



Family secrets. Lost memories.  
And the arrival of an ancient magical ability  
that will reveal everything.

# STORK

W E N D Y   D E L S O L



# STORK

WENDY DELSOL



CANDLEWICK PRESS

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*This book is dedicated to  
my mother, Elaine Peck,  
who gave me wings.*

## CHAPTER ONE

One moment I was fine, and the next it felt like an army of fire ants was marching across my head. Seriously. Fire ants wearing combat boots—heavy, cleated combat boots. I'd never experienced anything like it. I scratched at my scalp until my hand cramped. It didn't help. I turned, and the mirror behind the cash register confirmed my suspicions: along with the crazy rash creeping from under my hairline, I also had claw marks. Any other head of hair would conceal such blemishes. Not mine. My towheaded, sun-fearing ancestors had seen to that.

I opened the cupboard under the register. Where was that woolen beret I'd seen? Crimson red with a small loop on top. A bit of a fashion stretch, even for me. Oh, well. This town already thought I was odd, the suspicious package

dropped at their door. I shrugged the hat over my head. It provided no relief, but at least it covered the damage.

Where the heck was that delivery? My *afi*—my grandfather—had told me I could close as soon as Snjosson Farms delivered the apples. I looked at the old clock above the candy counter. Nine o'clock. Afi had said the bushels would arrive at seven.

Hoping to see headlights barreling down Main, I looked outside. Across the street, a light in Hulda's Fabric and Notions caught my eye. No way. I'd been waiting for a sign of life in the place for weeks. The going-out-of-business sign and unclaimed bolts of fabric, glorious pristine fabric, had been taunting me as a bargain opportunity. I quickly scribbled *Back in five* on a piece of paper and taped it to the door. Snjosson Farms and their golden pippins could wait.

Clutching my Juicy Couture velour jacket to my throat, I hurried across the road. Dang, it was cold. Mid-September and already something the Minnesota yokels called an Alberta Clipper was bearing down from the north. In California I'd still be in shorts, spaghetti straps, and flip-flops.

A chime tinkled above my head as I stepped over the threshold.

Holy crap. It smelled worse than my grandfather's store, something I hadn't thought possible. Like something died. No. Worse. Like something got caught in the act of dying—some long, lingering, putrefying fade. I

knew the feeling. For me it was junior year at Norse Falls High School. Exile High, as I liked to call it.

“Who’s there?” The voice sounded cracked with age.

I looked up to see an old ball of a woman with skin more crushed and textured than the bolts of velvet she stood over. Tufts of charcoal gray hair escaped from under an orange hat with floral trim. She looked like a shriveled root dangling under a flowerpot.

“I saw the light,” I said. “I’ve wanted to look at your shop for weeks now.” I took a hesitant step farther into the store.

The old lady, dressed in a drab gray skirt and dull gray cardigan, checked the time. “No. Is too late. You come back again.”

“But when?” The scalp condition grew worse. “I’ve been working at my grandfather’s store for a couple of months now.” I wanted so badly to scratch my head. “I’ve never seen you open before.” What would the woman think if I dropped to the floor and started rolling like some flea-bitten mongrel? And no wonder they called them boils. My whole head felt like it was churning with hot foaming bubbles.

“Next time. You come next time.” Once more, the old lady checked her watch.

I heard the creak of a rear door, a howl of wind, and then footsteps descending stairs, but I didn’t see anyone. Kinda creepy. Then again, the old lady probably had more friends on the other side than on this one.

She pointed to the front door. “So sorry. You go now.”

On a low shelf, I spied a tartan wool that would be perfect for the cape I was designing. I leaned down for a better look, and the red beret tumbled to the floor. I scooped it up and quickly replaced it on my head. I heard a gasp.

“You have the cap,” the old lady said, wagging a trembling finger in my face. Her eyes bulged as she stared at my head.

I tugged the beret over my ears. “Not really mine. Just borrowed it.” The itching got worse. It felt like fingers of angry red streaks were escaping down my forehead and across my neck. I fought the urge to reach under the hat and yank my hair out, handful by miserable handful.

The old lady looked at me as if I had jabbered in some long-lost Icelandic dialect. Of course, that was probably her native tongue. Half the town, my mom’s family included, had descended from the same band of Vikings blown off their little iceberg of an island.

“Not borrowed. Cap is a sign. Follow me.” The old lady started shuffling toward the back of the store.

Definitely creepy now.

“I really just wanted to look at the fabric. I sew, and I’m into design, but I could come back another time.” My head was screaming with pain. I wondered if scalping was ever medically prescribed. I would do it in a heartbeat, just lop the whole thing off, no anesthesia necessary.

“Time is now. Follow me.”

I obeyed like some sort of heeled dog, though how this little old lady could conjure such authority was beyond me. My mom couldn’t even get me to pour milk into a glass. I just hoped there was Dupioni silk or pebbled crepe for which the “time is now” phrase was intended.

“Is there something back here you wanted to show me? Mrs. Hulda, is it?” Common sense told me to make like the yards of fabric and bolt—still, I followed.

“Is Huldabrun Vigarthursdottir. You call me Fru Hulda.”

And I thought my name was bad. Plus Fru? I shook my head in wonder. *Fru*, I knew from my mother, was Icelandic for *Mrs.*, but seriously, who else would know that? In addition to the English word for *Mrs.*, maybe Fru Hulda should learn the word *assimilation*. Though I supposed the melting pot theory didn’t apply when you came from one frozen climate to another. And as for the rest of the name, what a load to carry through life. No wonder the old betty was bent in two.

The back of the store was a maze of low shelves holding boxes of gleaming buttons, skeins of lace, and spools of ribbon. The quantity and quality of fringe, rickrack, sequins, and trims was unlike anything I’d ever seen—not even in the garment district of downtown LA. And such a riot of colors. My eyes glistened with delight. Then again, it might just have been smoke clouding my vision from the whole head-on-fire thing.

Hulda stopped at a battered old door. Faded letters spelled out OFFICE on a paint surface so cracked I could have scraped the whole thing away with one swipe of a spatula. She opened the door. A step or two of warped wooden stairs were visible, after which there was nothing but black. Hulda pulled on a simple metal chain, and a bare bulb illuminated the descent.

“Now we go down,” she said.

## CHAPTER TWO

Hulda looked at me expectantly.

No way was I going down there. Nothing good happened below the earth's crust. Just poll the local residents of any cemetery on that one. I raked my left hand deep into my scalp.

"Quick. Is time," she said, squinting at her watch.

Not only was I expected to head into the heart of darkness—I was urged to go first. She nudged me with a sharp knuckle to the small of my back. Though my head said "Don't," my legs said "No," and my stomach said "Up, if anything," I descended.

The staircase was narrow and turned three times before opening into a dark corridor. Hulda stepped

forward and beckoned me with a nod of her head, motioning to the only door off the wide hallway. Clutching at my arm with surprising force, she pushed the door open.

Some of the oldest women I had ever laid eyes on were seated at an oval table. And if not the oldest, then definitely the oddest. Hardly the horror pic that'd been looping through my head, although the room itself was dank: low ceiling, stone walls, and lit only by thick white candles of varying heights surrounded by what could only be described as straw and twigs in the center of a massive table. The women all turned as Hulda pulled me into the room. *It must be some sort of costume party*, I thought. One of those crazy red-hatter clubs like my grams in Santa Monica belonged to. And hats off to this bunch: the assortment of bonnets, and beanies, and pillboxes—and one which could only be described as a horned wimple—was impressive, though oddly enough not a one was red.

I suddenly remembered my own hat, probably the mistaken passkey that had gotten me into this Knights of the Round Table meets Golden Girls Reunion. I was about to excuse myself, politely, when one of the women stood, scraping a heavy chair across the flagged floor. She was tall and dour, with a mouth that gathered in angry folds. She looked at Hulda as she spoke. “What is the meaning of this?”

Hulda pointed to one of the chairs, which, I now noticed, faced backward and away from the table. “The second chair can be seated now.”

A chorus of gasps rebounded off the damp walls, as every one of the old women reacted to this statement.

“I can’t stay,” I said.

They all stared at me with wide eyes and open mouths.

Tall-and-Dour was clearly not pleased by Hulda’s announcement, or invitation, or whatever it was. She slapped her hand to the table, causing the candles to flicker and the room to fall silent. “Have you no respect, Fru Hulda? You know the statutes. Youth is strictly forbidden. You risk exposure. And certainly not the second chair.”

Talk about reverse age discrimination.

“I really gotta go,” I said. “I’m waiting for a delivery.” I pointed in what I thought was the right direction, though all the crazy turns of the staircase had me disoriented. “Across the street at my *afi*’s store.”

“She has the cap,” Hulda said in a voice as flat as the prairie.

Again with the cap. Double the trouble at this point: its musty wool was probably teeming with vermin, and it seemed to somehow be my ticket into this masquerade. I yanked it off and balled it in my hand. Another round of gasps, pointing, and nervous twitters circled the room. These old women seriously needed to get out more. Sure the skin condition was a nasty, festering mess, but wasn’t it rude to gawk?

Another woman stood. “It is the cap.”

Tall-and-Dour shook her head. “Impossible. She’s just a child.”

