roger that. Are there any more objectives?”

“One,” Angela says lightly. “I thought one objective of Angel Club should be to help each other figure out our purposes. I mean, you two have had yours, but didn’t fulfill them. So what does that mean?” she says, glancing at Christian and me. “And Jeffrey and I still have ours coming. Maybe if we all put our heads together, we can understand this whole purpose concept better.”

“Great. Hey, look, I’ve got to go,” Jeffrey says abruptly. “Practice started ten minutes ago. Coach is going to have me running laps until I drop.”

“Wait, we haven’t got to the rules part yet,” Angela calls after him as he books it for the door.

“Clara can fill me in later,” he calls back over his shoulder. “Or you could make, like, stone tablets or something. Angel Club ten commandments.” Then he’s gone.

So much for finding out exactly what he knows.

Angela looks at me. “He’s funny.”

“Yeah, he’s a barrel of laughs.”

“So. The rules.”

I sigh. “Lay them on us.”

“Well, first, and this one’s a no-brainer, no one tells anybody about this. We’re the only ones who know about Angel Club, okay?”

“Do not talk about Angel Club,” says Christian with a smirk.

“I mean it. Don’t tell your uncle.” Angela turns to me. “Don’t tell your mom. Don’t tell your boyfriend. Got it? Second rule: Angel Club is a secret from everybody else, but we don’t keep secrets from each other. This is a no-secrets zone. We tell each other everything.”

“Okay . . . ,” I agree. “What are the other rules?”

“That’s it,” she says.

“Oh. One per stone tablet,” I joke.

“Ha. Ha.” She turns back to Christian. “What about you? You’ve been awfully quiet this whole time. You’ve got to swear too.”

“No, thank you,” he says politely.

She leans back in her chair in surprise. “No, thank you?”

“To the rules. I won’t go blabbing about this thing to my buddies on the ski team. But I tell my uncle everything, and I’m going to tell him about this.” His eyes seek mine, pin me. “It’s stupid not to communicate what you know to the adults. They’re only trying to protect us. And as far as the no-secrets zone, I can’t agree to that. I don’t even really know you guys, so why would I tell you my secrets? No way.”

Angela’s speechless. I find this kind of funny.

“You’re right,” I say. “We ditch the rules. There are no rules.”

“I think it’s great, though,” he says as a way of soothing Angela. “Meeting and finding out what we can do, trying to figure things out. Count me in. I’ll be here, whenever, until it snows and then I have ski team, but maybe then we can move this to Sunday afternoons, which would work for me.”

Angela recovers. She even whips up a smile. “Sure, that’s doable. Probably better for Jeffrey’s schedule, too. Sundays. Let’s do Sundays.”

There’s a moment of uncomfortable silence.

“Okay then,” Angela says finally. “I think this meeting is adjourned.”

It’s almost dark when I leave the theater. Storm clouds are brewing overhead, churning like a grumbling stomach. I guess I should be grateful for the rain, since the storm put out the fires, which in the end probably saved people’s lives and homes. It’s only weather, I remind myself, but sometimes I wonder if this particular weather’s been sent to bother me personally, a punishment, maybe, for not doing my job, for failing at my purpose, or some other sort of ominous sign.

I try for a quick, casual good-bye to Christian at the corner, but he puts his hand on my arm.

“I still want to talk to you,” he says in a low voice.

“I have to go,” I manage. “My mom will be wondering

where I am. Call me, okay? Or I'll call you. One of us should definitely call the other."

"Right." His hand drops away. "I'll call you."

"I gotta run. I'm late."

And then I'm off in the opposite direction.

Coward, says the nagging voice inside my head. You should talk to him. Find out what he has to say.

What if he says we belong together?

Well, then you'll have to deal with that. But at least you won't be running away.

I think it's more of a brisk walk.

Whatever.

I'm having an argument with myself. And I'm losing.

So not a good sign.



3

OTHER PEOPLE'S SECRETS

Mom comes out of her office the moment she hears me step through the front door.

“Hey,” she says. “How was school?”

“Everybody talked about my hair, but it was fine.”

“We could try to dye it again,” she suggests.

I shrug. “It must mean something, right? God wants me to be blond this year.”

“Right,” she says. “You want a cookie, blondie?”

“Do birds fly?” I scamper after her into the kitchen, where, sure enough, I smell something wonderful baking in the oven. “Chocolate chip?”

“Of course.” The buzzer goes off, and she puts on an oven

mitt, takes the sheet of cookies out of the oven, and sets it on the counter. I pull up a stool on the other side of her and sit. It feels so normal it's weird, after what's happened, all the drama and fight-for-your-life stuff and serious soul-searching, and now . . . cookies.

The night of the fire I came home assuming we'd have this big tell-all, and everything would be out in the open now that the stuff from my vision had happened. But when I got home, Mom was asleep, *asleep* on the most important night of my life, and I didn't wake her, didn't blame her because we were both, at the time, so literally fried, and she'd been attacked, almost died and all. But still. It wasn't exactly how I thought my purpose would go.

It's not like we haven't talked. We have, although mostly it was a debriefing of what's already happened. No new information. No revelations. No explanations. At one point I asked, "So what happens now?" and she said, "I don't know, honey," and that was it. I would have pressed her about it, but she kept getting this look on her face, this bleak expression, her eyes so full of pain and sadness, like she's so incredibly disappointed in me and how my purpose turned out. Of course she would never come right out and say that, never tell me that I've screwed up everything, that she thought I would be better than that, that she thought I'd make the right choices when my time came, that I'd prove myself worthy to be called an angel-blood. But the look says it all.

“So,” she says as we wait for the cookies to cool. “I thought you’d be home a while ago. Did you go to see Tucker?”

And already I need to make a big decision: to tell her about Angel Club, or not tell her.

Okay. So I think about how the first thing out of Angela’s mouth when it came to rules was not to tell anybody, especially the adults, and then I think about the way Christian refused, just like that, said that he tells his uncle everything.

Mom and I used to have that. Used to. Now I have no desire to share this stuff with her, not about Angel Club, not about the weird recurring dream I’ve been having, not about how I feel about what happened the day of the fire or what my true purpose might have been. I don’t want to get into it right now.

So I don’t.

“I was at the Pink Garter,” I say. “With Angela.”

Not technically a lie.

I brace myself for her to tell me that Angela, while full of good intentions, is going to get us all in deep trouble someday. She knows that any time spent with Angela is time spent talking about angel-bloods and Angela’s many theories.

Instead she says, “Oh, that’s nice,” and uses a spatula to slide the cookies onto a wire rack on the counter. I steal one.

“That’s nice?” I repeat incredulously.

“Get a plate, please,” she tells me, and I do. Then, as I’m sitting there with a mouthful of chocolatey goodness,

she says, “It was never my intention to shelter you from other angel-bloods forever. I only wanted you to live normal lives for as long as possible, to know what it’s like to be human. But now you’re old enough, you’ve been through your visions, you’ve had a glimpse of the evil in this world, and I don’t think it’s a bad thing to start learning what it truly means to be an angel-blood. Which means hanging out with others like you.”

