

PRAISE FOR
BEAUTIFUL CREATURES

An Instant **NEW YORK TIMES** Bestseller
An **AMAZON** #1 Teen Best Book of the Year
A **BORDERS** Original Voices Selection
An **INDIE NEXT LIST** Selection
A **WILLIAM C. MORRIS YA DEBUT AWARD** Finalist
A **NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY** Book for the Teen Age

“In the Gothic tradition of Anne Rice. . . Give this to fans of
Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* or HBO’s *True Blood* series.”
— **SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL**

“Gorgeously crafted, atmospheric, and original.”
— **MELISSA MARR**, *New York Times* bestselling
author of **WICKED LOVELY**

“Smart, textured and romantic. . . Ethan’s wry narrative
voice will resonate with readers of John Green as well as
the hordes of supernatural-romance fans looking
for the next book to sink their teeth into.”
— **KIRKUS REVIEWS**

“A lush Southern gothic.”
— **HOLLY BLACK**, *New York Times* bestselling
author of **TITHE: A MODERN FAERIE TALE**

“[Readers] will be swept up by the haunting and detailed
atmosphere, the conventions and strictures of Southern life,
and a compelling and dimensional mythology.”
— **PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**

“A hauntingly delicious dark fantasy.”
— CASSANDRA CLARE, *New York Times* bestselling
author of **CITY OF BONES**

“This book has it all: a creepy setting, a deadly curse,
reincarnation, spells, witchcraft and voodoo, plus characters
that simply will not let the reader put the book down until
finished. . . . Who could ask for more? A sequel? Please!”
— VOYA

“Like a thick, hot Carolina summer, this story seeps
into you until it’s all you can think about.”
— CARRIE RYAN, *New York Times* bestselling
author of **THE FOREST OF HANDS AND TEETH**

“Otherworldly.”
— BOOKLIST

“A multi-faceted Southern gothic saga that culminates
in a dramatic good-versus-evil showdown.”
— HORN BOOK GUIDE

“Exactly the right blend of dark suspense and romance.”
— NEWARK STAR LEDGER

“*Beautiful Creatures* is a page-turner that will keep
readers up until the wee hours of the morning.”
— DESERET NEWS

BEAUTIFUL CREATURES

BY

KAMI GARCIA &
MARGARET STOHL



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
New York • Boston

Copyright © 2009 by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl
All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976,
no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or
by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written
permission of the publisher.

Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group
237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017
Visit our website at www.lb-teens.com

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.
The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

First Paperback Edition: September 2010
First published in hardcover in December 2009 by Little, Brown and Company

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real
persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the authors. To the extent any
real names of individuals, locations, or organizations are included in the book, they are
used fictitiously and not intended to be taken otherwise.

STRENGTH TO LOVE and LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL speeches by DR.
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. copyright © 1963 by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; copyright
renewed © 1991 by Coretta Scott King. Reprinted by arrangement with the heirs to the estate
of Martin Luther King Jr., c/o Writers House New York, NY.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Garcia, Kami.
Beautiful creatures / by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl.—1st ed.
p. cm.

Summary: In a small South Carolina town, where it seems little has changed since the Civil
War, sixteen-year-old Ethan is powerfully drawn to Lena, a new classmate with whom he
shares a psychic connection and whose family hides a dark secret that may be revealed on
her sixteenth birthday.

ISBN 978-0-316-04267-3 (hc) / ISBN 978-0-316-07703-3 (pb)

[1. Supernatural—Fiction. 2. Psychic ability—Fiction. 3. Love—Fiction. 4. High
schools—Fiction. 5. Schools—Fiction. 6. Dreams—Fiction. 7. Recluses—Fiction.
8. South Carolina—Fiction. 9. South Carolina—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—
Fiction.] I. Stohl, Margaret, 1967– II. Title.

PZ7.G155627Bed 2010 [Fic]—dc22 2008051306

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

RRD-C

Book design by David Caplan
Printed in the United States of America

For
Nick & Stella
Emma, May & Kate
and
all our casters & outcasters, everywhere.
There are more of us than you think.





*Darkness cannot drive out darkness;
only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate;
only love can do that.*

— MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



BEFORE

The Middle of Nowhere

There were only two kinds of people in our town. “The stupid and the stuck,” my father had affectionately classified our neighbors. “The ones who are bound to stay or too dumb to go. Everyone else finds a way out.” There was no question which one he was, but I’d never had the courage to ask why. My father was a writer, and we lived in Gatlin, South Carolina, because the Wates always had, since my great-great-great-great-granddad, Ellis Wate, fought and died on the other side of the Santee River during the Civil War.