I'd had enough. I gave Tall-and-Dour the most adult-like look I could muster. "I'm sixteen, hardly a child." I turned and held the hat out to Hulda. "But anyway, you guys can keep the cap. It belonged to my *amma*, but she's dead now. I'm sure my *afi* wouldn't mind." I shoved the hat into Hulda's hand. "Like I said, I gotta get going."

"Is not the hat," Hulda said. "Is the cap." With this she removed her own hat, and I was shocked to see the same raging red rash afflicting her scalp, visible under thin wisps of gray twisted hair. One by one, the others in the room, except Tall-and-Dour, removed their hats. They were all suffering from the same mottled skin condition.

"Is this thing contagious?" I asked, a hand flying to my hairline.

Hulda shook her head. "Is not contagious. Is a sign. As is your youth. As is your arrival this night, the final night, of a three-year deadline to appoint a second chair."

All of a sudden my whole head started aching. Not just the scalp. Pain radiated from the base of my neck to my eyebrows. I'd had headaches before, but nothing like this. The room spun like a carnival ride, and I needed to sit down or drop to the floor. Hulda must have sensed this, as she quickly put a hand below my elbow and inched me into the room. I sat with a thud and put my head to my knees. Many minutes passed before I recovered enough to sit up and take stock of the situation. I was in the empty chair, which had been turned to face the table. The women looked at me expectantly.

On top of everything else, I thought I might hurl. “I don’t feel well.” I clutched my stomach. “And I don’t understand what’s going on.”

Hulda, who was seated to my right, stuck a white bowl of what looked like dried leaves under my nose. “Breathe deeply,” she said.

It smelled sharp, and the tip of my nose went numb, but I felt better. Both the headache and nausea were instantly gone.

“Where am I?” I was disoriented and momentarily wondered if I was hugging another type of bowl.

Hulda’s voice was solemn. “You are at a meeting of the Aslendigas Storkur Society.”

“The what?” I asked, realizing I was addressing my new best friend—the bowl.

Tall-and-Dour interrupted. “No more. There has been some mistake. She should never have been seated. And certainly not in the second chair.”

I crouched into a backbreaking pose, whereby I could keep both nostrils sucking in grass clippings while my eyes raked the surroundings.

A short, plump woman said, “But Fru Grimilla, she was sick. Nearly fell over.”

*Tall-and-Dour*, I thought, *must have been born with that scowl; how else would her parents have known to name her Grimilla?*

*Aha moment*: I can lift the bowl, a clever maneuver that allowed me to stretch my neck and shoulders in relief.

“Enough,” Grimilla said with a slash of her hand. “Too much has been said already.”

Hulda stood. “Fru Grimilla!” she said with surprising ferocity. “Do I need to remind you that I occupy the first chair, the Owl’s chair, the Uglá’s chair?” On closer examination, Hulda’s chair was larger than the others and raised on a small platform. It had a large ornate owl carving, which made the bird appear to be perched atop the chairback. “We have waited three years for a new member to find us. And for it to be one so young is a sign.”

I attempted to lower the herbs from my numbed nasals, make my apologies, and scam, but a mere inch of separation between my nose hairs and the weeds caused a relapse. I looked down and noticed that the arm of my chair was carved with perched birds, all kinds of birds.

“Youth is forbidden,” Grimilla repeated. I noticed that everything about her sagged: her shoulders, her bottom lip; even the peacock feather of her teal-blue cloche hat drooped to her brow. “And Fru Hulda, second chair? You pass over many worthy of such an honor.”

“We live to see many changes.” Hulda spoke with authority. “It is not for us to question. It is for us to accept.”

I didn’t feel well enough to respond in any way to the madness surrounding me. I was rooted to the mysterious bowl by pain and nausea. I thought of fleeing, stealing their dinnerware and its contents, but my jeans had turned Judas on me. They just sat there shaking uncontrollably. Traitors.

Hulda turned to face me. “*Velkominn, vinur*. Welcome, friend.”

A chorus of “*Velkominn, vinur*” was repeated.

All eyes fell on me, and I felt cornered and scared. It was definitely time to go. I’d had enough of the secret society of yodel sisters, and Afi would kill me if I missed the apple guy. “Sorry, but I can’t stay. I’ll be late,” I managed to say, thinking if I could make it to the back door, away from the stink of those candles, the stares of these strange women, the fresh air might revive me.

“No need to worry about time,” Hulda said. “Check your watch.”

Weird. It had stopped at 9:03, the time just before I entered the shop. All the more reason to scat. I tried to leave; it took a great deal of effort, but as soon as I stood, my symptoms returned: blazing hot scalp, pounding head, and nausea. I sat back down, plunging my nose to the bowl.

“What is wrong with me?”

“Nothing is wrong. When the cap appears, you must come at nine o’clock to council. As for the other discomforts, your gifts are settling in. And always worse with the cap.” Hulda nodded to a woman across the table. “Fru Birta, our Lark, are you ready to record?”

Birta, of the chartreuse wimple, opened a very large, very tattered leather book. “What is your name?”

“Kat.”

“Your full name?”

“Katla Gudrun Leblanc.”

Birta looked up from the book. “Katla Leblanc? That can’t be.”

“Only my mother is Icelandic. My father’s side is French.” Again, the room echoed with murmurs. I looked at the woman to my left. The arms of her chair were carved with what looked like pelicans. Were they bird watchers? Mad-hatter bird watchers?

Fru Hulda nodded to the room. “Yes. This is the granddaughter of Fru Valdis. And yes, this is the girl of the lake.”

*Huh?* OK. These crazy ladies were driving me nuts. First I thought it was my non-Icelandic last name they were questioning. Now it seemed to have something to do with my poor dead *amma*. And what lake? Unless you considered the Pacific Ocean a lake.

“Let us continue with the records,” Hulda said. “What is your father’s first name?”

“Greg.”

“Enter her as Katla Gudrun Gregorsdottir,” Hulda said.

I was at least familiar with this confusing Icelandic custom. A boy’s last name was his father’s first name followed by *son*, and a girl’s last name was her father’s first name followed by *dottir*, for daughter. My mother, for example, was Lilja Olafsdottir because her father, my *afi*, is Olaf Vilhalminsson. And a woman didn’t take a husband’s name in marriage. But just because I understood

the tradition didn't mean I bought into it. Nor did my dad. He accepted the name Katla, which he morphed into Kitty Kat. He begrudgingly tolerated the middle name Gudrun, because, as my birth story goes, my mom stopped pushing and refused to continue unless she got to pick my first and middle names. My dad agreed — though claimed the nurses bullied him — but he drew the line at the surname. He was French, and his child was a Leblanc.

“I prefer Leblanc,” I said.

Birta looked up momentarily and received a nod from Hulda. I stretched my neck to get a look at the faded yellow parchment, but the Lark scribbled quickly and turned the page. Roll was then called, and the book was shut with a heavy thud.

“Perhaps listening to the meeting will best explain our purpose,” Hulda said. “Fru Dorit, our Puffer, do you have an essence to bestow?”

*Huh?*

Dorit, the short, plump woman who had interrupted Grimilla before, rose solemnly from her place. “May I first commend you on this momentous decision, Fru Hulda, our Owl, our Uglá.” Dorit ducked her head coyly toward her right shoulder. “And I'm sure it is not lost on one so wise as you, Fru Hulda, that the Icelandic word for *little owl* is *hattugla*. Her very name, another sign. Yes? Fru Hulda?”

Boy. It was clear that the suck-up position in this group was already taken.

“This I noticed,” Hulda said, granting no particular favor to Dorit’s doughy face. “Let us continue with our duties. Do you have an essence to deliver?”

“As always, I am honored to serve my sister Storks. And I wish to thank you all, in advance, for your consideration of tonight’s recommendation.”

“Please, Fru Dorit,” Hulda said. “What say you?”

“A boy. He’ll be breech, and late,” Dorit said.

I looked around the room. Were these women midwives?

“What else can you tell us?” Hulda asked. “And remember, be brief.”

“He’s impatient to settle. He’ll be gifted in music, but someone to whom words will come slowly.”

OK. Even a really good midwife, with the ultrasound equivalent of the Hubble Telescope, couldn’t know that.

“What vessels are there?” Hulda asked.

Vessels? Like ships?

“A thirty-four-year-old mother of three girls. Her husband pines for a boy. A twenty-nine-year-old single woman, who has lost herself in her career. A thirty-eight-year-old who has, four times, endured artificial insemination. The husband has been incredibly patient.”

“And have you a recommendation for us?” asked Hulda.

“The thirty-eight-year-old,” replied Dorit. “She has waited so long.”

All of a sudden, something Hulda had said previously clicked. “Did you say Storkur Society? As in stork?” I asked. “As in big white bird? As in baby delivery service?”

Hulda nodded. “Yes. Aslendigas Storkur Society. Icelandic Stork Society, Local 414.”

“You guys are joking, right?” I said. “This is some kind of prank. Am I being punked by someone?” My friends in California were capable, but no way they’d go to this kind of trouble. And I didn’t have friends here in Minnesota.

I tried to stand, but—again—ended up in the weeds.

“If you are to join our society, you will learn protocol and patience,” old sour-faced Grimilla barked.

“Who said I was joining anything?” I said into the bowl of grasses, my nose ice-cold and my scalp smoldering.