I wonder if she still means Angela, or if now she’s talking about Christian. If she assumes being with him is my purpose. Not very women’s lib of her, I think, if she believes my entire purpose on this earth is to hook up with some guy.

“Milk?” she asks, then goes to the fridge and pours me a glass.

And this is the point where I finally get the guts to ask her. “Mom, am I going to be punished?”

“Why?” She reaches for a cookie. “Did you do something today I should know about?”

I shake my head. “No. My purpose. Am I going to be punished because I didn’t, you know, fulfill it? Am I going to hell or something?”

She halfway chokes on the cookie, then takes a quick sip of my milk.

“That’s not really how it works,” she says.

“How does it work, then? Will I get a second chance? Is there anything else that I’m going to be expected to do?”

She's quiet for a minute. I can practically see the wheels turning in her head, deciding how much she's going to tell me. This aggravates the crap out of me, of course, but there's not a lot I can do about it. So I wait.

"Every angel-blood is given a purpose," she says after what feels like an eternity. "For some that purpose manifests itself in a single event, a singular moment in time where we are led to be at a specific place at a specific time, to do a specific thing. For others . . ." She glances down at her hands, choosing her words carefully. "Their purpose can involve more."

"More?" I ask.

"More than a single event."

I stare at her. This has got to be the strangest conversation any mother and daughter has ever had over milk and cookies. "How much more?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. We're all different. Our purposes are all different."

"Which was it for you?"

"For me . . ." She clears her throat delicately. "It was more than one event," she admits.

Not good enough.

"Mom, come on," I demand. "Don't leave me in the dark."

Inexplicably, she smiles this tiny smile, like she finds me funny. "It's going to be okay, Clara," she says. "You'll figure it out when you're supposed to figure it out. I know that's frustrating to hear. Believe me, I know."

I swallow the rising craziness that's churning in my stomach. "How? How do you know?"

She sighs. "Because my purpose lasted more than one hundred years."

My mouth drops open.

One hundred years.

"So . . . so you're saying that it might not be over?"

"I'm saying that your purpose is more complicated than simply completing a task."

I jump to my feet. I can't keep sitting down for this. "You couldn't have told me this, oh, I don't know—*before* the fire?"

"I can't give you the answers, Clara, even if I know them," she says. "If I did it might change the outcome. You just have to trust me when I say that you'll get the answers when you need them."

And there's the look again, the sadness. Like I'm disappointing her right this minute. But I also see something else in her luminous blue eyes: faith. She still has faith. That there's some kind of plan for our lives, some kind of meaning, or direction, behind all of this. I sigh. I've never had her kind of faith, and I'm afraid I never will. But I find that even though I obviously have some issues with her, I do trust her. With my life. Not only because she's my mother, but because when it really counted, she saved it.

"Okay," I say. "Fine. But I don't have to like it."

She nods, smiles again, but the sadness doesn't quite leave

her face. “I don’t expect you to like it. You wouldn’t be my daughter if you did.”

I should tell her, I think, about the dream. See if she thinks it’s important, if it’s more than a dream. If it’s a vision. Of my possibly continuing purpose.

But right then Jeffrey comes through the door, and of course he hollers, “What’s for dinner?” since food is always the first thing on his mind. Mom calls back to him, starts bustling around preparing a meal for us, and I’m amazed at her ability to switch off like that, to make it feel like we’re any other kids coming home from our first day of school, no heavenly purposes set for us, no fallen angels hunting us, no bad dreams, and Mom is just like any other mother.

After dinner I fly over to the Lazy Dog to see Tucker.

He’s surprised when I tap on his window.

“Hi there, handsome,” I tell him. “Can I come in?”

“Absolutely,” he says, and kisses me, then quickly rolls across the bed to close the door. I crawl through the window and stand, looking around. I love his room. It’s warm and cozy, neat but not too neat, a plaid bedspread pulled haphazardly up over his sheets, piles of schoolbooks, comics, and rodeo magazines strewn about his desk, a pair of gym socks and a balled-up hoodie in the corner of the slightly dusty oak floor, his collection of cowboy hats set in a line across the top of his dresser along with some old green army men and a

couple fishing lures. There's a rusty horseshoe nailed over his closet door. It's so *boy*.

He turns to look at me, scratches at the back of his neck.

"This isn't going to become one of those creepy situations where you show up at all hours of the night to watch me sleep, is it?" he asks playfully.

"Every moment I'm away from you, I die a little," I say in return.

"So that's a yes, then."

"Are you complaining?" I ask, quirking an eyebrow at him.

He grins. "Nope. Definitely not complaining. I just wanted to know so I can start wearing more than my boxers to bed."

That gets a blush out of me. "Well, don't—uh, change anything on my account," I stammer, and he laughs and crosses the room to kiss me again.

We spend a very nice few minutes hanging out on his bed. Nothing heavy, since Tucker still has this notion that since I have angel blood in my veins he should try to keep my honor intact. For a long time we simply lie there, catching our breath. I lay my head on his chest, feeling his heart thumping beneath my ear, and I think for the thousandth time that he is without question the best guy on the planet.

Tucker takes one of my hands and curls and uncurls my fingers around his. I love the texture of his hands, the calluses along his palms, evidence of all the hard work he's done in his life, the type of person he is. Such rough hands, but he's

always so gentle with them.

“So,” he says out of the blue, “are you ever going to tell me what happened the night of the fire?”

Moment over.

I guess I knew this question was coming. I was maybe hoping he wouldn't ask it. It puts me in this terrible position, knowing other people's secrets, especially when those secrets are all tangled up with mine.

“I—” I sit up, pull away from him. I seriously don't know what to say. The words catch in my throat. This must be what it's like for Mom, I think, keeping things hidden from the people she loves.

“Hey, it's okay,” he says, sitting up next to me. “I get it. It's top-secret angel stuff. You can't tell.”

I shake my head. I decide that I am not my mother.

“Angela's forming a club, for angel-bloods,” I say as a start, even though I know this isn't what he asked me.

This is so not what Tucker thought I was going to say. “Angela Zerbino's an angel-blood.”

“Yes.”

He snorts. “Well, I guess that makes sense. There's always been something off about that girl.”

“Hey. I'm an angel-blood. Are you saying there's something off about me, too?”

“Yep,” he answers. “But I like it.”

“Oh, okay, then.” I lean in to kiss him. Then I pull away.

“Christian is an angel-blood too,” I say, trying to be brave and look him in the face and say it. “I didn’t know until the night of the fire, but he is. A Quartarius. Like me.”

Tucker’s eyes widen. “Oh,” he says in this emotionless voice, and looks away. “Like you.”

For a long time neither of us speaks. Then he says, “Big coincidence, huh, all these angel-bloods popping up in Jackson?”

“It was a pretty big surprise, that’s for sure,” I admit. “I don’t know about coincidence.”

He swallows, and there’s this little click in his throat. I can see how hard he’s trying to play it cool, pretend that the angel stuff doesn’t scare him or make him feel like he’s standing in the way of something more important than him. He’d still step aside, I realize, if he thought he was distracting me from my purpose. He’s already putting on the breakup face. Like he did before.