Only folks down here didn’t call it the Civil War. Everyone under the age of sixty called it the War Between the States, while everyone over sixty called it the War of Northern Aggression, as if somehow the North had baited the South into war over a bad bale of cotton. Everyone, that is, except my family. We called it the Civil War.

Just another reason I couldn't wait to get out of here.

Gatlin wasn't like the small towns you saw in the movies, unless it was a movie from about fifty years ago. We were too far from Charleston to have a Starbucks or a McDonald's. All we had was a Dar-ee Keen, since the Gentrys were too cheap to buy all new letters when they bought the Dairy King. The library still had a card catalog, the high school still had chalkboards, and our community pool was Lake Moultrie, warm brown water and all. You could see a movie at the Cineplex about the same time it came out on DVD, but you had to hitch a ride over to Summerville, by the community college. The shops were on Main, the good houses were on River, and everyone else lived south of Route 9, where the pavement disintegrated into chunky concrete stubble—terrible for walking, but perfect for throwing at angry possums, the meanest animals alive. You never saw that in the movies.

Gatlin wasn't a complicated place; Gatlin was Gatlin. The neighbors kept watch from their porches in the unbearable heat, sweltering in plain sight. But there was no point. Nothing ever changed. Tomorrow would be the first day of school, my sophomore year at Stonewall Jackson High, and I already knew everything that was going to happen—where I would sit, who I would talk to, the jokes, the girls, who would park where.

There were no surprises in Gatlin County. We were pretty much the epicenter of the middle of nowhere.

At least, that's what I thought, when I closed my battered copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, clicked off my iPod, and turned out the light on the last night of summer.

Turns out, I couldn't have been more wrong.
There was a curse.
There was a girl.
And in the end, there was a grave.
I never even saw it coming.

9.02

Dream On

Falling.

I was free falling, tumbling through the air.

“Ethan!”

She called to me, and just the sound of her voice made my heart race.

“Help me!”

She was falling, too. I stretched out my arm, trying to catch her. I reached out, but all I caught was air. There was no ground beneath my feet, and I was clawing at mud. We touched fingertips and I saw green sparks in the darkness.

Then she slipped through my fingers, and all I could feel was loss.

Lemons and rosemary. I could smell her, even then.

But I couldn't catch her.

And I couldn't live without her.



I sat up with a jerk, trying to catch my breath.

“Ethan Wate! Wake up! I won’t have you bein’ late on the first day a school.” I could hear Amma’s voice calling from downstairs.

My eyes focused on a patch of dim light in the darkness. I could hear the distant drum of the rain against our old plantation shutters. It must be raining. It must be morning. I must be in my room.

My room was hot and damp, from the rain. Why was my window open?

My head was throbbing. I fell back down on the bed, and the dream receded as it always did. I was safe in my room, in our ancient house, in the same creaking mahogany bed where six generations of Wates had probably slept before me, where people didn’t fall through black holes made of mud, and nothing ever actually happened.

I stared up at my plaster ceiling, painted the color of the sky to keep the carpenter bees from nesting. What was wrong with me?

I’d been having the dream for months now. Even though I couldn’t remember all of it, the part I remembered was always the same. The girl was falling. I was falling. I had to hold on, but I couldn’t. If I let go, something terrible would happen to her. But that’s the thing. I couldn’t let go. I couldn’t lose her. It was like I was in love with her, even though I didn’t know her. Kind of like love *before* first sight.

Which seemed crazy because she was just a girl in a dream. I didn’t even know what she looked like. I had been having the dream for months, but in all that time I had never seen her face,

or I couldn't remember it. All I knew was that I had the same sick feeling inside every time I lost her. She slipped through my fingers, and my stomach dropped right out of me—the way you feel when you're on a roller coaster and the car takes a big drop.

Butterflies in your stomach. That was such a crappy metaphor. More like killer bees.

Maybe I was losing it, or maybe I just needed a shower. My earphones were still around my neck, and when I glanced down at my iPod, I saw a song I didn't recognize.

Sixteen Moons.

What was that? I clicked on it. The melody was haunting. I couldn't place the voice, but I felt like I'd heard it before.