“Fru Grimilla, our Peacock, you judge too quickly.” Hulda turned to me. “Is never a choice,” she said with resignation. “Is a calling.”

“Yeah, well, nobody called me,” I said. “Trust me. I’d remember.”

A twitch of a smile flashed across Hulda’s face, but was gone in an instant. “You will come to understand. I will help you.”

“Fru Hulda,” old Grimilla said, “I fear we digress.” She and her bobbing feather wouldn’t allow me another interruption. Peacock, eh? I’d heard of whole

neighborhoods in Palos Verdes whose common goal was to rid their streets of wild peacocks. Reportedly the birds were loud, aggressive, territorial, and full of crap—literally. Made a lot more sense to me now. I half-listened as the women adopted some sort of agreement regarding the musical boy and the test-tube mom, though I was simply too overwhelmed to fully understand the significance of the moment. Next thing I knew, I was herded up the stairs with the group, my scalp blister-free, my head pain-free, and my stomach settled. The women turned left at the stairs and disappeared out the back door. I hesitated, standing with Hulda at the rear of the store.

“What just happened?” I asked.

“Katla, you are very special girl. I know never of one so young to be given these powers.”

“Powers?”

“Yes.”

I looked around the shop, filled with such beautiful materials. “I’m seriously hoping this is all a dream, but if it is, what a waste of fabric.”

“Is no dream. You go home. Next time you see my store open, we talk again.”

Before I knew it, I stood in front of Hulda’s dark store with no one in sight, my scalp as cool as the night air, and my brain twisting like taffy.

## CHAPTER THREE

I turned the key in the lock, pushed open the door, and looked at the large clock on the wall. Six minutes after nine. Only three minutes had passed since I'd walked over to Hulda's store. How was that possible? I put a hand to my muddled head; no angry red bumps, and the hat was gone. I glanced back across the street through the still-open door. The fabric shop was dark. I was either going crazy or had just had an up-close-and-personal with a coven of witches or a gaggle of Stork ladies. Given a choice, I'd take crazy.

An old junker of a truck came belching down the road and pulled into a parking spot in front of Afi's shop, the Norse Falls General Store. I noticed the apples in the back of the cab and watched as a guy, lean and lanky, unfolded

his long legs from under the steering wheel. Though it was a bitterly cold evening, he wore only a T-shirt.

I stepped back outside and crossed my arms. “You’re late.”

“Sorry. Engine trouble.” He closed the car door with a back kick of a crusty boot, walked the few steps to the back of the truck, and lifted out a bushel of green apples.

Nothing like bad service to jar you back to reality. “You could have called.”

“No cell phone. Where you want ’em?”

“Afi wants them in the back storeroom.”

It took the guy about fifteen minutes to unload, all the while leaving a trail of mud across the plank floorboards I’d already swept. I used the time to work on an English assignment. When finished, he approached with papers to be signed. As he smoothed the crumpled sheets onto the counter in front of me, I could feel his stare.

“Aren’t you even going to say hi?” he finally asked, removing his cap and looking at me.

I clicked a ballpoint pen in and out. “Uh, sure. Hi.” He continued to look at me so intently that I became nervous that the rash or claw marks had returned. I fluffed my bangs over my forehead.

“You know me, right?”

I didn’t recognize him. Then again, the school was filled with flannel-clad, John-Deere-capped, boot-shod farm boys, one indistinguishable from the other. Though

as he held his gaze, which was becoming pretty awkward, there was definitely something familiar about the guy. I'd always liked the unexpected combination of blue eyes and dark hair. Didn't he go to my high school in California? No, that couldn't be it. He looked like that guy from the TV show about the Valley. Or was it the one about that prep school? Jeez, did the guy never blink? Or was he the local kid who cut my mom's grass over the summer? By this point, the guy had me so flustered, he was starting to look like a cross between my *afi*, Jack Sparrow, and Bono. There really should be a law, or at least some sort of strict etiquette, regarding lingering stares.

"Should I? I'm the new kid," I said, knowing for certain that it was a singular distinction. "I barely know anyone."

"But you know me."

I was starting to pick up on his tone: a mixture of arrogance and entitlement. He was probably the prom king or quarterback. And I'd put money on him being one of Wade Ivarsson's buddies. "Sorry," I said, shrugging.

He didn't seem satisfied with this response. "Seriously? You don't know me?"

Man, this guy didn't give up. "Am I in one of your classes?" I was not going to give him the satisfaction of guessing him as class president, or captain of whatever sport was king around here—probably bear wrestling or log rolling.

He seemed let down. “From before?”

Before what? I’d only been here a couple of months. I was pretty sure he hadn’t been in the store in that time. And I remembered that the kid who cut my mom’s grass was freckled and younger. “I doubt it. I haven’t been here since I was eleven.”

He looked at me with what could only be described as disappointment, though what I could have possibly done to him I couldn’t guess. “I must be confusing you with someone. And I’m sorry if I kept you waiting.” He extended his hand. It looked dirty, but I didn’t see any way around shaking it. “I’m Jack Snjosson.”

At least they taught manners alongside tractoring. “Kat.” I touched his warm fingers. “Ouch!” A surge of cold shot up my arm, leaving me with a sudden ache. He must have experienced a similar jolt because we both pulled our hands away quickly.

He looked up to the lines of exposed wiring stapled to the wall. “When’s the last time you guys had an electrician out here?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said, rubbing my arm and looking suspiciously at the jerry-rigged fixture dangling just a few inches above my head.

“Something you may want to mention to your grandfather.”

“Yeah. I will,” I said, though the shock didn’t feel electric to me. I shivered. It got a little more awkward, because he was the one who should have offered an exit line. Yet

he kept standing there, all rigid, like he expected something of me, like he was daring me to do it—whatever *it* was.

I sighed, trying to think of something to diffuse the tension. The guy was in such an internal headlock that it really did look like he might hurt himself. “Can I ask you something?” I pointed across the road with the pen. “Have you ever seen that fabric store open?”

He replaced his cap, tugged at its brim, and seemed to come out of his trance. “Kind of a sore subject around here.”

“Really? Why?”

“Old Hulda’s the only holdout among the merchants on Main. They all have an offer from some developer, but she won’t sell. And hasn’t been seen for months, so she’s holding the whole thing up. The developer won’t buy unless it’s a complete parcel. Why do you ask?”

I didn’t know how much to reveal. “I thought I saw a light on over there.”

“I hope not. I hope she foils the deal.”

I had heard my *afi* talking about “cashing out,” but he’d never mentioned an obstacle. “Why? Isn’t it what the shops want?”

“Not the rest of the town.”

“Why not? What’s the developer going to do with it?”

“They’re talking about leveling the whole downtown and building some big-box shopping center.”

“Sounds good to me.” Visions of Starbucks and Jamba Juice flitted across my lashes.

“There’re a lot of people who depend on selling to these businesses. My dad sells apples and cider to the store; my mom sells pies, and strudels, and jellies to the café. And it’s not just our family.” He lifted his none-too-clean hands in a sweeping motion. “Take a walk through the shops one day. Most everything is local. You won’t see too many ‘Made in China’ labels.” He was working himself into a lather, which I hoped he’d at least use to clean the grime from under his fingernails. “And besides, you wipe away a town, you wipe away a piece of history.”

“But if the stores aren’t making it, that’s just the way it goes. Right?” I knew I was grinding his gears, but, seriously, strudels and jellies? And apples were computers, period. “People like to see the quaint downtowns, sure, as they drive by in their SUVs on the way to the mall. It’s the natural selection of economics; if you can’t adapt, you go extinct.” I gestured toward the rear of the store. “Just take a look at the old abandoned railroad back there, if you need an example.”

That did it. He snatched the paperwork from the glass countertop. “What the hell would you know about it, anyway? If people like you had their way, the whole world would look like Disneyland.” He stomped more mud across the floor and slammed the front door on his way out.

I sat and replayed his remarks, chafing under his tone. *Testy, testy*, I thought. Someone needed a visit to the Happiest Place on Earth. I shook my head in bewilderment. What a night. First the Stork ladies, and then eye-locking, freezer-zapping, angry Apple Boy. I *so* had to get back to California.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning, Wednesday, I felt chilled, even though a southerly had arrived with bags of balmy air and warm breezes. I hoped I wasn't getting sick, though at least an illness would have explained the hallucinations from the previous night. Maybe something nasty and viral was a good thing—a symptom, not a psychosis. I dressed in jeans I'd slashed and then lined with polka-dot panels, a Michael Stars tank top layered over a thermal T, a silver Burberry quilted jacket, three black crosses, and a Cole Haan turquoise belt. I sat down at the kitchen island to a bowl of Kashi Nuggets and my mom's scrutiny.

“A little warm for all those layers, don't you think?”

“It's cold in here,” I said. “Did you leave the fridge open all night?” For longer than I could remember, I'd

had an almost pathological aversion to cold. Even in LA, I was known for my jackets and sweaters.

My mom wore a short-sleeved polo, cropped khaki pants, and Birkenstocks. My style gene definitely came from my dad's side, the French side. From my mom, besides the blond hair, I got my ability to recite pi to the twentieth place, not necessarily a skill I would have chosen. "No. And it's not cold." She put a hand to my forehead. "Are you feeling OK?"