“I don’t know what was supposed to happen that night,” I say quickly. “But the fire’s over. I’m moving on with my life.” I hope he doesn’t detect the touch of desperation in my voice, how much I want to make the words true just by saying them. I don’t want to think about the possibility that my purpose could last another hundred years. “So I’m all yours now,” I say, and the words ring false, so terribly false, in my ears. And here I started out determined to tell him the truth.

Only I don't know the truth. Or maybe I don't want to know.

"All right," he says then, although I can tell he's not sure if he believes me. "Good. Because I want you all to myself."

"You've got me," I whisper.

He kisses me again. And I kiss him back.

But the image of Christian Prescott, standing with his back to me at Fox Creek Road, waiting for me, always waiting, suddenly flashes through my mind.

When I get home Jeffrey's out in the yard, chopping wood in the rain. He sees me and nods his head, lifts his arm and wipes sweat from above his top lip with his sleeve. Then he grabs a log, lifts the ax again, and splits it easily. He splits another. And another. The pile of chopped wood at his feet is already pretty big, and he doesn't look like he's stopping anytime soon.

"You deciding to stock up for the whole winter? Can't wait for the snow?" I ask. "You do know it's only September."

"Mom's cold," he says. "She's in there in her flannel pj's, wrapped up in blankets drinking tea, and she's shivering. I thought I'd build her a fire."

"Oh," I say. "That's nice of you."

"Something happened to her that day. With the Black Wing," he says, trying out the words. He looks up, meets my eyes. Sometimes he looks so young, like a vulnerable little

boy. Other times, like now, he looks like a man. A man who's seen so much sadness in this life. How is that possible? I wonder. He's fifteen.

"Yeah," I say, because I've concluded the same thing. "I mean, he tried to kill her. It was a pretty rough fight."

"Is she going to be okay?"

"I think so." The glory healed her. I watched it wash over her like warm water, taking away the burns, the bruises from Samjeeza's hands. But thinking about it brings back the image of her dangling from his arm, flailing, gasping for breath as his hand tightened around her throat, her kicks growing weaker and weaker until she went still. Until I thought she was dead. My eyes burn at the memory and I quickly turn away to look at the house so Jeffrey won't see my tears.

Jeffrey chops some more wood, and I pull myself together. It's been a long day. I want to crawl into bed, pull the covers up over my head, and sleep it all away.

"Hey, where were you that day?" I ask suddenly.

He goes with playing dumb. "When?"

"The day of the fire."

He grabs another block of wood and places it on the stand. "I told you. I was in the woods, looking for you. I thought maybe I could help."

"Why don't I believe that?"

He falters and the ax strikes the log unevenly and sticks. He makes a noise like a growl and jerks it out.

“Why wouldn’t you believe me?” he asks.

“Um, maybe because I know you, and you’re acting all weird. So where were you? Cut the crap.”

“Maybe you don’t know me as well as you think.” He throws the ax in the dirt, then gathers an armload of the chopped wood and pushes past me toward the house.

“Jeffrey . . .”

“It was nothing,” he says. “I got lost.” Suddenly he looks like he’s the one about to cry. He goes into the house, and I can hear him offering to make a fire for Mom. I stand in the yard until the first curls of smoke drift out of the top of our chimney. I remember his face when he flew out of the trees that night, tight with fear and something like pain. I remember the hollow way he laughed at me when I told him that I saved Tucker, and suddenly I’m all twisted up with worry for him, because whatever he was doing out there that day, my gut tells me that it wasn’t good.

My brother has his secrets, too.



4

FREAKING OUT

This time in the dream, there are stairs. A set of ten or twelve concrete steps, complete with a black handrail, leading up between two aspen trees. Why would there be stairs in the middle of the forest? And where do they lead to? I grab the rail. It's rough, the paint flaking off to expose patches of rust. The steps are edged with moss. As I climb I notice I'm wearing nice shoes, Mom's sensible black pumps, the ones she always loans me for formal occasions.

I see Jeffrey ahead of me in the trees. Others wait there too, shadowy figures at the top of the hillside, people I recognize: Angela, Mr. Phibbs, Wendy. It feels like they're all staring at me, and I don't know why. I glance back, and the

heel on my nice shoe catches. I lose my balance on the stairs, almost falling, but Christian's there again, his hand at my waist, steadying me. For a moment we stare at each other. His body radiates a kind of heat that makes me want to step closer to him.

"Thanks," I whisper, and I open my eyes to my bedroom ceiling, a strong cold wind still rattling the trees outside.

"You're freaking out," Angela observes with a mouthful of green bean salad. We're sitting at a booth in the Rendezvous Bistro in Jackson on a Saturday night, post-action movie, eating salad because that's all we can afford at this place.

"I'm fine," I say.

"You are so not fine. You should see yourself."

"Well, it sucks, okay? I just wish I knew if it's a dream or another vision, or what."

Angela nods thoughtfully. "Your mom said that some angel-bloods have their visions as dreams, right, while they're sleeping?"

"Yeah, she said that, before I started having mine, way back when she was okay with telling me useful information. But I've always had my visions while I was awake."

"Me too," Angela says.

"So it makes me wonder, is this dream thing for real, or is it, you know, the result of bad chow mein at dinner? Is this a divine message, or my subconscious talking here? And either

way, what's it telling me?"

"See, there you go freaking out," she says. "It's messed up, C. You won't even look at Christian during Angel Club. It's like you two take turns avoiding each other. I'd find it hilarious if I didn't find it so totally sad."

"I know," I say. "I'm working on it."

She cocks her head at me sympathetically. "I like Tucker, Clara. Really I do. He's a stellar guy, no one would argue with that. But have you considered the possibility that you're not supposed to be with him? That you're supposed to be with Christian, that he's your destiny, that you're supposed to fly off into the sunset together?"

"Of course I have." I put my fork down, not hungry anymore. Destiny can really put a damper on the appetite. "I don't know why he even cares," I say.

"Why who cares? Tucker? Or Christian?"

"God."

She laughs. "Well, that's the big mystery, isn't it?"

"I mean, I'm seventeen years old. Why does He care who I . . ."

"Love," she supplies when I don't finish the sentence. "Who you love."

We're quiet while the waiter refills our drinks.

"Anyway, you should write this dream stuff down," she says. "Because it could be important. Check for variations, like you did with your vision. You should ask Christian about

it too, because who knows, maybe he's having the same dream, and if he is, then you can figure it out together."

It's not a terrible idea. Except that I'm not exactly crazy about spilling to Christian that I've been dreaming about him.

"What does your mom say?" Angela asks, gnawing on a bread stick.

"I haven't told her about it."

She looks at me as if I just told her I'd been thinking of dabbling in heroin.

"Why should I? She never tells me anything. Even if I did tell her, I'm sure she'd only bury me in platitudes about trusting my feelings and listening to my heart or some crap like that. Besides, we don't know that it means anything," I say. "It's probably just a dream. People have recurring dreams all the time."

"If you say so," she says.

"Can we talk about something else now?"

So we do. We talk about the rain, which Angela agrees is excessive. We talk about Spirit Week at school and whether or not it would be fair for us to use our special gifts to win the Powderpuff game on Wednesday. She tells me about this old book she found in Italy this summer that seems to be some kind of angel-blood roster during the seventeenth century.