*Sixteen moons, sixteen years
Sixteen of your deepest fears
Sixteen times you dreamed my tears
Falling, falling through the years . . .*

It was moody, creepy—almost hypnotic.

“Ethan Lawson Wate!” I could hear Amma calling up over the music.

I switched it off and sat up in bed, yanking back the covers. My sheets felt like they were full of sand, but I knew better.

It was dirt. And my fingernails were caked with black mud, just like the last time I had the dream.

I crumpled up the sheet, pushing it down in the hamper under yesterday's sweaty practice jersey. I got in the shower and tried to forget about it as I scrubbed my hands, and the last black bits of my dream disappeared down the drain. If I didn't

think about it, it wasn't happening. That was my approach to most things the past few months.

But not when it came to her. I couldn't help it. I always thought about her. I kept coming back to that same dream, even though I couldn't explain it. So that was my secret, all there was to tell. I was sixteen years old, I was falling in love with a girl who didn't exist, and I was slowly losing my mind.

No matter how hard I scrubbed, I couldn't get my heart to stop pounding. And over the smell of the Ivory soap and the Stop & Shop shampoo, I could still smell it. Just barely, but I knew it was there.

Lemons and rosemary.

I came downstairs to the reassuring sameness of everything. At the breakfast table, Amma slid the same old blue and white china plate—Dragonware, my mom had called it—of fried eggs, bacon, buttered toast, and grits in front of me. Amma was our housekeeper, more like my grandmother, except she was smarter and more ornery than my real grandmother. Amma had practically raised me, and she felt it was her personal mission to grow me another foot or so, even though I was already 6'2". This morning I was strangely starving, like I hadn't eaten in a week. I shoveled an egg and two pieces of bacon off my plate, feeling better already. I grinned at her with my mouth full.

"Don't hold out on me, Amma. It's the first day of school." She slammed a giant glass of OJ and a bigger one of milk—whole milk, the only kind we drink around here—in front of me.

"We out of chocolate milk?" I drank chocolate milk the way some people drank Coke or coffee. Even in the morning, I was always looking for my next sugar fix.

“A. C. C. L. I. M. A. T. E.” Amma had a crossword for everything, the bigger the better, and liked to use them. The way she spelled the words out on you letter by letter, it felt like she was paddling you in the head, every time. “As in, get used to it. And don’t you think about settin’ one foot out that door till you drink the milk I gave you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I see you dressed up.” I hadn’t. I was wearing jeans and a faded T-shirt, like I did most days. They all said different things; today it was *Harley Davidson*. And the same black Chuck Taylors I’d had going on three years now.

“I thought you were gonna cut that hair.” She said it like a scolding, but I recognized it for what it really was: plain old affection.

“When did I say that?”

“Don’t you know the eyes are the windows to the soul?”

“Maybe I don’t want anyone to have a window into mine.”

Amma punished me with another plate of bacon. She was barely five feet tall and probably even older than the Dragonware, though every birthday she insisted she was turning fifty-three. But Amma was anything but a mild-mannered old lady. She was the absolute authority in my house.

“Well, don’t think you’re goin’ out in this weather with wet hair. I don’t like how this storm feels. Like somethin’ bad’s been kicked up into the wind, and there’s no stoppin’ a day like that. It has a will a its own.”

I rolled my eyes. Amma had her own way of thinking about things. When she was in one of these moods, my mom used to call it going dark—religion and superstition all mixed up, like it can only be in the South. When Amma went dark, it was just

better to stay out of her way. Just like it was better to leave her charms on the windowsills and the dolls she made in the drawers where she put them.

I scooped up another forkful of egg and finished the breakfast of champions—eggs, freezer jam, and bacon, all smashed into a toast sandwich. As I shoved it into my mouth, I glanced down the hallway out of habit. My dad’s study door was already shut. My dad wrote at night and slept on the old sofa in his study all day. It had been like that since my mom died last April. He might as well be a vampire; that’s what my Aunt Caroline had said after she stayed with us that spring. I had probably missed my chance to see him until tomorrow. There was no opening that door once it was closed.

I heard a honk from the street. Link. I grabbed my ratty black backpack and ran out the door into the rain. It could have been seven at night as easily as seven in the morning, that’s how dark the sky was. The weather had been weird for a few days now.

Link’s car, the Beater, was in the street, motor sputtering, music blasting. I’d ridden to school with Link every day since kindergarten, when we became best friends after he gave me half his Twinkie on the bus. I only found out later it had fallen on the floor. Even though we had both gotten our licenses this summer, Link was the one with the car, if you could call it that.