A loaded question. Technically I was miserable. Hated Minnesota. Hated school. Hated Kashi Nuggets, for that matter. I dumped a heaping spoonful of sugar onto my cereal. "Yes. Fine."

I wasn't. There was more on my what-sucks list. My seriously stupid hot and heavy with Wade Ivarsson, for one. I thought, with dread, about that night two weeks ago—the night before school started—at the abandoned quarry. Also making the list was the way he and his stuck-up girlfriend, Monique Tomlin, had since shunned me. The capper, of course, was my parents' divorce. But why worry my mom, who had cried for three months after Dad moved out? Especially now that she was finally acting happy.

"You sure?" she asked.

"Of course."

My mom moved back to the kitchen counter. She sliced open a package of beef and plopped it into a Crock-pot. She added a bag of baby carrots, diced onions, wine,

beef broth, and a heaping spoonful of paprika. Pot roast meant only one thing: Stanley. I was grateful for the warning.

“You’ll be home for dinner, honey, won’t you?” She ground pepper into the pot.

“Can’t. I’m helping Afi again tonight,” I lied.

“You’ve been doing that a lot lately. It’s not cutting into your studies, is it?”

“No.” Not a lie. Norse Falls High was, if nothing else, academic pabulum.

“Too bad. Stanley was hoping you’d be here.”

Then he was even more of a doofus than I thought he was, because I’d been giving him the stink eye ever since he burst into our lives like gum on the face. The whole thought of my mom having a boyfriend made me want to retch. For starters, it was way too soon after the divorce. Plus, Stanley was a bore and a nerd. But worst of all, he tethered her to Minnesota, which made a return to California unlikely. Stanley, therefore, was a sore subject.

As was the ink-still-drying-on-the-paper divorce. Ten days ago, my mom had to track my dad down at the San Francisco Airport to get him to sign the final papers. He had been on his way to Vancouver to meet with a project engineer for his newest venture. She had returned all flushed and in the mood to celebrate. My dad is an entrepreneur, and he can’t help it if his job requires him to travel a lot. The affair he definitely could have helped, and it still pissed me off, but he had said he was sorry

about a thousand times. And he really was a good guy and a good dad. If I could forgive him, so could she. She just needed more time and space, without complications like Stanley.

My mom checked the clock on the stove. “Yikes. Gotta go. Eight o’clock lecture.” She kissed the top of my head and hurried out of the room with a jangle of keys and a rustling stack of graded papers. My mom is a mathematics professor who left a tenured position at UCLA to return to her hometown and the nearby podunk Walden College, in a post-divorce molting of everything she associated with southern California: crime, traffic, materialism, and my dad. And as much as I loved my mom—and knew she was heartbroken, and wanted her to be happy—I had never been, and was still not, on board with the move.

The back door slammed and I sighed, dreading another day of torture at school.

I dropped my satchel on the worktable and fell into a chair. English had been a joke. Social Science had been a snore. And the butchery Madame Klabber, the French teacher, committed to the French language was, as *ma grandmère* in Santa Monica would say, *un massacre*. At least fourth period was Design, the only class and teacher I found remotely interesting.

Ms. Bryant leaned against the front edge of her desk, crossing one booted calf over the other. Her look that day,

a chunky brown belt over a rolled-at-the-sleeve tweed jacket, was one I'd be borrowing. I asked myself again how this smart, attractive native Chicagoan had settled in Norse Falls.

"Today I'll be assigning partners for the semester project." Everyone quieted down. You know a teacher's cool when she doesn't have to shout for attention. "We'll be helping with the drama department's spring production of *The Snow Queen* by assembling a portfolio of costume and set designs. Does everyone know the story by Hans Christian Andersen?"

I sat wondering how even a high-school play in this alpine village had to be Norse-themed and snowbound, when I heard my name called.

"Katla Leblanc and Penny Peterson will be our last team." Ms. Bryant closed the folder she had been reading from. "Why don't you take the rest of the hour to meet with your assigned partner?"

"I'm Penny," said a perky redhead who took a seat in the chair beside me. I recognized Penny but hadn't known her name. She had bushy, copper-colored hair that lifted from her head and was shaped into something topiary-like, and she owned, I now recalled, an unusually large number of woolen vests. Today's was green with a band of pumpkins encircling her waist. At least she was thin enough to wear a design of bulbous gourds around her midsection.

"I'm Kat."

“I know. Everyone knows you.”

I groaned.

“We don’t get many new kids. And everybody knows your grandpa. We all have to go into his store sometime or other. Plus, I remember the . . .” Penny paused, biting her bottom lip. “I knew your grandma, too. She was so sweet. She used to be good friends with my *amma*, until they had that dumb fight. We even live on their block.”

I figured anybody who knew my *amma* and liked her got the benefit of the doubt, though I wondered what was up with the granny catfight story. It almost made me giggle, picturing some silly altercation: the clash of the church ladies, the famous tea-party tussle, the great baked-goods brawl.

Penny and I spent the rest of the hour recounting what details we could of *The Snow Queen*: the arrival of a mysterious woman, her abduction of the boy character in her beautiful sleigh, and the girl’s journey to rescue him. The bulk of this came from Penny; I mostly remembered fur coats with matching muffs.

When the bell rang for lunch, Penny stood and gathered her things. “You wanna walk together? To the cafeteria?”

Lunch. I hated lunch. Two weeks into the school year, and lunch was the code I just couldn’t crack. The first day of school—the very next day after playing backseat Twister with Wade—I’d approached his lunch table, certain I’d be welcome. He hadn’t even looked up. As I stood

there, like a dork, waiting for him to acknowledge me, I'd been summarily shooed away with a haughty "This table is reserved" from a strikingly beautiful girl, who I would later learn was his girlfriend, Monique. I got the impression it was the sort of reserved that would hold through a ten-, twenty-, and even thirty-year reunion.

I waited for Wade to correct the misunderstanding, but he just stared at his food. I walked away slowly, still thinking he'd call me back. That's when I heard him say to the table, "Who the hell was that girl?" I'd turned around, a natural reaction to something too awful to believe. Monique locked eyes with me and bug-swatted the air in front of her. I spent the rest of that lunch in the bathroom. Over the next few days, I plopped down with groups of kids who looked friendly enough, only to be ignored—or worse, the subject of whispers and curious looks. Eventually, I found it easiest to sit alone and bring a book.

Penny and I were still discussing the project as we entered the cafeteria. I followed her through the line and was surprised when she waited for me to swipe my lunch card.

"So, can you write?" Penny asked.

"I read, too," I said.

"Follow me," she said. I shuffled behind her. As we passed the lunch monitor, she motioned with a backward hook of her thumb and said, "She's with me."

"Where are we going?"

“To the journalism room.”

“The huh?”

“You’re our new fashion columnist for the school paper,” Penny said. “Congratulations.”

“Oh, no, Penny. I really don’t think so.”

“Just come and see what’s up. I think you’d like it. It’s a good group. Plus, Mr. Parks, our staff liaison, writes us a pass out of lunch for the whole year. We get to hang out in his room and skip the whole cafeteria scene.” Penny took a right past the senior lockers. “All of the staff are twelfth-graders. We’ll be the only two juniors. Cool, huh?”

As much as the Get-Out-of-Lunch-Free card sounded good, not to mention that my mom would puddle over an extracurricular to pad the college apps—a 4.0, according to my mom, wasn’t enough anymore—it sounded like work. Penny looked at me hopefully.

“I’ll eat lunch with you guys today, but let me think about it. There’s a bunch of other stuff going on right now. I don’t want to feel pressured.”

I followed her into the room, thinking maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea, maybe I needed a diversion, until I got a look at the occupants. Not only were they a collection of misfits, but chief among them sat Jack, the angry Apple Boy, still sporting a seed cap and flannel shirt. If I had felt slightly chilled all day, I was now downright iced. And blue lips look cadaverish on ultra-pale blondes.

“Guys, this is Kat. She’s in my design class.” Everyone said hello except Jack, who kept his eyes lowered to

a sandwich. “She’s considering taking on the fashion column.” I glared at her as we sat down at side-by-side desks, part of a larger semicircular configuration. She was oblivious to my look, more intent on Jack, whom she must have thought hadn’t heard her. “Jack, did you meet Kat?”

“We’ve met,” he said, balling his crusts and wax paper into a brown bag. “I gotta go check the printer.” He walked out of the room without another word.

Everyone got all spooky quiet, as if something eventful had happened. They looked at me like I’d done something wrong. I felt like I’d just dropkicked a puppy. And I hadn’t even said anything. He was the one who stomped out of the room. I gnawed on the inside of my cheek instead of the rubbery chicken strips, and watched as grease marks soaked through the small paper plate. What was it with guys in this town? I’d had plenty of guy friends in LA, and Ethan Milken and I had managed to go out for six months without the least bit of drama. Even our breakup had been easy. So why was it that the only two guys I’d even said boo to here wouldn’t acknowledge my existence?

Penny nudged me and put a stack of school newspapers at my elbow. “Jack’s our editor.”

*Of course.*

“And I’m assistant editor,” she continued with the bluster of a second-in-command. “Why don’t you have a look at some of our back issues? You can get an idea of what we’re looking for.”