"It's like a group of them," she tells me. "*Congregarium celestial*, literally like a herd of angel-bloods. A flock. It's actually where I got the idea to form the Angel Club."

“Anything else interesting happen in Italy?” I ask her. “With, say, a hot Italian boyfriend you’re now going to tell me all about?”

Her cheeks go instantly pink. She shakes her head, suddenly super interested in her salad. “I don’t have a boyfriend. Italian or otherwise.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It was silly,” she says, “and I don’t want to talk about it. I won’t hound you about Christian, you don’t talk about my nonexistent Italian boyfriend, okay?”

“You already hounded me about Christian. That’s hardly fair,” I say, but there’s genuine pain in her eyes, which surprises me, so I let it drop.

My mind wanders back to the dream, to Christian, the way he’s always looking out for me, catching me, keeping me on my feet. He’s become my guardian, maybe. Someone who is there to keep me on the path.

If only I knew where that path was headed.

We’re in the parking lot when the sorrow hits me. At least, I think it’s sorrow. It’s not as overwhelming as it was that day in the forest. It doesn’t paralyze me in the same way. Instead it’s like suddenly, in the space of a few minutes, I go from fine, laughing even, to wanting to cry.

“Hey, are you okay?” Angela asks as we walk to the car.

“No,” I whisper. “I feel . . . sad.”

She stops. Her eyes go saucer wide. She glances around.

“Where?” she says much too loudly. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I can’t tell.”

She grabs my hand and pulls me through the parking lot toward the car, walking fast but trying to stay composed, like nothing’s wrong. She doesn’t ask me if she can drive my car; she goes straight to the driver’s seat, and I don’t argue. “Put on your seat belt,” she orders me once we’re both inside. Then she floors it out of the parking lot and onto the street. “I don’t know where to go,” she says in a half-terrified, half-excited rush. “I think we should stay somewhere well-populated, because he’d have to be crazy to obliterate us in front of a bunch of tourists, you know, but I don’t want to go too close to home.” She does a quick check of the mirrors. “Call your mom. Now.”

I fumble in my purse for my phone, then call. Mom picks up on the first ring.

“What’s wrong?” she asks immediately.

“I think . . . maybe . . . there’s a Black Wing.”

“Where are you?”

“In the car, on 191, driving south.”

“Go to the school,” she says. “I’ll meet you there.”

It’s the longest five minutes of my life before Mom lands in the parking lot at Jackson Hole High School. She gets in the back.

“So,” she says, reaching up and feeling my cheek like sorrow is some kind of fever, “how do you feel?”

“Better now. I guess.”

“Did you see him?”

“No.”

She turns to Angela. “How about you? Did you feel anything?”

Angela shrugs. “Nothing.” There’s an edge of disappointment in her voice.

“So what do we do now?” I ask.

“We wait,” Mom says.

So we wait, and wait, and wait some more, but nothing happens. We sit in the car in silence, watching the windshield wipers push the rain off the glass. Occasionally Mom asks me how I’m doing, which is hard to answer in any clear way. At first, what I feel most is terrified that any second now Samjeeza’s going to show up and murder us all. Then I downgrade to just plain scared—that we’re going to have to run now, pack up and leave Jackson, and I’ll never see Tucker again. Finally I arrive at mildly freaked out. Then embarrassed.

“Maybe it wasn’t sorrow,” I admit. “It wasn’t as strong as before.”

“It would surprise me if he came after us so soon,” Mom says.

“Why?” Angela asks.

“Because Samjeeza’s vain,” Mom says matter-of-factly. “Clara mangled his ear, burned his arm and his head, and I don’t think he’ll want to show his face until he’s healed, which is a long process for Black Wings.”

“I would have thought they could heal quickly,” Angela says. “You know, like vampires or something.”

Mom scoffs. “Vampires. Please. Black Wings take a long time to heal because they’ve chosen to cut themselves off from the healing forces in this world.” She touches my cheek again. “You did the right thing, getting out of there, calling me. Even if it wasn’t a Black Wing. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Angela sighs and looks out the window.

“Sorry,” I say. I turn to Mom. “I guess I’m kind of on edge.”

“Don’t be,” she says. “You’ve had a lot to deal with.”

She and Angela switch places. Then she pulls out of the school parking lot and onto the road, heading back toward town.

“What do you feel?” she asks as we pass the restaurant.

“Nothing,” I say with a shrug. “Except I have a feeling I might be losing my mind.”

“It doesn’t matter whether this is a false alarm or not. Samjeeza will come after us, Clara, eventually. You’ll need to be ready.”

Right.

“How does one get ready to be attacked by a Black Wing,

exactly?" I ask sarcastically.

"Glory," she says, which immediately gets the told-you-so look on Angela's face. "You learn to use glory."

"Hey, I think I see a flicker," Christian says, startling me. "You're doing it."

My eyes snap open. Christian wasn't here earlier, when I got up onstage and started trying this bring-the-glory thing, but here he is now, sitting at one of the tables down in the audience at the Pink Garter, staring up at me with amusement like he's watching a show. For a split second our eyes meet and then I glance down at my hand, which is definitely not glowing. No glory.

Clearly I suck at bringing glory if it's not a do-it-or-die situation.

"What flicker?" I ask.

One side of his mouth hitches up. "Must have been my imagination."

Uh-huh. Insert another one of the classic Christian-Clara awkward silences. Then he coughs and says, "Sorry I interrupted your glory practice. Carry on."

I should close my eyes and try again, but I know it's no use. There's no way I'm going to achieve glory with him watching me.

"God, this is frustrating!" Angela exclaims. She slams her laptop closed and pushes it across the table, blowing out a

long, aggravated breath. She's been scouring college websites, trying to figure out what college she's supposed to go to, which to most people is a pretty big deal, but for Angela, it's a huge deal, the hugest, since she thinks it's a college campus she's seeing in her visions. Talk about pressure.

"Didn't get that ancient text you wanted on eBay?" asks Christian.

She glares at him. "Funny."

"Sorry, Ange," I say. "Can I help?"

"The vision doesn't give me very much to go on. There's a set of wide steps, a bunch of stone archways, and people drinking coffee. That describes practically any college in the country."

"Look for trees," I tell her. "I have a good book if you're trying to identify what area certain trees grow in."

"Well, I hope I get something decent to go on soon," mutters Angela. "I have to apply, you know? Like, now."

"Don't sweat it," Christian says nonchalantly. He glances down at his notebook, where I think he's working on calculus homework. "You'll figure it out when you're supposed to figure it out." Then he looks up, and his eyes catch mine again.

"Did you?" I can't help but ask, even though I know the answer. "Did you figure it out when you were supposed to?"

"No," he admits with a short, almost bitter laugh. "I don't know why I said that. Drilled into me, I guess. That's what my uncle always tells me."

He hasn't talked much about his uncle. Or his purpose, outside of the initial "I was having visions of you in the forest fire, I thought I was supposed to save you, and now I'm confused" conversation. Once, he showed us that he could fly without flapping his wings, Superman style, hovering over the stage like David Blaine while Angela, Jeffrey, and I gaped up at him like idiots. Occasionally he gives Angela some random angel fact, so she'll be satisfied with what he's contributing to the group. He seems to know more than we do, but mostly he's been pretty tight lipped.