At least the Beater’s engine was drowning out the storm.

Amma stood on the porch, her arms crossed disapprovingly. “Don’t you play that loud music here, Wesley Jefferson Lincoln. Don’t think I won’t call your mamma and tell her what you were doin’ in the basement all summer when you were nine years old.”

Link winced. Not many people called him by his real name, except his mother and Amma. “Yes, ma’am.” The screen door slammed. He laughed, spinning his tires on the wet asphalt as we pulled away from the curb. Like we were making a getaway, which was pretty much how he always drove. Except we never got away.

“What did you do in my basement when you were nine years old?”

“What didn’t I do in your basement when I was nine years old?” Link turned down the music, which was good, because it was terrible and he was about to ask me how I liked it, like he did every day. The tragedy of his band, Who Shot Lincoln, was that none of them could actually play an instrument or sing. But all he could talk about was playing the drums and moving to New York after graduation and record deals that would probably never happen. And by probably, I mean he was more likely to sink a three-pointer, blindfolded and drunk, from the parking lot of the gym.

Link wasn’t about to go to college, but he still had one up on me. He knew what he wanted to do, even if it was a long shot. All I had was a whole shoebox full of college brochures I couldn’t show my dad. I didn’t care which colleges they were, as long as they were at least a thousand miles from Gatlin.

I didn’t want to end up like my dad, living in the same house, in the same small town I’d grown up in, with the same people who had never dreamed their way out of here.



On either side of us, dripping old Victorians lined the street, almost the same as the day they were built over a hundred years ago. My street was called Cotton Bend because these old houses used to back up to miles and miles of plantation cotton fields. Now they just backed up to Route 9, which was about the only thing that had changed around here.

I grabbed a stale doughnut from the box on the floor of the car. “Did you upload a weird song onto my iPod last night?”

“What song? What do you think a this one?” Link turned up his latest demo track.

“I think it needs work. Like all your other songs.” It was the same thing I said every day, more or less.

“Yeah, well, your face will need some work after I give you a good beatin’.” It was the same thing he said every day, more or less.

I flipped through my playlist. “The song, I think it was called something like *Sixteen Moons*.”

“Don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.” It wasn’t there. The song was gone, but I had just listened to it this morning. And I knew I hadn’t imagined it because it was still stuck in my head.

“If you wanna hear a song, I’ll play you a new one.” Link looked down to cue the track.

“Hey, man, keep your eyes on the road.”

But he didn’t look up, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw a strange car pass in front of us. . . .

For a second, the sounds of the road and the rain and Link dissolved into silence, and it was like everything was moving in slow motion. I couldn’t drag my eyes away from the car. It

was just a feeling, not anything I could describe. And then it slid past us, turning the other way.

I didn't recognize the car. I had never seen it before. You can't imagine how impossible that is, because I knew every single car in town. There were no tourists this time of year. They wouldn't take the chance during hurricane season.

This car was long and black, like a hearse. Actually, I was pretty sure it was a hearse.

Maybe it was an omen. Maybe this year was going to be worse than I thought.

"Here it is. 'Black Bandanna.' This song's gonna make me a star."

By the time he looked up, the car was gone.

New Girl

Eight streets. That's how far we had to go to get from Cotton Bend to Jackson High. Turns out I could relive my entire life, going up and down eight streets, and eight streets were just enough to put a strange black hearse out of your mind. Maybe that's why I didn't mention it to Link.

We passed the Stop & Shop, otherwise known as the Stop & Steal. It was the only grocery store in town, and the closest thing we had to a 7-Eleven. So every time you were hanging out with your friends out front, you had to hope you weren't going to run into someone's mom shopping for dinner, or worse, Amma.

I noticed the familiar Grand Prix parked out front. "Uh-oh. Fatty's camped out already." He was sitting in the driver's seat, reading *The Stars and Stripes*.

"Maybe he didn't see us." Link was watching the rearview mirror, tense.

“Maybe we’re screwed.”

Fatty was Stonewall Jackson High School’s truant officer, as well as a proud member of the Gatlin police force. His girlfriend, Amanda, worked at the Stop & Steal, and Fatty was parked out front most mornings, waiting for the baked goods to be delivered. Which was pretty inconvenient if you were always late, like Link and me.

You couldn’t go to Jackson High without knowing Fatty’s routine as well as your own class schedule. Today, Fatty waved us on, without even looking up from the sports section. He was giving us a pass.