I pretended to shuffle through the old papers, but all I could do was sulk. How could I have gotten off to such a bad start here? How was I already a *persona non grata*?

My mind drifted to Wade. I thought about how he had started frequenting the store the last few weeks of August, buying sodas, magazines, and packs of gum. He seemed to have a knack for showing up just after Afi shuffled home. It had been a lonely summer; my mom and I had moved in late July, so I hadn't yet had school as a way to meet people. The first thing he ever said to me was, "Cool boots." Sure, I had been wearing leopard-patterned UGGs with jean cutoffs, but "cool boots" was a phrase my friends and I in LA used for everything, and "CB" was text for a range of affirmations, anything from "OK" to "I'm there" to "got it"—so he got my attention. For a hick, he wasn't bad-looking, a tall, barrel-necked linebacker type, who filled a room with both his stature and self-confidence. At first his size made me nervous, but when he'd leaned on the counter with his thick forearms resting casually, I'd relaxed. And he did have a certain charisma or charm that I found compelling. He wanted to know about California, beach life, and surfing. And he said he had a thing for blondes, real blondes.

I knew that a player's a player, no matter the geography. The only difference was the ones in LA had better tans—and better cars. But Wade offered me the one thing I wanted more than anything: introductions to his friends. I could tell that he was full of himself, and not really my

type, but I was in no position to be choosy. School was starting, and I didn't know a soul. I never should have gotten in his car, and not just because it was a Camaro. And I never should have had that first beer. Bad enough it was a school night, but I barely knew the guy, and I have like zero tolerance for alcohol. I wasn't a complete innocent, but for whatever reason, drunk and stupid just didn't gel with my personality. Plus, the cheap stuff tastes like crap. I learned that much from my dad.

The second beer with Wade was plain old dumb—and the third, insane. He drove me out to an abandoned quarry. We made out. I also remember drinking something out of a flask, but after that, my memory gets a little blurry. Clarity returned the moment my knee made contact with Wade's groin and he rolled off me, calling me the kind of names that could shut down a TV station. But at least he'd stopped. Something in my resolve and awareness had thwarted him. I was sorry about the ball bruising, and said as much. I'd been told, on more than one occasion, that I was stronger than I looked. When he had recovered the use of his voice and limbs, and I had tucked in my blouse, he drove me home. The next day, I had a killer headache, my stomach was rolling, and my mouth tasted like mothballs. Seriously, my spit could have lined a linen drawer. And instead of apologizing, or at least blaming it on the beers, the lunch shunning took place. Later, I watched him strut through the halls with his arm slung around Monique.

The bell rang and Penny popped up, startling me out of my nightmare. “So?”

“I’ll think about it.” We walked out of the classroom.

As if somehow summoned by my recent brood-fest, Wade passed us in the hallway. He looked left and then right, as if scouting. He then broke into a horsey grin, brought his hand to his lips, and blew a kiss in our direction.

Penny looked at me like she’d just seen me walk on water. “Do you know him?”

“No.” If he didn’t have to own up to the stupid hookup, neither did I.

“Then why would he blow you a kiss?”

“I thought that was for you.”

Now she looked at me like I’d parted water. “For me? Hardly. We don’t exactly hang out with the same people. Not to mention that Monique would make life miserable for any girl who messed with Wade.”

“Good thing I don’t know him, then.”

Penny lowered her voice. “If you’re smart, you’ll stay away from him. I do. I have ever since kindergarten. He was mean even back then.”

I could actually picture a younger pug-faced, yappy-voiced version of him.

“They have an on-again, off-again relationship, but they always get back together. And nothing good comes of anyone who comes between them. Wade and Monique may be king and queen around here, but they’re not exactly benevolent.”

“Probably best then to set out for the brave new world.” Ironic that I could even use the word *brave*. The whole thing with Wade had left me shaken. Why had I been charmed by him? How could I put myself in such a dangerous position? What kind of guy would try to take advantage and then deny even an acquaintance? “Maybe I’ll find some followers and we’ll give that democracy thing a go.”

Penny laughed, and I had to admit it had a contagious quality to it. We started walking again.

Penny hitched her backpack up over her shoulder. “I couldn’t help but notice a little tension between you and Jack.”

“Oh. That.”

“Well?”

“He delivered some apples to my *afi*’s store last night. We shared opinions on topics ranging from evolution to economics to progress in the form of bulldozing Main Street. Needless to say, we didn’t agree. I was for and he was against. I guess I rubbed him the wrong way.”

That summed it up nicely: I’d managed to alienate both the monarchy and the peasantry. We stopped at the intersection of the school’s north and south wings. Penny waved and headed in the opposite direction. I watched her walk away, wondering what she thought of me. Acquaintances for only two hours, and the only concrete things she knew about me were that the school king was blowing me random kisses and that I was in favor of leveling their

town. I just hoped I hadn't scared her off; I really needed a friend, and should topiary hair and woolly vests be part of the package, so be it.

I leaned against my locker, hugging my arms to my body —being the new kid was stressful. No wonder I was imagining Stork ladies.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I headed to Afi's store straight from school. As soon as I got there, he went to the back to take inventory, which I knew was code for nap. He'd been running the store alone since my *amma* died three years ago, so had earned himself a power nap or two. It wasn't like the place got the foot traffic of the Whole Foods in Westwood, but still, he worked hard for an old guy.

I sat on a stool behind the front counter with my Rocket Dog clogs propped up. I pulled a Mary Jane out of one of the glass canisters lined up along the antique mirror and thought I saw the reflection of movement across the street. Relief flooded my system when I realized it was just a car pulling out of the alley next to Hulda's

store. I was really starting to lose it. I snuck another peek. Nothing. Activity would mean Hulda was around, and that my memories—which I’d fairly successfully convinced myself to be nothing more than an anxiety-induced delirium—were real. I busied myself with a chemistry worksheet and then turned my attention to Design. I was certain that everyone would submit something traditional: period Scandinavian costumes and quaint village settings for the term project. I was hoping to talk Penny into something hip and futuristic and edgy. *The Snow Queen* meets *Blade Runner*. I sketched a few quick commando-chic costumes.

Afi woke up from his nap and was hungry for dinner. “Wednesday’s beef stew at the restaurant,” he said. “You fly. I buy.”

Walking down Main Street, I passed the used bookstore. A woman waved to me from where she was setting gourds and pumpkins among the stacks of paperbacks in the front window display. I knew she’d introduced herself in the summer and asked about my mom, but I couldn’t remember her name. A few doors down, a man wished me a pleasant evening as he swept the sidewalk in front of the hardware store. I had no clue what his name was either.

Two doors past the antique store was the Kountry Kettle, my favorite hangout, mostly because Jaelle waited there. Jaelle was from Minneapolis and had more sass and presence than the whole town huddled on the

green. I hip-checked the door open and stopped to savor something pumpkin. Idabelle, the café's owner, had no eye for interiors—as evidenced by the ruffled curtains and milk-can decor—but the woman sure could pipe out some delicious aromas. Jaelle looked up from the counter and instantly her mouth stretched into a wide grin. She had a great smile, but one she didn't spread thin the way so many of the adults around here did. Minnesota-nice, or whatever you want to call it, was like Michael Kors at Macy's: the more you offer it to just anybody, the more it loses its appeal.

“Hey, Ice.” The first day we met, back in the summer, Jaelle had taken one look at my blond hair and proclaimed it ice-white. And as far as I could tell, Jaelle didn't give out nicknames easily. Kind of ironic that she called me Ice, given my dislike of the cold. Jaelle leaned against the counter. Idabelle made the waitresses wear yellow button-front dresses, but Jaelle had a way of making it her own. A black lace-trimmed undershirt pushed through the V created by unfastened buttons, and black bicycle shorts and long brown legs pedaled under the shortened skirt.

“So what's Mr. Vilhalminsson in the mood for tonight?” Jaelle asked. I always thought it interesting that someone as jive as Jaelle was so formal with elders.

“I'll take two stew specials to go.” I sat at the lunch counter and spun the vinyl-topped seat a full three-sixty, something I could never resist.

Jaelle wrote the ticket and clipped it to the order wheel.

“Where is everybody?” I asked.

“Russ and the crew left on Saturday for a job up near Baudette. Don’t know about anybody else.” Russ was Jaelle’s husband and the big hunk of a lumberjack for whom she had uprooted her life and moved north of civilization. It was a sore point with Jaelle that Russ’s work often took him away for weeks at a time. They’d only been married a year, and Jaelle was an outsider here, too. No wonder she was bored and restless and spent her tips at Tinker’s Tap, the local bar out on Highway 53. Rumor had it Jaelle liked tequila. And Norah Jones. And six-ball pool. Just give these townies something to yammer about and it spreads like mustard on a foot-long.

The door opened, and a waft of cool air blew in. I looked up to see Wade holding the door for middle-aged male and female versions of himself, complete with cropped hair and pig cheeks—even the mother. He continued to play doorman, and I was surprised when none other than Fru Dorit, Hulda’s suck-up, walked in. Wade ushered her in with a well-mannered, after-you gesture. Huh? A submissive Wade?