"So," Angela says, and the expression on her face makes me nervous. She gets up and crosses to stand next to Christian's table. "What happens now?"

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"You haven't fulfilled your purpose, right?"

He stares at her.

"All right," she says when he doesn't say anything. "At least answer this: when you had your vision before, did it come during the day, or at night?"

He looks off at the shadows in the back of the stage area for a minute, deciding, then glances back at her. "At night."

"You dreamed it?"

"Usually. Except one time I was awake."

Prom. When we danced, and then we had the vision, together.

"Well, Clara's having a new dream," Angela says. I give

her what I hope is my most angry glare, but she ignores it, of course. “Like maybe it could be a vision. We need to figure out what it is.”

Christian looks at me, immediately interested. I’m literally standing in the spotlight, so I jump down from the stage and walk over to them, feeling his gaze following me.

“What vision?” he asks.

“It might only be a dream,” Angela answers for me. “But you’ve had it what, Clara, ten times now?”

“Seven. I’m walking up a hill,” I explain, “through a forest, but not like the hill in my—in our vision. It’s a sunny day, no fire. Jeffrey’s there, and he’s wearing a suit for some reason. Angela’s there—at least she was last time I had it. And some other people too . . .” I hesitate. “And you’re there,” I say to Christian.

I can’t tell him about how he takes my hand, how he whispers straight into my mind without saying anything out loud.

“It’s probably only a dream, you know?” I manage. “Like my subconscious working something out, my fears, maybe, or like those dreams where you show up to school naked.”

“What does the forest look like?” he asks.

“That’s the weird thing about it. It’s like a normal forest, but there are these stairs—a set of concrete stairs in the middle of the trees. And a fence.”

“What about you, have you been having any strange dreams?” asks Angela. “Some clue to add to all this craziness?”

Christian finally drags his gaze away from mine to look at her.

“No dreams.”

“Well, personally I think it’s more than a dream,” she says. “Because it’s not over.”

“What?”

“Your purpose. There’s no way you go through all that, the visions and the fires and everything, and then that’s it. No way. There has to be more.”

My empathy chooses this moment to kick in, and I get a jolt of what Christian’s feeling: Resolve. Determination. A yearning underneath everything that makes me catch my breath. And certainty. Pure, absolute certainty. That Angela is right. That it’s not over. That there is more to come.

That night when I come into my room there’s someone standing on the eaves outside my window. In a split second all my mom’s baloney about Samjeeza being injured and vain and biding his time to come after us seems like exactly that—baloney—and I think, it’s him, it *was* his sorrow I felt the other day, I knew it, and my heart goes into crazy-panicked mode and my blood starts pumping and I glance wildly around my room for a weapon. Which is a joke because, a) I don’t have weapons so much as average teenage girl stuff in my room, and b) even if I were to procure something other than a nail file to defend myself with, what weapon works on a Black Wing?

Glory, I think, got to call glory, but then I also think, wait. Why is he just standing there? Why hasn't he started in on the cheesy evil I-will-kill-you-little-bird lines yet?

It's not Samjeeza, I realize then. It's Christian. I can feel his presence plain as day, now that I've calmed down enough to think straight. He's come to tell me something. Something important.

I sigh, put on a sweatshirt, and open the window.

"Hey," I call out.

He looks over from his spot on the edge of the roof, a place that perfectly overlooks the mountains, which are still glowing a faint snow-dusted white in the dark. I climb out the window and sit down next to him. It's freezing outside, raining a chilly, miserable drizzle. I immediately hug my arms around myself and try not to shiver.

"Cold?" he asks.

I nod. "Aren't you?" He's wearing a black T-shirt and his usual Seven jeans, gray this time. I hate that I recognize his clothes.

He shrugs. "A little."

"Angela says that angel-bloods are supposed to be immune to cold. It helps with the flying at high altitudes, I guess." I shiver again. "I must not have gotten the memo."

He smiles. "Maybe that power only applies to mature angel-bloods."

"Hey, are you calling me immature?"

“Oh no,” he says, his smile blossoming into a full-blown grin. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“Good. Because I’m not the one peeping into someone else’s window.”

“I wasn’t peeping,” he protests.

Right. Something important.

“You know, there’s this new amazing invention,” I tease. “It’s called a cell phone.”

“Yeah, because you and I have such amazing heart-to-heart conversations over the phone,” he shoots back.

It’s quiet for a second, then we both start laughing. He’s right. I don’t know why it’s easier here, but it is. Out here we can finally talk. It’s a bona fide miracle.

He turns toward me, his knee brushing mine. In the dim light from my window, his eyes are a deep, dark green.

He says, “In your dream, the fence you mentioned, it’s a chain-link fence, on the right as you climb the hill.”

“Yes, how did you—”

“And the stairs you see, they have moss growing on the edges, and a railing to hold on to, metal, with black paint?”

I stare at him. “Right.”

“On the left side, back behind the trees, there’s a stone bench,” he continues. “And a rosebush, planted beside it. But the roses never bloom—it’s too cold up there for roses.”

He looks away for a minute. A sudden puff of wind stirs his hair, and he brushes it out of his eyes.

“You’re having the dream, too?” I whisper.

“Not like yours. I mean, I dream about that place all the time, but—” He sighs, shifts uncomfortably, then looks at me.

“I’m not used to talking about this,” he says. “I’ve sort of become a professional at not talking about this.”

“It’s okay. . . .”

“No, I want to tell you. You should know this. But I didn’t want to tell you in front of Angela.”

I draw my sweatshirt up to my chin and cross my arms against my chest.

“My mom died,” he says finally. “When I was ten years old. I don’t even know how it happened. My uncle doesn’t like to talk about it, but I think . . . I think she was killed by a Black Wing. One day she was there, doing long-division flash cards with me at breakfast, driving me to school, kissing me good-bye in front of the boys at school and embarrassing me. . . .” His voice wavers. He stops, looks away, clears his throat lightly. “Then the next minute, they’re pulling me out of class. They say there’s been an accident. And she’s gone. I mean, they let me see her body, eventually. But she wasn’t inside of it. It was just . . . a body.”

He looks at me then, eyes gleaming. “Her gravestone is a bench. A white stone bench, under the aspen trees.”

Suddenly my head feels all cloudy. “What?”

“It’s Aspen Hill Cemetery,” he says. “It’s not a real cemetery—well, it is a real cemetery, with graves and flowers

and stuff like that, but it's also like part of the forest, this beautiful place in the trees where it's quiet and you can see the Tetons in the distance. It's probably the most peaceful place I know. I go there sometimes to think, and . . .”

And talk to his mom. He goes there to talk to his mom.

“So when you said that thing about the stairs, and the hillside and the fence, I knew,” he says quietly.

“You knew I was dreaming about the cemetery,” I say.

“I'm sorry,” he whispers.

I look up at him, choking back a cry, putting it all together, the people wearing suits and me in a black dress, everybody walking in the same direction, the grief I feel, the way everybody looks at me so solemnly, the comfort Christian tries to offer. It all makes perfect sense.