“Sports section and a sticky bun. Know what that means.”

“We’ve got five minutes.”



We rolled the Beater into the school parking lot in neutral, hoping to slink past the attendance office unnoticed. But it was still pouring outside, so by the time we got into the building, we were soaked and our sneakers were squeaking so loud we might as well have just stopped in there anyway.

“Ethan Wate! Wesley Lincoln!”

We stood dripping in the office, waiting for our detention slips.

“Late for the first day a school. Your mamma is goin’ to have a few choice words for you, Mr. Lincoln. And don’t you look so smug, Mr. Wate. Amma’s gonna tan your hide.”

Miss Hester was right. Amma would know I’d shown up late about five minutes from now, if she didn’t already. That’s what it was like around here. My mom used to say Carlton Eaton, the postmaster, read any letter that looked half-interesting. He

didn't even bother to seal them back up anymore. It's not like there was any actual news. Every house had its secrets, but everyone on the street knew them. Even that was no secret.

"Miss Hester, I was just drivin' slow, on account a the rain." Link tried to turn on the charm. Miss Hester pulled down her glasses a little and looked back at Link, uncharmed. The little chain that held her glasses around her neck swung back and forth.

"I don't have time to chat with you boys right now. I'm busy fillin' out your detention slips, which is where you'll be spendin' this afternoon," she said, as she handed each of us our blue slip.

She was busy all right. You could smell the nail polish before we even turned the corner. Welcome back.



In Gatlin, the first day of school never really changes. The teachers, who all knew you from church, decided if you were stupid or smart by the time you were in kindergarten. I was smart because my parents were professors. Link was stupid, because he crunched up the pages of the Good Book during Scripture Chase, and threw up once during the Christmas pageant. Because I was smart, I got good grades on my papers; because Link was stupid, he got bad ones. I guess nobody bothered to read them. Sometimes I wrote random stuff in the middle of my essays, just to see if my teachers would say anything. No one ever did.

Unfortunately, the same principle didn't apply to multiple-choice tests. In first-period English, I discovered my seven-hundred-year-old teacher, whose name really was Mrs. English, had expected us to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* over the summer,

so I flunked the first quiz. Great. I had read the book about two years ago. It was one of my mom's favorites, but that was a while ago and I was fuzzy on the details.

A little-known fact about me: I read all the time. Books were the one thing that got me out of Gatlin, even if it was only for a little while. I had a map on my wall, and every time I read about a place I wanted to go, I marked it on the map. New York was *Catcher in the Rye*. *Into the Wild* got me to Alaska. When I read *On the Road*, I added Chicago, Denver, L.A., and Mexico City. Kerouac could get you pretty much everywhere. Every few months, I drew a line to connect the marks. A thin green line I'd follow on a road trip, the summer before college, if I ever got out of this town. I kept the map and the reading thing to myself. Around here, books and basketball didn't mix.

Chemistry wasn't much better. Mr. Hollenback doomed me to be lab partners with Ethan-Hating Emily, also known as Emily Asher, who had despised me ever since the formal last year, when I made the mistake of wearing my Chuck Taylors with my tux and letting my dad drive us in the rusty Volvo. The one broken window that permanently wouldn't roll up had destroyed her perfectly curled blond prom-hair, and by the time we got to the gym she looked like Marie Antoinette with bedhead. Emily didn't speak to me for the rest of the night and sent Savannah Snow to dump me three steps from the punch bowl. That was pretty much the end of that.

It was a never-ending source of amusement for the guys, who kept expecting us to get back together. The thing they didn't know was, I wasn't into girls like Emily. She was pretty, but that was it. And looking at her didn't make up for having to listen to

what came out of her mouth. I wanted someone different, someone I could talk to about something other than parties and getting crowned at winter formal. A girl who was smart, or funny, or at least a decent lab partner.

Maybe a girl like that was the real dream, but a dream was still better than a nightmare. Even if the nightmare was wearing a cheerleading skirt.

I survived chemistry, but my day only got worse from there. Apparently, I was taking U.S. History again this year, which was the only history taught at Jackson, making the name redundant. I would be spending my second consecutive year studying the “War of Northern Aggression” with Mr. Lee, no relation. But as we all knew, in spirit Mr. Lee and the famous Confederate general were one and the same. Mr. Lee was one of the few teachers who actually hated me. Last year, on a dare from Link, I had written a paper called “The War of Southern Aggression,” and Mr. Lee had given me a D. Guess the teachers actually did read the papers sometimes, after all.