The parents passed solemnly, nodding terse good evenings to Jaelle. Dorit graced me with a lopsided grin, wacky enough to pass for old-lady eccentric but lingering enough to make me think we shared a secret. My stomach did a small flip. *Uh-oh. Did we really share a secret? Like*

*membership to a clandestine organization?* Wade managed a suggestive smirk, quick and smug. *Jerķ*. They settled into a booth in the far corner of the restaurant.

“Do you know the Ivarssons?” Jaelle asked. “Wade must go to your school.”

“I’ve seen him around.”

“They’re an odd bunch,” Jaelle said in a low voice. She stacked the two containers of stew in a paper bag, wrapped two corn muffins in bakery sleeves, and then added napkins and plastic soup-spoons. “I guess it’s understandable, given the tragedy.”

I snuck a peek at their table, catching the father reaching across the booth to give Wade an upside-the-head smack. Some words were exchanged, but we were too far away to hear. I turned back quickly, not wanting to be caught staring—and wondering if “odd” was a comprehensive enough adjective.

“What tragedy?”

“The death of the little girl, Wade’s sister, years ago.”

“Really? How?”

“On a camping trip. She fell down a hillside and hit her head on some rocks. She was only nine.”

“That is sad.”

“Wade was with her. Can you imagine anything so awful?”

“No.” I couldn’t.

“The grandmother, Dorit, is a hoot. When she’s on her own, she dishes on everyone and everything. That

woman can yak, and that woman can obsess. She really loved that little granddaughter of hers, Hanna. I guess because she never had a daughter of her own. Wade's dad was her only child, so she dwells on the loss sometimes. She was in here this June and just beside herself about it being the first day of summer and the anniversary of Hanna's death. She really couldn't have been any sadder. But most times she's got a lot of spunk, and there's no mistaking who rules the roost in that family."

I took another quick look at their table, where Dorit was talking with a pointed index finger. Even Wade's father had his head lowered. *All righty, then. Order up. Scoop du jour. One big steaming bowl of dysfunction.*

Jaille folded the to-go bag neatly and handed it across the counter, sighing and rubbing her temples.

"Are you feeling OK?" I pushed Afi's twenty across the counter and waited for change.

"I guess so," Jaille said. "Had a little headache since I woke up, but have only myself to blame."

So maybe there was a little truth to the tequila rumors. I gave Jaille a sympathetic look and noticed something above her head. Was it a bug? Did a throbbing headache actually bend air? I must have stared at the spot hard, because Jaille started patting down her thick black curls. "What are you staring at?" she asked. "Is my hair that bad today?"

"No. Sorry. It's me. I'm tired. My eyes can't focus right."

“You stressed out at school again?”

“Again? That would imply the stress had stopped and restarted.”

“OK, Miss Semantics. Are you *still* stressed out at school?”

“Yes.”

“Remember. It’s a pit stop.”

I shoved a wad of bills and coins into my back pocket and made toward the door. “You mean it’s the pits.”

Jelle pushed her hands into the pocket of her lace-trimmed apron. “Just don’t let ’em get to you.”

“I’ll try.” I tucked the paper sack under my left arm. “See ya, Jelle.”

Afi waited at one of the checkers tables, technically a row of barrels flanked by rickety wooden chairs, set up for a crew of old-timers who liked to come in and push reds and blacks across a board. The tables had been out on the covered porch all summer, but had recently been moved close to the cast-iron box stove in the center of the store. Afi rubbed his hands in anticipation as I pulled his stew from the bag.

“Atta girl.”

I looked around the empty store. “Not too busy, huh, Afi?”

“Had a couple sales while you were gone.”

We ate in silence, which was normal. My grandpa

was a quiet guy. Amma had been the chatty one. Talked enough for two or three, truth be told. In her presence, Afi's silent nature hadn't been noticeable. I wondered what he'd been like with her. Had he always been the ear to her voice, or had she been able to oil his jaw hinge on occasion? He had to have made conversation once upon a time, right? You couldn't go out with someone—what would have been called courting back then—and then marry them, I supposed, without some chitchat. Then again, I didn't remember much talk between me and Wade. Ugh. Thinking about that stupid mistake rolled my stomach end-over-end. Afi dipped his corn muffin into the bowl, sponging up the last dribble of gravy. Maybe he just needed a little prompt, and I was curious about what Jack had said last night.

I leaned back and picked an apple out of the bin. “These any good?”

“Best in the county.”

“Jack Snjosson delivered them last night.” I rubbed the apple up and down my pant leg, polishing it to a nice shine. “So what's the story with him? He seemed all cranked up about that development deal.”

Afi lifted the paper napkin from his lap and dropped it over the empty Styrofoam bowl. “The Snjosson kid?”

“Yeah. Jack.”

“Lars was supposed to deliver them.”

“Well, he sent his grandson.”

“Son,” Afi corrected.

“Whatever. What difference does it make?”

Afi took a long time, even for him, to answer. “It doesn’t really, but do me a favor. Don’t mention the Snjosson kid to your mom.”

“Why not?”

“Just an old bit of family business. No big deal, but your mom’s got enough on her plate these days.”

Wow. That was more than I may have ever heard my *afi* speak on any topic. And of course it got me thinking that the “old business” was why Jack expected me to know him already. “What old business?”

I could see the topic close in Afi’s squinty eyes. “Never mind about that.”

I knew better than to press. But maybe if I came at it from a different angle . . . “Jack is definitely against that development deal.”

“He’s entitled to his opinion.”

“What’s yours?”

“Gonna sell if I can.”

I cracked a bite out of the apple. Tart, just how I liked them. “Then what would you do?”

“Rest. Find me a view over some water.”

Afi started to gather the trash. Either Amma had been way better at crowbarring information out of the old guy or that was as much as you got. Period.

“Would they really level all of Main Street?”

“Oh, that’s just one of about twenty different plans floating around. I’ve been to enough of the city council

meetings now to understand that the whole thing is a mess. All I know is that this old building and little scrap of land is mine, and I can sell it to whomever I darn well please.”

Another long oration from Afi. Quite the occasion. He yawned and stretched his legs. I knew I wasn’t going to get anything else out of him for the night. “You want me to close up again for you, Afi?”

He looked up at me with milky blue eyes. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“No.”

“You OK driving in the dark?”

So far the only good thing about Minnesota was that I got a car. A little used VW Bug, but I wasn’t complaining. Now that I had my license, the real thing, not some bozo learner’s permit, I had a newfound sense of freedom. “I’m a good driver. Besides, it’s not far.”

My mom had rented a house from a colleague who was on sabbatical. It was about a mile out of town and close to the highway my mom took to work. The house was nice enough. I could still hear my mom trying to sell it to me: two floors, three bedrooms, kitchen with granite countertops, formal dining room, hardwood floors, and a yard that backed onto a city park. And trees. She’d been over the moon about bushy, leaf-dropping, color-changing trees. I was just glad it wasn’t old and smelly. The agreement was that we’d give Minnesota a year, see how we liked it. And then talk about where I’d do my senior year. I wished I’d gotten that one in writing. Two

weeks in a row I'd caught my mom with a highlighter and the Sunday real-estate section of the paper.

“Why don't you go ahead and walk home, Afi?”

He yanked on his thick lopi sweater with the patterned circular yoke. With his tufts of white hair, ruddy cheeks, and wiry build, he looked like an old fisherman. All he needed was a net thrown over his shoulder. Afi came from a long line of seafarers—mariners, as he liked to call them. Fishermen, whalers, boatbuilders, merchant traders, and explorers with a lineage going back to the Vikings.

He left, and I took my usual spot up at the front register. I pulled out my sketchbook, envisioning a costume for Kay, the boy character in *The Snow Queen*. At Hulda's, I'd seen a bolt of russet brown suede which would be perfect for a field jacket. I instinctively looked across the street to where the material was shelved, and a flicker of light caught my eye. It wasn't the overhead lights, the way it had been yesterday. It was more like a lantern or flashlight moving through the store.

I froze, a confusion of emotions. My logical side had told me to ignore the store entirely and had talked myself, deeper and deeper, into an illness theory, possibly stress-induced and with very strange symptoms. This logical side, I discovered, to a combination of dismay and thrill, had a counterpart that was highly curious about all things mystical. What if I hadn't been dreaming? What did “Icelandic Stork Society” mean, exactly? How had I been chosen?

How on earth could they possibly influence who a baby was placed with—and not *with* really, more like *in*!

There it was again, a flash of light moving slowly. I sat paralyzed with fear. I finally wrenched my eyes away, covering my face with my forearm and taking big gulping breaths of air. After a few minutes, I lowered my arm by a mere fraction of an inch. I'd take one last look and then close early, exiting through the rear. Afi wouldn't want me to go crazy all for the sale of a dozen eggs and a gallon of milk.

Holy cow! Hulda was pressed against the front window staring right at me and waving a lantern back and forth.

I tried to swallow, but my mouth was dry as chalk, and tasted like it, too. At least in LA you knew the basic shape of your worst fears: a drive-by, a carjacking, home invasion, or Zoey Simmons showing up to Mark Hall's party in the same alice + olivia batik print blouse as yours. This, however, had a whole new eerie supernatural side to it, and made riots and earthquakes and wardrobe malfunctions seem mundane. With an upright bolt, I steeled my shoulders. The woman was old, BC old. And small—heck, there wasn't enough of her to stuff a pillow. Just spooky with all her "The cap is a sign" ramblings, but not dangerous. It was time to get to the bottom of this. I grabbed the key out of the drawer, locked up the store, and marched across the street.