It's not a Black Wing's sorrow I'm feeling, in the dream. It's mine.

Someone I love is going to die.



5

FIND ME A DREAM

“Clara? You still with us?”

Mom nudges me in the shoulder. I blink for a second, then smile up at Ms. Baxter, the guidance counselor. She smiles back.

“So what do you think?” she asks. “Do you have any ideas about the direction you want to go in, any visions of your future?”

My eyes flick over to Mom. Oh, I have visions, all right. “You mean, like college?” I direct at Ms. Baxter.

“Well, yes, education is a big part of that, and we want to encourage all our students to attend college, of course, especially a bright, clearly gifted girl like yourself. But every person has their own special path, whether that

leads to college or not.”

I look down at my hands. “I don’t really know what I want to do, career-wise.”

She gives an exaggerated, encouraging nod. “Perfectly okay. Lots of students don’t at this point. Have you done any looking around, college visits or surfing the university websites?”

“Not much.” Or at all.

“I think maybe that would be a good place to start,” Ms. Baxter says. “Why don’t you check out some of the brochures I have posted outside and make a list of five colleges that appeal to you and why. Then I can help you get started on applications.”

“Thank you so much.” Mom stands up and shakes Ms. Baxter’s hand.

“You’ve got a special young lady here,” says Ms. Baxter. I try not to roll my eyes. “I know she’s going to do something remarkable with her life.”

I nod awkwardly, and we get out of there.

“She’s right though, you know, in spite of the cheesy lines,” Mom says as we walk out to the parking lot. “You’re going to do remarkable things.”

“Sure,” I answer. I want to believe her, but I don’t. All I see when I examine my life these days is a messed-up purpose and a not-so-distant future where somebody important to me is going to die.

“You want to drive?” I ask her as a change of topic.

“No, you go ahead.” She digs around in her purse for her big Audrey Hepburn–style sunglasses, which, paired with the scarf she’s wrapped around her head and her long, sleek trench coat, make her look like a movie star.

“So, what’s going on?” she asks. “I feel like something’s bothering you, something more than the college stuff. Which will all work itself out, Clara, not to worry.”

I hate it when she tells me not to worry. It’s usually when I have a pretty darn good reason to worry. It seems like that’s all I can do right now: worry about whose grave I’m going to in this new vision, worry that whoever it is died because of something I did or am supposed to do, worry that the sorrow attacks I’ve been having lately mean that Samjeeza is hanging around just waiting for the perfect moment to kill somebody I love.

“It’s nothing major,” I say.

We get into the car. I slide the key into the ignition. But then I stop.

“Mom, what happened between you and Samjeeza?”

She doesn’t even look rattled by my question, which surprises me. Then she answers it, which floors me even more.

“It was a long time ago,” she says. “He and I were . . . friends.”

“You were friends with a Black Wing.”

“I didn’t know he was a Black Wing at first. I thought he was a regular angel.”

I can’t imagine mistaking Samjeeza for a regular angel.

Not that I've met any regular angels.

"Right. Are you friends with lots of angels?" I ask sarcastically.

"A few."

"A few," I repeat. How can she keep blowing my mind like this? I mean, really—she knows *a few* angels?

"Not many."

"Angela thinks Samjeeza's some kind of leader," I tell her.

"Ah," Mom says, nodding. "*The Book of Enoch?*"

"Yeah."

"That much is true. He was the leader of the Watchers, a long time ago."

Wow. She is actually telling me this.

"And what do the Watchers do, exactly?" I ask. "Other than, I assume, watch stuff."

"The Watchers gave up heaven so they could be with human women," she says.

"I take it God doesn't dig the idea of angels hooking up with humans."

"It's not that God doesn't like it," she explains. "It's that angels don't live in linear time like you and I do, which makes having a relationship with a human woman nearly impossible, since that would require the angel to stay grounded in the same time for a sustained period."

Oh. The time stuff again.

"It's difficult for us to fully understand how they live,

moving between the different planes of existence, through space and time. Angels don't simply sit around on clouds looking down at us. They are constantly at work."

"Married to the job, huh?" I quip.

A flicker of a smile passes over her face. "Exactly."

"And the Watchers did what? Quit?"

"Yes. And Samjeeza was the first to put in his two-week notice, so to speak."

"And then what happened?"

"The Watchers married human women, had children, and for a while, everything was fine. I imagine they felt some sorrow, being away from heaven, but it was manageable. They were happy. But they never truly belonged on earth, and their children lived a long time and kept multiplying, until there were more Nephilim than humans on the earth. Which became a problem."

I think about Angela's story from *The Book of Enoch*. "So God sent the flood," I deduce.

"Yes," she says. "And Samjeeza . . ." She stops. Thinks about how much she should tell me. "Samjeeza couldn't save his family. His children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, every single one of them drowned."

No wonder the guy's pissed.

"That's when the Watchers joined the other Black Wings and declared war against heaven," she says.

"The other Black Wings?"

“Satan and his crew.”

I laugh at the idea of Satan having an entourage, even though I know it’s not funny.

“They fight the sovereignty of God and try to ruin heaven’s plans whenever possible,” she explains. “But their desire doesn’t stem from grief, it’s just pure evil, being contrary for their own sakes.”

“Uh-huh. How do you know all this?” I ask her.

“Sam told me.”

“Because you were friends.”

“Yes,” she says. “Once upon a time.”

Still can’t get my head around that one.

“He’s in love with you, you know,” I add, just to see her reaction.

She smoothes her scarf down against her hair. “How do you know?”

“When he touched me I could feel him thinking about you. Well, first he was thinking about me. But after you showed up, he was completely distracted by you. I saw you, in his mind. You looked different. You had short brown hair and”—I stop myself from mentioning the cigarette—“a lot of lipstick. He’s definitely obsessed with you and your lipstick.”

Her hand rises like she wants to touch her neck where, if she was a normal person, there might still be bruises from Samjeeza choking her. “Lucky me,” she says.

I shudder, remembering the feeling of his cold hands

moving underneath my shirt.

“If you hadn’t shown up when you did, he would have . . .”
I can’t finish the sentence.

She frowns. “Rape is not a Black Wing’s style. They prefer seduction. They want to win you over to their side.”

“What about Angela’s mom?” I point out. “She was raped.”

“Yes, so she says.”

“You think that’s not true?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there.”

“Well, I think Samjeeza was planning on it with me,” I tell her. “He didn’t exactly try to charm me.”

“He was behaving strangely that day,” she says. “The way he talked, all melodrama and clichés, like he was playing a part. It wasn’t like him. It was as if he was trying to prove something.”

“But nobody was watching him but us.”

“Somebody was,” she says cryptically. “Somebody always is.”

Oh. I guess she means God. Always watching. Gulp.

Her mouth twists into a pained line. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“Me too.”

“Anyway,” she says like she’s relieved to be changing the subject, “I thought we could go into town for some ice cream, maybe do some shopping.”

“Can’t,” I tell her. “I’m supposed to go fishing with Tucker this afternoon.”

She tries to hide her disappointment. “Oh.”