I found a seat in the back next to Link, who was busy copying notes from whatever class he had slept through before this one. But he stopped writing as soon as I sat down. “Dude, did you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“There’s a new girl at Jackson.”

“There are a ton of new girls, a whole freshman class of them, moron.”

“I’m not talkin’ about the freshmen. There’s a new girl in *our* class.” At any other high school, a new girl in the sophomore class wouldn’t be news. But this was Jackson, and we hadn’t had a new girl in school since third grade, when Kelly Wix moved in

with her grandparents after her dad was arrested for running a gambling operation out of their basement in Lake City.

“Who is she?”

“Don’t know. I’ve got civics second period with all the band geeks, and they didn’t know anythin’ except she plays the violin, or somethin’. Wonder if she’s hot.” Link had a one-track mind, like most guys. The difference was, Link’s track led directly to his mouth.

“So she’s a band geek?”

“No. A musician. Maybe she shares my love a classical music.”

“Classical music?” The only classical music Link had ever heard was in the dentist’s office.

“You know, the classics. Pink Floyd. Black Sabbath. The Stones.” I started laughing.

“Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Wate. I’m sorry to interrupt your conversation, but I’d like to get started if it’s a’right with you boys.” Mr. Lee’s tone was just as sarcastic as last year, and his greasy comb-over and pit stains just as bad. He passed out copies of the same syllabus he had probably been using for ten years. Participating in an actual Civil War reenactment would be required. Of course it would. I could just borrow a uniform from one of my relatives who participated in reenactments for fun on the weekends. Lucky me.

After the bell rang, Link and I hung out in the hall by our lockers, hoping to get a look at the new girl. To hear him talk, she was already his future soul mate and band mate and probably a few other kinds of mates I didn’t even want to hear about. But the only thing we got a look at was too much of Charlotte Chase in a jean skirt two sizes too small. Which meant we weren’t going to find out anything until lunch, because our next

class was ASL, American Sign Language, and it was strictly no talking allowed. No one was good enough at signing to even spell “new girl,” especially since ASL was the one class we had in common with the rest of the Jackson basketball team.

I’d been on the team since eighth grade, when I grew six inches in one summer and ended up at least a head taller than everyone else in my class. Besides, you had to do something normal when both of your parents were professors. It turned out I was good at basketball. I always seemed to know where the players on the other team were going to pass the ball, and it gave me a place to sit in the cafeteria every day. At Jackson, that was worth something.

Today that seat was worth even more because Shawn Bishop, our point guard, had actually seen the new girl. Link asked the only question that mattered to any of them. “So, is she hot?”

“Pretty hot.”

“Savannah Snow hot?”

As if on cue, Savannah—the standard by which all other girls at Jackson were measured—walked into the cafeteria, arm in arm with Ethan-Hating Emily, and we all watched because Savannah was 5'8" worth of the most perfect legs you’ve ever seen. Emily and Savannah were almost one person, even when they weren’t in their cheerleading uniforms. Blond hair, fake tans, flip-flops, and jean skirts so short they could pass for belts. Savannah was the legs, but Emily was the one all the guys tried to get a look at in her bikini top, at the lake in the summer. They never seemed to have any books, just tiny metallic bags tucked under one arm, with barely enough room for a cell phone, for the few occasions when Emily actually stopped texting.

Their differences boiled down to their respective positions on

the cheer squad. Savannah was the captain, and a base: one of the girls who held up two more tiers of cheerleaders in the Wildcats' famous pyramid. Emily was a flyer, the girl at the top of the pyramid, the one thrown five or six feet into the air to complete a flip or some other crazy cheer stunt that could easily result in a broken neck. Emily would risk anything to stay on top of that pyramid. Savannah didn't need to. When Emily got tossed, the pyramid went on fine without her. When Savannah moved an inch, the whole thing came tumbling down.

Ethan-Hating Emily noticed us staring and scowled at me. The guys laughed. Emory Watkins clapped a hand on my back. "In like sin, Wate. You know Emily, the more she glares, the more she cares."

I didn't want to think about Emily today. I wanted to think about the opposite of Emily. Ever since Link had brought it up in history, it had stuck with me. The new girl. The possibility of someone different, from somewhere different. Maybe someone with a bigger life than ours, and, I guess, mine.

