



CHAPTER ONE

My stepmother, Anna, swears magic exists in the everyday. I used to think she was full of it, but then one morning at Big Chico Creek we found a mermaid's eye under a patch of bird's-foot trefoil. The eye was large and perfectly round like a human's, but it had the glittering green iris of a fish. After that, I started noticing magic in other places too. A swan serenading a catfish at Horseshoe Lake, her neck arching like a quivering bow in song. A boy with the legs of a goat, playing the flute from his canoe along the river.

Since my dad died, though, I haven't spotted a single bit of magic. Not even a shooting star, or the quiet unfurling of a fiddlehead fern frond at dawn.



Anna spoons vegetarian chili onto her tofu dog. The spoon makes a clattering noise against the blue chili bowl. "Are you sure you're ready to go back, Lacy? I know you miss your friends and the routine and all that, but we could keep homeschooling until summer; you can start as a senior in the fall." She reaches for the pitcher of water garnished with floating bits of mint and slices of lemon from our garden. "Besides, I'll miss having you around."

I take a bite of my own tofu dog, which I still maintain tastes like weird cheese, and shake my head. True, Shell and Mechelle think I'm crazy to want to go back to school, but they don't understand. They don't know what it's like here all day, in this sad house, where Anna and I tiptoe around each other in grief. Like ballerinas in some tragedy, we move so quietly, careful not to touch each other, as though the slightest contact might send us spinning off the stage.

Since my dad has been gone, dinner is often a silence so loud it makes my ears ring. To mask it, Anna sometimes plays the Grateful Dead or some other hippie music from a million years ago, from a time before Anna was even born. While the music plays, we think of things to say to each other in the spaces between the songs. Anna is one of the nicest people I've ever known, and the truth is, she never asked for this — a teenager to raise on her own. We just don't always know what to say to each other, so we talk around the silences, we talk around his empty chair.

"I want to go back," I say carefully, as though what I'm saying could somehow be taken wrong. "I miss everyone. I miss being busy."

Anna glances at her knitting basket on the kitchen counter, heaped with skeins of thick orange wool, and smiles because she gets it. She knits to keep her hands busy. She knits because it keeps her mind off things. She's always knitted, but never like this. It has been a hard four months, but we are rich in knitted sweaters.

"Shell said there's a new science club meeting on Wednesdays after school. We're going to join together."

"What about Mechelle?"

“No. She hates science. She’s going out for the spring musical, anyway.”

Anna smiles. “That I can see.” She laughs. She’s probably thinking about the time in eighth grade when my friends and I put on a play in the backyard. Mechelle wore tap shoes and a sequined leotard, a feather boa, and face paint like a cat. She sang “Memory” while the neighbor’s dog howled, and her dark skin glistened in the sun and she looked more like an angel than a cat on the ugly makeshift stage. Shell and I stammered through our lines, embarrassed and laughing. We would rather dissect flowers than go out for the spring musical. But then, we’d rather dissect flowers than do most things.

“Will you need a ride?” Anna asks.

“No,” I say, but then I imagine myself arriving alone to my first day of school in four months. I imagine everyone staring at me as I walk up to the front doors, thinking, *Poor Lacy, poor little orphan girl; first her mother left her, and now she’s lost her dad.* So I say, “I don’t know. Maybe.”



Anna drives a sky-blue 1971 Volkswagen bus. You can hear us coming from a block away, I know. When we pull up to school, kids stare. They all arrive in Toyota Priuses and Camrys, normal cars that don’t make a sound. But I love our blue Volkswagen. We’ve slept in it and cooked in it. We’ve taken it across America. Anna says it’s mine when I get my license. “It’s time for me to settle down, get a sensible vehicle,” she says. But I can’t see her driving anything else.

Shell comes running up, her hair, which she has recently dyed magenta, bouncing and shining with streaks of gold in the sun.

“Hey,” she says, and she flashes a smile at Anna. I jump out of the bus. “Welcome back, Lacy,” Shell says, but she rolls her eyes because she thinks I’m so crazy to want to be here. Already, though, school feels like normal to me, like cheese dogs and science lab, not frozen veggie casseroles we’ll defrost and put on our plates but not eat, not layers of dust on the neck of my dad’s guitar.

“Hi, Shell. Bye, Anna,” I say, rolling the window back up. You can’t open the passenger seat door from the inside, so you have to roll down the window and stick your arm out to access the handle on the outside of the door. “Thanks for the ride.”