“I’ve hardly had a chance to see him lately, because he got a job at Flat Creek Saddle Shop and he’s been working all these hours. . . .”

“No, I understand,” she says. “You should go be with him.”

I wonder if she cares about Tucker at all now. If she still disapproves.

“Maybe we can do something this weekend?”

“Sure,” she agrees. “I would love that.”

“Okay.”

Then there’s nothing to do but turn the key in the ignition, put the car in gear, and drive home.

There’s something magical about the way my head fits into the crook of Tucker’s neck. I lie there, breathe in his scent, which is a delightful mix of earth and hay and his own brand of man smell and aftershave, a touch of bug spray thrown in there, and for a minute all my worries evaporate. It’s just him and me, the lull of the water gently rocking the boat, particles of dust floating around in the warm air. I don’t know what heaven’s like, aside from the sense of brightness that Mom described for me once, but if I got to choose my heaven, this would be it. On the lake with Tucker. I’ll take the mosquitoes and everything.

“I so needed this,” I say, which comes out almost as a yawn.

I feel him smile against my hair. “Me too. Your hair smells

like wind, did you know that?”

Yep, me and Tucker, smelling each other.

I tip my head up to kiss him. It starts out as something sweet, slow and lazy as the afternoon sun, but it heats up fast. We pull apart for a second and our breath mingles, and I twist around so I am practically lying on top of him, our legs tangling. He reaches up to take my head in his hand and kisses me again, then does this half groan, half laugh that drives me crazy and drops his hand down to my hip and tugs me closer. I slide my fingers under the collar of his shirt, along the solid breadth of his chest, where I can feel the hammering of his heart. I love him, I think. In that moment I know, if I tried, I would be capable of glory.

He breaks away.

“Okay,” he gasps.

“You still think you’ll get struck by lightning if we . . . you know?” I tease, arching an eyebrow at him and pinning him with my most seductive (I think) look.

He gives me a kind of tortured, bemused smile. “When I was a kid my mom used to tell me that if I had sex before I was married, my . . . junk would turn black and fall off.”

That gets a startled laugh out of me. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, and I believed her, too.”

“So you’re not going to have sex before you’re married? What if you don’t get married until you’re thirty?”

He sighs. “I don’t know. I just love you. I don’t want to mess anything up.”

This doesn't make sense to me, but I nod. "So we'll be good."

"Right."

"Because you're scared."

"Hey!"

"Okay," I say with a sigh. "Even though that's not much fun."

He startles me by flipping me over, pressing me gently back into the blanket at the bottom of the boat. "You don't think this is fun?" he challenges, and then he kisses me until my insides turn to mush and my head goes all fuzzy.

Much, *much* later, we actually attempt to fish. I find that I still suck at it. And I still like that I suck at it. And Tucker is still some kind of fish whisperer.

"There now," he says softly as he carefully removes the hook from the lip of a gleaming cutthroat trout. "You be smarter next time."

He lowers it back into the water, where it darts away in a flash of green and silver. He looks up at me and grins wickedly. "Want to make out with me now?" he asks, holding up his fish-slimed hands.

"Um, tempting, but no," I answer quickly. "I think we better be good, don't you think?"

"That's really funny," he says, then starts re-tying his fishing line, ". . . so-ho-ho-ho funny." A cloud moves over the sun, and suddenly it's colder. Quieter. Even the birds stop singing. A shiver passes through me.

“Want my shirt?” Tucker asks, always the gentleman.

“I’m okay. I’m working on becoming immune to cold.”

He laughs. “Good luck with that. We probably won’t get any more days like this, warm enough to fish out here.” He threads some bait onto his line and casts again. Almost immediately he has a bite. The same fish.

“You deserve to be on a dinner plate,” he tells the cut-throat, but releases him again anyway. “Go! Find your destiny. Stay away from the shiny hook-type things.”

This reminds me, for some crazy reason, of my talk with the school counselor.

“So, all this work you’re doing lately—” I start.

“Don’t remind me.”

“It’s to buy a new horse?”

“And a new truck, eventually, and by new I mean used, and by used I mean probably on its last legs, since that’s all I’ll be able to swing.”

“You’re not saving for college?” I ask.

Bad question. His eyes stay focused on his fishing pole, which he quickly unties and disassembles. “Nope,” he says with forced lightness. “After I graduate, I’ll stay on the ranch. Dad hurt his knee this spring, and we can’t afford to hire more help, so I thought I’d stick around.”

“Oh,” is all I can think to say to that. “Did you have to go visit Ms. Baxter?”

“Yeah,” he says with a scoff. “She got me set up for some

talks with Northern Arizona University next week. I guess I'll probably go off to school in a year or two, because that's what's expected of me."

"What would you study? In college, if you go?"

"Agriculture, probably. Maybe forestry," he says, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Forestry?"

"To be a ranger."

I picture him in the green ranger uniform, wearing one of those hats like Smokey the Bear. Which is totally hot.

"Hey, it's getting late. Ready to go in?" he asks.

"Sure." I reel in my line and stick my pole with Tucker's at the bottom of the boat. He starts the motor, and in a few minutes we're gliding over the water toward the dock. Neither of us says anything, but he suddenly sighs. He slows the boat to a crawl, then stops us. We're right in the middle of the lake, the motor idling, the sun sinking behind the mountains.

"I don't want to leave," he says after a minute.

I look up at him, startled. "You don't want to leave?"

He gestures around, at the towering blue mountains behind us, the gray heron skimming the water, the glimmers of the sinking sun on the lake. "This is it for me. This is what I want."

I realize that he's not talking about today, the lake, this moment. He's talking about his future.

“I might go to college, but I’m going to end up back here,” he says. “I’ll live and die here.”

He looks at me like he’s daring me to challenge him. Instead I scoot across the boat to him and circle my arms around his neck. “I get it,” I whisper.

He relaxes. “What about you? What do you want to do?”

“I don’t want to leave, either. I want to stay here. With you.”

That night as I’m drifting off to sleep, my cell phone rings. At first I ignore it, let it go to voice mail, because I want to get into my dream and figure out who’s dead. But then it rings again. And again. Whoever it is won’t take no for an answer. Which makes me think it’s—

“Okay, Ange, this better be good, because it’s late and—”

“It’s Stanford!” She laughs, a wild happy laugh that I’ve never heard from her before. “I’m going to Stanford, C. It was the trees—you were so brilliant to suggest I look at the trees.”

“Wow. Big league. That’s great, Ange.”

“I know, right? I mean, I was prepared for it to be anything, even if it was this dinky school that nobody’s ever heard of, because it’s my purpose and that’s more important, but Stanford’s like a school I’d kill to go to even without my purpose. So it’s perfect.”

“I’m happy for you.” At least I’m trying to be. I grew up

near Stanford. It still feels like home.

“And there’s something else,” she says.

I brace myself for even more jolting news, like she already has a full-ride scholarship, or that a real-live angel, an Intangere, dropped off with a note for her, carefully detailing her purpose and everything she’s supposed to do at Stanford, a memo from heaven.

“Okay. What?” I ask when she doesn’t come out and tell me.

“I want you to go too.”

“Huh? When?”