Hulda opened the front door and looked furtively up

and down the street. She pulled me inside with a finger pressed to her lips. “Follow quickly” were her only words.

I trailed the swinging lantern to the back of the store. Hulda shuffled quietly between the rows of fabric. I let a finger brush over their surfaces: nubby wools, cool silks, plush velvets. Once again, Hulda led me through the door marked OFFICE, down the rickety stairs, and into the chamber with the oval table. She motioned for me to sit. I went for the closest seat, but Hulda flapped and clucked and puffed until I scooted over to the second chair. And I had thought my ninth-grade biology teacher was uptight about assigned seats.

Hulda sat in the high-back she'd occupied the night before, the Owl's chair. Everything about this room gave me the willies. The carved back of my chair was jagged and uncomfortable, the lit candles cloyed the air with the smell of smoke and burning wax, and I had always disliked windowless spaces, basements in particular. I shifted in my seat, glancing down at the wooden arm, which was now carved with only robins, judging by their painted red breasts.

“Uh, Fru Hulda, is it me, or is this a different chair than I had last time?”

Hulda looked at the figures of robins perched among branches in the bloom of springtime. “Ah, so you will be our Robin. How appropriate.”

“I thought I was *kattugla*, little owl.”

“The chair picks the bird for each member of our

society. Though there is symbolism to be heeded from the little-owl reference, you are, from now on, our Robin.”

Sounded better than puffer or peacock, anyway.

Hulda straightened her skirt. “It is highly unusual for us to meet outside of the council.” She looked around like we were being watched, which did not help my overall feeling of unease. “There are those who would disapprove. We never like to arouse suspicion. But I could think of nothing else all day, and I knew we were destined to connect. When the bones ache, there’s a friend to make.”

Afi’s bones hurt, too; he called it arthritis. But whatever, at least she used the word *friend*. I relaxed enough to breathe, though only one quick ragged intake.

“Tell me. Have you noticed anything unusual?” Hulda clamped bony fingers under my elbow.

*Yeah*, I thought—*you, for starters*. “Uh. Not really.”

“You will. Your powers will grow. You will be contacted.”

“By?”

“By the essence awaiting birth.”

“Could you be a little more specific? Contacted how? Phone? Text? FedEx?”

“The child always comes as a dream.”

I rubbed my cheeks. “I’ve pretty much convinced myself that you are a sickness-induced dream. So that would be a dream within a dream.”

Hulda finally released the hold she had on my arm with a soft pat. “I know this must be very difficult for you.

Especially in these modern times, so many have forgotten the ancient ways.” She looked at me with such furrowed intensity that her long gray spiky eyebrows rose like antennae. “Tell me, do you believe you have a soul?”

Nobody had ever asked me about my soul before. I’d had conversations about God, angels, ghosts, UFOs, and even the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot—but not my soul. It felt somewhat personal, but I didn’t hesitate to reply. “Yes.”

“And do you believe in fate?”

A little trickier. A master plan for this spinning ball of billions? “Just for the big stuff, I guess.”

“And would one’s birth be included in your list of big stuff?”

“Sure.”

“Finally, then, would you allow that there are those among us with special powers?”

*Crossing Over with John Edward* was one of my favorite shows. “Yes. I suppose. But not me!”

“Why not you?”

“It’s just, I’m not . . .”

“Not what?”

I wanted to say *special*. I wasn’t special. At least not in that way. Maybe in other ways. Right? Everyone thought they were. Or was made to believe so, anyway, by those who loved them. My *amma*, my personal cheerleader, had always made me feel exceptional about anything and everything—ironically, even my childhood fascination

with birds. From a very young age, I'd sketched them, pulled books about them from the library shelf, and made up stories about their winged adventures. That much I remembered. My *amma* liked to tell stories about my childish claims to understand them, translate their chirps to language. That part I didn't remember, but knew she had been quite amused by—even boastful of—this purported bird-whispering skill. Though I wondered what she ever made of my professed love for and intentions to marry Big Bird, the hottie of Sesame Street. Regardless, I'd outgrown such flights of fancy and delusions of grandeur a long time ago. “Not interested,” I said.

Hulda sat back in her chair with crossed arms. “Not interested, you say. Your pupils are large, your breathing is rough, your cheeks are flushed, and your ears are ringing.”

“How do you know my ears are ringing?”

“Same way I know you don't like clowns.”

*That helps.* I exhaled loudly. My ears were ringing, and it was very annoying. Plus nobody really liked clowns, right? “Fru Hulda, do I have a choice?”

“No.” Hulda's answer was kind, but definitive.

I lowered my head to the table and tapped my forehead lightly against its rough hewn surface. So many questions. So confused. So totally bummed it wasn't a serious illness. I sat up.

“So let's say I have a dream about some soul, or essence, or baby, what then?”

“Then, if they haven't already through the dream

cycles, the vessels who are candidates will be made known to you.”

“Made known how?”

“Is different for everyone. For me, is always smell. When a woman is a prospect, she smells like crushed arnica root.”

*Right, that’s a big help, I thought, because when you crush the arnica root, that makes all the difference.*

“Fru Grimilla feels vibrations,” Hulda continued. “Fru Birta sees candidates in colors, red too hot, blue too cold. She looks for something in a very specific shade of yellow-green.”

Which at least explained Birta’s chartreuse wimple—the color, anyway.

I was still unsure of the timing of the whole process, though it seemed a fairly delicate question. “So, the essence gets assigned, for lack of a better word, when exactly?”

“Two weeks after.”

“After?” I asked.

Hulda looked at me impatiently. “Coupling during ovulation.”

“So assignment comes right about the same time as . . .?” I thought I knew the answer, but it wasn’t like I had committed the whole reproductive cycle to memory.

“A woman’s menses. No essence, she menstruates. An essence, the pregnancy continues.”

“Does every soul require a meeting and vote? I’m not sure I have the time. I’ve got homework, a social life.” Technically I did not have a social life, but what did she know?

“No. Only those in need of guidance.”

“And what is the significance of second chair? Fru Grimilla made it sound important.”

“Second chair is second-in-command and makes decisions when the first chair is not present.”

Forget baby on board, more like baby at the wheel. “Fru Hulda, I’m not ready to be second chair.”

“You will learn quickly. This I know. And what’s done is done. Besides, I haven’t missed a Stork meeting in twenty years. You will have plenty of time to observe.”

I’m sure my mathematician mother had a formula to calculate the likelihood of an event after a prolonged—say twenty-year—period of inactivity. Kind of like ninety-nine years without a hundred-year flood. At least Hulda looked healthy, for her age, anyway. “What if I have more questions? Can I get ahold of you?”

Hulda took a deep breath. “For one so young, I must make an exception.” She reached a leathery hand into the pocket of her long gray skirt, producing a large old-fashioned key, which she handed me. “This will open the back door. Wait for me inside, but do not open the door to the office. I will come along soon.” Hulda, again, looked side to side as if under surveillance. “Something else. It’s important.”

“What?”

“You must tell no one. Not your family. Not the vessel, not the vessels who still wait. And certainly not the child, ever.”

“Uh. OK.” I couldn’t imagine getting that conversation going, anyway. Uh, excuse me ma’am, but you smell like dried unicorn dung, so I’m going to beam a hovering soul into you. It’s a girl, by the way. She’s going to like butterflies and be lactose-intolerant. Congratulations!

“Your thoughts are swirling.”

Jeez. It was bad enough when she knew my ears were ringing and that clowns had Charles Manson eyes. “So when I figure all this out—if I figure all this out, what then?”

“You call a meeting of the council.”

“How do I do that?”

“You start scratching.”

“Scratching what?”

“Your scalp.”

“What will that do?”

“Once you start scratching, we will all get the cap, and we meet at nine p.m. And it is very important that you waste no time. It must be as soon as you have sufficient information. You must not hesitate. Do you understand?”

“Yeah. But I don’t get it. By clawing at my own head, I’m gonna give you all a rash?” It seemed too stupid to believe.

“Yes.”

There had to be a better way to communicate. Hadn’t these old gals heard of e-mail? “Will I still get it?”

“Yes.”

I rolled my eyes. “That thing hurt like nobody’s business.”

“The first time is always the worst.”

“And the second time?”

“A little better.”

“Only a little?”

Hulda shrugged in reply.

“Do I get to have a normal life in the meantime?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Then can I look at some of your fabrics?”

Hulda nodded. “For you, twenty percent off.”

## CHAPTER SIX

At breakfast the next morning, my mom wanted to talk about Stanley. Why did I avoid him?

She had made it clear to me, months ago, that the divorce was inevitable, that she could never forgive my dad for being unfaithful, and that the return to Minnesota symbolized her new start. Still, I couldn't help but think that my dad was a big drink of life, whereas Stanley was a sip, as in insipid. Anyway, it was just the wrong time for a heart-to-heart. I hadn't slept well. Hulda had me so paranoid about the essence coming to me in a dream that I couldn't relax. Branches had tapped at my window, and a nightjar may have been going for Guinness Book bragging rights on number of calls by a single bird. All night it sang its name: *Whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will,*

*whip-poor-will*. No wonder it was of the species *vociferus*. If it were going for the record, it would have to best 1,088, one of the stranger facts I knew. Another thing I knew about the whippoorwill, that I had lain awake thinking about, was that its song was considered a death omen.