“My pleasure,” Anna says. “Good luck.”

I link arms with Shell and we head inside.



We push open the glass double doors, and in a whoosh, the stale air from the heater pumps into my face. The halls are still pretty empty, but they won’t be for long. I hear footsteps on the linoleum, a slamming locker, a high-pitched giggle like a joke or imitation. My heart starts to pound and my palms sweat. I wipe them on my jeans. Just like that, I’m not sure exactly how I thought this would feel like normal.

The last time I was here, my father was alive and I was just like everyone else. My mom had left, but so what; moms leave. Now, though, everything’s different, and maybe everyone will treat me weird. Maybe no one will know what to say, so they won’t say anything at all. Shell walks close beside me so our arms touch. I pretend the friction from our arm hairs is a force field no one can penetrate.

Then Mechelle and some of her theater friends round the corner, and when she sees me, Mechelle tilts her head and opens her arms and hugs me, and her friend Todd throws his arms around us both and kind of jumps up and down. And everyone around us is laughing and talking and no one is treating me different at all. Some girl I only know by sight offers me a piece of gum, and I take it. When Zach comes around the corner and sees me, he grins his funny gap-toothed grin and punches me in the gut, so I'll know he's not feeling sorry for me. It's a very light punch, but I know what he's doing: letting me know I'm still just weird old Lacy to him, the girl who prefers cataloguing plants to ordering clothes from catalogues. I punch him back, just a tiny bit harder, so he'll know he doesn't have to be delicate with me.

"Hey, Science Freak," he says. "Chemistry hasn't been the same since you left. There's no one smarter than Mr. Ramsy anymore, so he can say anything and we have no choice but to believe him. I think even he misses you correcting him every few minutes."

"I don't correct him every few minutes!"

"Once a day at least."

"Well, yeah."

"He almost got in trouble the other day. Abram tried correcting him on something, and Mr. Ramsy goes 'Can I call you Camel Jockey?'"

"Are you serious?" I throw my extra books into my locker, and we start walking together to class.

"Yeah, but Abram was just like 'Can I call you Imperialistic Pig?' And everyone laughed and it was over."

“He probably could have gotten fired for that.”

“I know. He probably should’ve. He’s such a racist.”

“I know, and he doesn’t know anything about chemistry, either.”

I say that, and it’s true that Mr. Ramsy gets a lot of his facts mixed up. It’s also true that we have a boy named Tuong in the class, and Mr. Ramsy is always telling this totally unfunny joke where Tuong’s parents drop a fork on the ground and decide to name their kid whatever sound the fork makes. He’d already told that joke at least ten times before I left to homeschool. He’s kind of a jerk, but none of us takes him too seriously and I don’t think he means any harm really. He’s kind of just not very smart. And the fact is, in spite of Mr. Ramsy, I absolutely love chemistry. I even just love being inside the classroom, with its huge periodic table and the lab stations and Bunsen burners. I can almost pretend I’m a real scientist when I’m in there.

Zach and I are almost to class now and I wish I could slow down and we could keep talking, but it’s too late. We part as soon as we get inside the door.

“See you after class,” Zach says, and he goes to his seat at the back of the room. I take my old seat near the front next to Mechelle, and she pinches me and I smile. She and Shell are the only ones who know that I like Zach, that I have ever since we had to do an oral report together as our final last year in French. We could choose any topic we wanted, and he wanted to do Anne Frank. I think I wanted to do the report on French cheese or something. Anne Frank was a much cooler idea, and he was so sweet about the whole thing. I think he may have been a tiny bit in love with Anne, which is probably why I fell a tiny bit in love with him. Sometimes I think he likes me back. But so far, neither of us has

made a move. I'm waiting for him to do it. I'd be mortified if I let him know I liked him that way and it turned out it was all in my head. He'd be like, "Let's be friends," and I'd die.

We spend the period identifying isotopes. I think it's so cool how, in chemistry, everything is a symbol for something else. The old alchemical symbol for gold looks like a punk rock eyeball or a baby bird. Everything fits together and you get to wade through this amazing microscopic world of atoms and molecules to solve the ancient riddles, and everything has an answer. Alchemy — turning base metals to gold, the transformation of something ordinary into something extraordinary. One bucketful of water contains more atoms than there are bucketsful of water in the Atlantic Ocean. It's just like magic. Diamond and graphite are both pure carbon. If that is true, then anything is possible. For a whole hour, I don't think once about my father. When the bell rings, it's like having to leave Wonderland.