Maybe even someone I'd dreamed about. I knew it was a fantasy, but I wanted to believe it.

"So did y'all hear about the new girl?" Savannah sat down on Earl Petty's lap. Earl was our team captain and Savannah's on-again, off-again boyfriend. Right now, they were on. He rubbed his hands over her orangey-colored legs, just high enough so you didn't know where to look.

"Shawn was just fillin' us in. Says she's hot. You gonna put her on the squad?" Link grabbed a couple of Tater Tots off my tray.

"Hardly. You should see what she's wearin'." Strike One.

"And how pale she is." Strike Two. You could never be too thin or too tan, as far as Savannah was concerned.

Emily sat down next to Emory, leaning over the table just a little too much. “Did he tell you *who* she is?”

“What do you mean?”

Emily paused for dramatic effect.

“She’s Old Man Ravenwood’s niece.”

She didn’t need the pause for this one. It was like she had sucked the air right out of the room. A couple of the guys started laughing. They thought she was kidding, but I could tell she wasn’t.

Strike Three. She was out. So far out, I couldn’t even picture her anymore. The possibility of my dream girl showing up disappeared before I could even imagine our first date. I was doomed to three more years of Emily Ashers.

Macon Melchizedek Ravenwood was the town shut-in. Let’s just say, I remembered enough of *To Kill a Mockingbird* to know Old Man Ravenwood made Boo Radley look like a social butterfly. He lived in a run-down old house, on Gatlin’s oldest and most infamous plantation, and I don’t think anyone in town had seen him since before I was born, maybe longer.

“Are you serious?” asked Link.

“Totally. Carlton Eaton told my mom yesterday when he brought by our mail.”

Savannah nodded. “My mamma heard the same thing. She moved in with Old Man Ravenwood a couple a days ago, from Virginia, or Maryland, I don’t remember.”

They all kept talking about her, her clothes and her hair and her uncle and what a freak she probably was. That’s the thing I hated most about Gatlin. The way everyone had something to say about everything you said or did or, in this case, wore. I just stared at the noodles on my tray, swimming in runny orange liquid that didn’t look much like cheese.

Two years, eight months, and counting. I had to get out of this town.



After school, the gym was being used for cheerleading tryouts. The rain had finally let up, so basketball practice was on the outside court, with its cracked concrete and bent rims and puddles of water from the morning rain. You had to be careful not to hit the fissure that ran down the middle like the Grand Canyon. Aside from that, you could almost see the whole parking lot from the court, and watch most of the prime social action of Jackson High while you warmed up.

Today I had the hot hand. I was seven-for-seven from the free throw line, but so was Earl, matching me shot for shot.

Swish. Eight. It seemed like I could just look at the net, and the ball would sail through. Some days were like that.

Swish. Nine. Earl was annoyed. I could tell by the way he was bouncing the ball harder and harder every time I made a shot. He was our other center. Our unspoken agreement was: I let him be in charge, and he didn't hassle me if I didn't feel like hanging out at the Stop & Steal every day after practice. There were only so many ways you could talk about the same girls and so many Slim Jims you could eat.

Swish. Ten. I couldn't miss. Maybe it was just genetics. Maybe it was something else. I hadn't figured it out, but since my mom died, I had stopped trying. It was a wonder I made it to practice at all.

Swish. Eleven. Earl grunted behind me, bouncing the ball even harder. I tried not to smile and looked over to the parking

lot as I took the next shot. I saw a tangle of long black hair, behind the wheel of a long black car.

A hearse. I froze.

Then, she turned, and through the open window, I could see a girl looking in my direction. At least, I thought I could. The basketball hit the rim, and bounced off toward the fence. Behind me, I heard the familiar sound.

Swish. Twelve. Earl Petty could relax.

As the car pulled away, I looked down the court. The rest of the guys were standing there, like they'd just seen a ghost.

"Was that—?"

Billy Watts, our forward, nodded, holding onto the chain-link fence with one hand. "Old Man Ravenwood's niece."

Shawn tossed the ball at him. "Yep. Just like they said. Drivin' his hearse."

Emory shook his head. "She's hot all right. What a waste."

They went back to playing ball, but by the time Earl took his next shot, it had started to rain again. Thirty seconds later, we were caught in a downpour, the heaviest rain we'd seen all day. I stood there, letting the rain hammer down on me. My wet hair hung in my eyes, blocking out the rest of the school, the team.

The bad omen wasn't just a hearse. It was a girl.