“For college, silly. I’m going to Stanford, and I want you to be there with me.”

Three a.m. No possibility of sleep. I’ve been thrashing in my blankets all night, unable to quiet all the crazy thoughts bouncing around my head. My mother being friends with a fallen angel. College plans. Christian. Purposes that last a hundred years. A flood that kills all the angel-bloods on earth. Angela wanting me to go to Stanford with her. Tucker staying here, always and forever. Ms. Baxter all hopeful and sweet and completely annoying. And somebody dying, let’s not forget. Somebody. And I still have no clue who.

Finally I get up and go downstairs. I’m surprised to find Mom sitting at the kitchen counter with a shawl wrapped around her shoulders, her hands circling a cup of tea like she’s using it for warmth. She glances up and smiles.

“Insomniacs of the world unite,” she says. “Want some tea?”

“Sure.”

I find the pot on the counter and pour myself a cup, locate cream and sugar, then stand there absently stirring it for way too long, until Mom asks, “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” I answer. “The usual. Oh—and Angela’s going to Stanford.”

Her eyebrows lift. “Stanford. Impressive.”

“Well, she hasn’t even applied yet, but she thinks her purpose is going to happen there.”

“I see.”

“She wants me to go with her.” I laugh. “Like I could ever get into Stanford, right?”

“I don’t see why not,” she says with a frown. “You’re an excellent student.”

“Come on. It takes more than that, Mom. I know I have good grades, but for a school like that it takes . . . being president of the debate team or building houses for the homeless in Guatemala or acing my SATs. I hardly paid attention to my SATs. I haven’t done anything since I came to Wyoming.” I meet her eyes. “I was so obsessed with my purpose I hardly noticed anything else.”

She drinks her tea. Then she says, “Pity party over?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Good. Not good to wallow for too long. It’s bad for the complexion.”

I make a face at her.

“You do have one big advantage when it comes to Stanford,” she says.

“Oh yeah? What?”

“Your grandmother went there, and she happens to donate a large sum of money to the university every year.”

I stare at her. My grandmother. I don’t have a grandmother. Mom’s mother died in childbirth back in like 1890.

“You mean Dad’s mom?” I’ve never heard anything about Dad’s mom. Neither of my parents have ever said much about their families.

“No,” Mom says with a small, knowing smile. “I mean *me*. In 1967 I graduated from Stanford with a degree in history. My name back then was Margot Whitfield. That, according to the official records, anyway, is your grandmother.”

“Margot Whitfield,” I repeat.

“That’s me.”

I shake my head incredulously. “You know, sometimes I feel like I don’t know you at all.”

“You don’t,” she admits easily, which catches me off guard. “When you’ve been around as long as I have, you’ve lived several different lives, and each one of them is, in some ways, like a different person. A different version of yourself. Margot Whitfield is a stranger to you.”

My thoughts shoot straight to Samjeeza and the way he calls my mom Meg, the image of her he carries around in his head, this smirking girl with cropped brown hair. Definitely a stranger.

“So what was she like, this Margot Whitfield?” I ask. “Nice name, by the way. Margot.”

“She was a free spirit,” Mom says. “A bit of a hippie, I’m afraid.”

My brain instantly conjures an image of my mom in one of those flowy polyester dresses with the tiny sunglasses and daisies in her hair, swaying to the music at Woodstock, protesting the war.

“So did you do a lot of drugs?”

“No,” she says a bit defensively. “I had my rebellious stage, Clara. But it definitely wasn’t the sixties. More like the twenties.”

“Then why were you a hippie, if you weren’t rebelling?”

She hesitates. “I had a hard time with the conformity of the fifties.”

“What was your name in the fifties?”

“Marge,” she says with a laugh. “But I was never the fifties-housewife type.”

“Because you weren’t married.”

“Right.” She’d told me this. Early on I’d been nervous that maybe, given her age, she’d already been married a few times and had lots of kids out there, but she assured me this wasn’t the case.

“Did you ever almost get married?” Now this, I’ve never asked her. But she’s been pretty forthcoming recently, so I try my luck.

She closes her eyes for a minute, takes a deep breath. “Yes.”
“When?”

She looks at me. “In the fifties. Now back to Margot Whitfield, please.”

I nod. “So you’re a Stanford alum. How many times have you been to college, anyway?”

“Let’s see,” she says, obviously relieved to be off the fifties and back to a time she’s comfortable with. “Four. I studied nursing, history, international relations, and computer programming.”

I let that sink in for a minute. “International relations?”

“I’d tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

“Don’t tell me you were a spy?”

She smiles blandly.

“So that’s why you keep telling me to relax about the college thing. I don’t have to pick a single career. When you’re going to live hundreds of years, you have time to be everything that interests you.”

“When you live a long life,” she says, “you can do a lot of things. You have time. But if you want to go to Stanford with Angela, I think that might be great fun.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say. But if I go with Angela, Tucker and I are going to be separated. We’re going to have to do the long-distance thing, and that does not sound like great fun to me.

* * *

I crawl back to bed around four, completely exhausted by this point, hoping to grab a couple hours of sleep before tomorrow begins. But I'm instantly sucked into the cemetery dream, which is not at all restful. For a few seconds I fight it, completely disoriented, stumbling as I make my way up the hill. I try to slow my breathing, remind myself that I actually want to be here, try to calm the immediate desperation and panic I feel to figure out who is going to die. *Look around*, I tell myself. *See who's not here. Who should be here, and isn't.*

I spot Jeffrey, same as usual. I say his name. He doesn't look at me, says, *Let's get this over with*, like he does every time. I want to ask him, *Who is it?* But my lips won't form the words. I am locked into what future-Clara is doing at this moment, which is walking, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other, and wishing she could cry. *If I could just flipping cry*, she thinks—I think—*then maybe the ache wouldn't be so bad.*

All I can do is stay along for the ride and observe. Now that I know this is a cemetery, that this is a funeral procession, it seems so obvious. Everybody's wearing dark clothes. I notice gravestones scattered around under the trees. I try to pay attention to more than the grief raging in my head.

It's spring, I quickly figure out. The leaves on the trees, the grass, are new green. The air has that fresh-washed smell that comes after a spring rain, where you can still detect a hint of snow. There are the beginnings of wildflowers on the hillside.

It's going to happen in the spring.

I can clearly make out Angela walking way off to the side, wearing a long violet dress. There's Mr. Phibbs, my English teacher. Come to think of it, I recognize several people from school, maybe because school is the only place in Jackson where I know anybody. I see Mrs. Lowell, the school secretary, and her redheaded daughter, Allison. Kimber Lane, Jeffrey's girlfriend. Ava Peters. Wendy, walking next to her parents, clutching a white rose to her chest. I see a flash of her face, which is paler than usual, her blue eyes all red and puffy. She doesn't have a problem crying.

Who's missing?

Warm fingers enclose mine. I look up at Christian. He squeezes my hand. I shouldn't be letting him hold my hand, I think. I belong to Tucker.

You can do this, Christian says in my head. There's no doubt in him. No hesitation. He's not worried that Tucker's going to show up and have a problem with him holding my hand.

The bottom of my stomach drops out.

Tucker.