In this sleep-deprived state, I was no match for my crafty mom, who extracted a promise from me to have dinner with her and Stanley that night. He had offered to cook. What a sucker.

School that day was a grease fire. Wade, it appeared, was not content with Monique as the only chew toy dangling from his muzzle. He cornered me at the drinking fountain between second and third periods. I hadn't heard anyone behind me, so I had lifted my head and turned quickly after my drink. He was too close, uncomfortably close, forcing our chests to bump. The bastard stepped back, dropped his eyes to the point of contact, and had the audacity to lick his lips. Nasty, little thin lips that they were.

"The new girl," he said as if nothing had happened between the hours he spent lingering at Afi's counter and that moment. "We finally meet, but you really didn't have to throw yourself at me." He looked down at me. Dang, he was tall. "I would have found you."

"Wade!" a voice that could chip marble called from our left. I turned to find Monique with her hands on her hips. "What are you doing?"

"Keep your panties on," he said gruffly. "Just introducing myself to the new girl."

“They’re staying on,” Monique said. “I can promise you that.”

“Relax,” Wade said, stepping around me and coiling his arm around her waist. “You got nothing to worry about.”

Monique looked over her shoulder, her brows lifting in scrutiny. “Nice outfit,” she said in a phony voice.

I looked down at my Anthropologie floral shirtdress, striped tights, and Pucci flats. What would she know? She wore Old Navy. I took a big bracing breath of air and looked around. We had attracted onlookers, one of whom, naturally, was Jack.

In Design, nervous lines crimped Penny’s forehead when I mentioned my idea of a *Blade Runner* look for our project. Not even the flash of tawny faux fur or russet suede from my book bag had piqued her interest. And I told Penny I’d write the dumb column. At least it was better than sitting by myself at lunch, though I still thought appointing a Norse Falls High fashion columnist made about as much sense as funding a Hawaiian interstate.

I followed Penny through the lunch line and to Mr. Parks’s room. We were the last ones in. The desks were arranged in a circle again, and I had no choice but to take the one next to Jack. At least today he was without the cap. I noticed that his espresso-brown hair had a cowlick, which sprayed above his left brow in a fountainlike arc. He ignored me by shoveling his food, hand to mouth, with the rote mechanics of an oil derrick. He appeared

to be eating some sort of brown-rice casserole with lumps of indistinguishable meat and a few branchy clumps of green, presumably broccoli stalks, but quite possibly pine boughs. It did not escape my notice that, unlike the rest of the room, Jack's meal was a sack lunch, definitely home-made. No flash of cellophane wrapping, nor scrap of cardboard packaging to be seen. He drank from a thermos. Even the sack itself was of sturdy cotton cloth. When finished, he dropped the Tupperware container and bent silver fork back into it and extracted two green apples.

If I was going to continue eating lunch with this crew, I figured I'd better make an effort. I turned to Jack. "I had one of your apples yesterday. It was pretty good."

Jack stopped chewing for about a half second and then took another huge bite without responding. Nothing. He let my compliment just hang there like an open fly.

"Eat up, people," he said aloud to the group. "We start working in five."

"I read your editorial, chief," Penny said.

*Did she really just call him chief?*

Penny pulled out a copy of the paper, *The Norse Falls Herald*, from her folder. "The changes you made from the version you submitted prepress are great, and really pulled it all together."

Jack mumbled, "Thanks" between bites. Penny, at least, merited a reply.

"I wonder if anyone at Pinewood has heard about it yet," Pedro, a small guy with thick dark hair and large

brown eyes, said. “You quoted two members of their school board, so it’s bound to get back to them.”

Tina, a tall girl with bangs curling-ironed into an unmoving barrel of molded hair, said, “Better watch your back at the homecoming game, Jack.”

I had no idea what they were talking about. Pinewood was another small town about ten miles west, but they appeared to be discussing more than just a sports rivalry. “Is there a problem between the two schools?” I asked.

Penny passed the paper to me. “You should read Jack’s article. It’s really well researched. The bottom line is that both communities have declining enrollments. The two school districts are negotiating a merge. The sticky point is which high school to use. Both towns want their building to be spared.”

“Which one’s better?” I asked.

Jack made no attempt to hide a complete three-sixty of his eyeballs. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“Our school is bigger, but theirs is newer,” Penny said.

Given the proximity of the high school to the downtown business district, I thought I already knew the answer, but asked anyway. “If the other were chosen, what would happen to this building?”

“It would be sold as part of the development deal,” Penny said.

“And?” I asked.

“And flattened. What do you think?” Jack finished with an exasperated toss of his head.

I thought I might like to literally toss his head, out the window. “Sounds like one has the updated facilities, while the other has the space.” I shrugged. “I guess that makes it a fifty-fifty.”

Jack froze, his mouth wide open, an apple just inches from his teeth, which were, I noticed, very straight and very white. “A fifty-fifty?”

I didn’t like the way he was looking at me. Jeez, he was smug. “Then again, if they’ve got computer labs, science labs, a gymnasium with level floors, tennis courts, and a cafeteria that can crank out more than pizza and chicken nuggets, then I don’t know why we’re even discussing it.” I dropped a napkin over my half-eaten lunch.

Jack stood and threw his apple cores, one after the other, in perfect lobbing tosses into the nearest trash can. “Except ours is a hundred-year-old structure with architectural integrity and historic significance. Shiny and new isn’t always better.” He opened the folder on his desk. “Deadline is a week from Monday. Why don’t we all get to work?”

It was more of an edict than a question. And what was the word for he who issues decrees? Edictor? Edictor in chief. Hmmm. I, challenger of authority, doodled clothing designs until the bell rang.

“Wait up,” Penny called from behind me in the hallway.

I slowed for her to catch up.

“What is up with you and Jack? Can’t you cut him some slack?”

“*Me* cut *him* slack?” Was she kidding?

We walked together toward our lockers.

“It’s just that there’s . . .” Penny bit her bottom lip and attempted to start again. “I’ve never seen a girl get under his skin the way you do.”

“So?”

“So, he’s usually the easygoing type.”

I laughed. “I’d hate to see what you consider uptight.”

“Seriously, he’s not normally like that. He’s a really good guy.”

I found that hard to believe. Yeah, sure, he was kind of good-looking, if bullheaded plow-hands were your thing. “*Good* is a relative term,” I said after a long pause.

“I don’t know; he’s good at everything he tries. Did you know that besides editor of the school paper, he’s quarterback of the football team?”

Logrolling must be a spring sport. “So, why doesn’t he hang out with the royalty?” I asked. “With Wade and Monique and their court?”

“Actually, Jack and Wade used to be friends.”

*Oh?* “What happened?”

“Last year it was total drama around Valentine’s Day. Wade and Monique broke up the week before, because he got caught with Lindy Vanmeer. And then Monique

was all over Jack, playing the victim, tricking him into comforting her.” Penny swung her backpack from one shoulder to the other. “On Valentine’s Day, the student council sells Cupid’s arrows. Most of the kids wear them over their heart, but it becomes this whole funny scene with kids wearing them sticking out of their legs and arms and butts.”

I gave Penny a get-on-with-the-story look. She tucked a big clump of hair behind her ear and continued. “The arrows have a little dangling heart on the end for the sender to write their name, so it’s the one day all year when everyone knows who’s with who. Last year, Lindy was walking around with Wade’s arrow sticking out of her chest. Monique took one look and went running to Jack. I saw the whole thing. It was one bad acting job, but Jack was just too nice to call her on it. And then after third period, Monique was walking around with about twenty arrows sticking out of her. Honestly, she looked like target practice gone bad.” Penny giggled. I did too. The image was simply too wonderful.

“The little dangling hearts were left blank,” Penny continued, “but she told everyone who asked that they were from Jack. Later on, Wade had this big confrontation with Jack. Wade accused Jack of planning to move in on Monique all along. I heard they actually came to blows. And then, boom, Jack and Wade aren’t speaking and Monique and Wade are back to normal. Well, normal for them, anyway.”

“What happened to Lindy Vanmeer?”

“Her family moved away. Kind of abruptly.”

This town was like a little bubbled snow globe that had to shake itself up every now and then just to feel alive. “Seems pretty clear-cut to me. Jack, the really good guy,” I said, charading quotation marks around those last two words, “got himself a whole bunch of arrows, but didn’t get the girl.”

Penny looked offended. “I don’t believe that version of events. I think Monique sent herself those arrows. Plus, Lindy made some accusations against Wade.” She crossed her arms. “And anyway, Jack isn’t the type to get . . . I mean, he’s never really acted like any girl . . . it’s more like he’s either oblivious or above all the immaturity of high school.”

I wanted to ask more about Lindy’s accusations, whether there was a flask involved. How could I, though, given my claim that Wade and I were virtual strangers?

We had reached my locker. Penny waved and kept on walking. I spun the combination thinking about her description of Jack — oblivious, a technique I resolved to master.

Instead of heading straight to Afi’s store after school, I stopped first at the café. Jaelle was marrying ketchup bottles by stacking one upside down atop another.