Second-period algebra sludges by, with Mr. Garcia talking about probability and statistics, but in French we get to watch an old TV show called *Le Professeur* and in English we get to write haiku. I write about last summer: We climbed to the top / of Monkey Face in August / bright Perseid sky. At lunch, Zach is waiting for me at my locker.

"Eat with me?" he asks.

"Sure." I smile apologetically at Shell and Mechelle, and they raise their eyebrows and purse their lips and smile.

I order pepperoni pizza for lunch, and we take our lunches to the quad where we sit on the grass against a wall. I take a bite of my pizza. It is greasy and delicious after four months of vegetarian health food.

“So I’ve kind of gotten behind in chemistry,” Zach tells me. “My mom’s pissed. She wants me to get a tutor.”

“Oh.” I put my pizza down on the grass. “Well, I could help you.”

“Really? Like maybe I could come to your house a couple afternoons a week and you could help me catch up?”

“Sure,” I say. “That would be great. I mean, that will be fun.”

“Awesome. Thanks, Lacy.”

“My pleasure.” We smile at each other. I take a bite of my pizza, but I can’t even taste it anymore. After the bell rings, I float through the rest of my day. Gym isn’t as dreadful as usual because we are doing a unit on Tai Chi. My friends and I laugh all the way through it, making rainbows with our hands. It is good. It is good to be back.



I take the long way home from school so I can walk along the creek. The blackberries are blooming and will be ready to eat in a month. The invasive periwinkle blooms too, its purple flowers like the spring sky at night. Over two hundred years ago, the Maidu Indians lived right here along this creek in their houses made of bark. I think about them, the Maidu, and how much they knew about the natural world. Soap plant and sweet Indian potatoes, deer grass and yerba santa. They were immune to poison oak, so they cooked their bread in the leaves and wove the branches of the poison oak into baskets. I wish I knew everything there was to know about plants. I know a lot, but there are so many secrets I have still to uncover. I’ve read a ton of books, but I wish a real live Maidu woman would come out of the bushes and teach me. We’d weave a basket to carry sorrow for all the old ways that are

gone, and then another one to carry hope. I smile at the thought — a beautifully woven hope basket.

When I'm almost home, I leave the creek and cross to the edge of the park. White blossoms from the cherry trees whip through the air like snow. Across the street, I can see Anna's blond hair blowing like streaks of lightning across the sky — she is gardening in spite of the wind. I cross the street and she stands, brushing dirt from her overalls.

"Hey, Lace," she says, shaking out her hands. "How was the first day back?"

"Great. I'm going to start tutoring someone, okay? My friend Zach. I guess he's gotten behind in chemistry. Is it okay if he starts coming over after school?"

"After school?"

"Yeah. Just a couple times a week." I don't wait for her to answer. I know Anna won't mind. I drop my backpack and kneel to pick up my kitty cat, Mr. Murm. "Hey, Mr. Mr." I nuzzle my nose in his fur, but he leaps from my arms. "What's with him? He seems spooked."

Anna watches Mr. Murm as he dashes around the side of the house, into the backyard.

I pluck a peapod from the vine and split it with my fingernail. I always eat the whole thing, but in sections — skin first.

"The butter lettuce is looking really good. Do you want me to harvest some for tonight's dinner?" She usually asks me to prepare a side dish, something from the garden. I pop the peas single file into my mouth.

"I thought we'd go out for dinner," Anna says, not quite meeting my eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“We should go inside,” she says, and I notice the quick dart of her eyes. Suddenly the wind stills, and yet I feel an even sharper chill: Something is wrong; there’s something dangerous in the air. I head up the steps to the porch, trying to figure it out. But it isn’t until I get inside the house and smell her perfume that I realize what it is. My real mother, Cheyenne, has come back.

The smell of perfume (Bad Apple by Marie-Andre Bourdieu) mingles with the incense Anna is burning and I retch. Anna follows me inside and coughs.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I thought the incense would mask the smell.”

The air in the living room even tastes like my mother. I feel like she’s back inside me already, her taste in my mouth, her smell all around us. I walk into the kitchen and pour myself a glass of iced tea. “What did she want?” I ask, stones in my stomach.

Anna reaches behind herself and grasps the counter with both hands. “Well,” she says. “She wants you.”