For a few minutes, I had let myself hope. That maybe this year wouldn't be just like every other year, that something would change. That I would have someone to talk to, someone who really got me.

But all I had was a good day on the court, and that had never been enough.

A Hole in the Sky

Fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, string beans, and biscuits—all sitting angry and cold and congealed on the stove where Amma had left them. Usually, she kept my dinner warm for me until I got home from practice, but not today. I was in a lot of trouble. Amma was furious, sitting at the table eating Red Hots, and scratching away at the *New York Times* crossword. My dad secretly subscribed to the Sunday edition, because the ones in *The Stars and Stripes* had too many spelling mistakes, and the ones in *Reader's Digest* were too short. I don't know how he got it past Carlton Eaton, who would've made sure the whole town knew we were too good for *The Stars and Stripes*, but there was nothing my dad wouldn't do for Amma.

She slid the plate in my direction, looking at me without looking at me. I shoveled cold mashed potatoes and chicken into my mouth. There was nothing Amma hated like food left on

your plate. I tried to keep my distance from the point of her special black # 2 pencil, used only for her crosswords, kept so sharp it could actually draw blood. Tonight it might.

I listened to the steady patter of rain on the roof. There wasn't another sound in the room. Amma rapped her pencil on the table.

"Nine letters. Confinement or pain exacted for wrongdoin'." She shot me another look. I shoveled a spoonful of potatoes into my mouth. I knew what was coming. Nine across.

"C. A. S. T. I. G. A. T. E. As in, punish. As in, if you can't get yourself to school on time, you won't be leavin' this house."

I wondered who had called to tell her I was late, or more likely who hadn't called. She sharpened her pencil, even though it was already sharp, grinding it into her old automatic sharpener on the counter. She was still pointedly Not Looking at me, which was even worse than staring me right in the eye.

I walked over to where she was grinding and put my arm around her, giving her a good squeeze. "Come on, Amma. Don't be mad. It was pouring this morning. You wouldn't want us speeding in the rain, would you?"

She raised an eyebrow, but her expression softened. "Well, it looks like it'll be rainin' from now until the day after you cut that hair, so you better figure out a way to get yourself to school before that bell rings."

"Yes, ma'am." I gave her one last squeeze and went back to my cold potatoes. "You'll never believe what happened today. We got a new girl in our class." I don't know why I said it. I guess it was still on my mind.

"You think I don't know about Lena Duchannes?" I choked on my biscuit. Lena Duchannes. Pronounced, in the South, to

rhyme with rain. The way Amma rolled it out, you would have thought the word had an extra syllable. Du-kay-yane.

“Is that her name? Lena?”

Amma pushed a glass of chocolate milk in my direction. “Yes and no and it’s none a your business. You shouldn’t be messin’ with things you don’t know anything about, Ethan Wate.”

Amma always spoke in riddles, and she never gave you anything more than that. I hadn’t been to her house in Wader’s Creek since I was a kid, but I knew most of the people in town had. Amma was the most respected tarot card reader within a hundred miles of Gatlin, just like her mother before her and her grandmother before her. Six generations of card readers. Gatlin was full of God-fearing Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals, but they couldn’t resist the lure of the cards, the possibility of changing the course of their own destiny. Because that’s what they believed a powerful reader could do. And Amma was nothing if not a force to be reckoned with.

Sometimes I’d find one of her homemade charms in my sock drawer or hanging above the door of my father’s study. I had only asked what they were for once. My dad teased Amma whenever he found one, but I noticed that he never took any of them down. “Better safe than sorry.” I guess he meant safe from Amma, who could make you plenty sorry.

“Did you hear anything else about her?”

“You watch yourself. One day you’re gonna pick a hole in the sky and the universe is gonna fall right through. Then we’ll all be in a fix.”

My father shuffled into the kitchen in his pajamas. He poured himself a cup of coffee and took a box of Shredded Wheat out of the pantry. I could see the yellow wax earplugs still stuck in

his ears. The Shredded Wheat meant he was about to start his day. The earplugs meant it hadn't really started yet.

I leaned over and whispered to Amma, "What did you hear?"

She yanked my plate away and took it to the sink. She rinsed some bones that looked like pork shoulder, which was weird since we'd had chicken tonight, and put them on a plate. "That's none a your concern. What I'd like to know is why you're so interested."

I shrugged. "I'm not, really. Just curious."

"You know what they say about curiosity." She stuck a fork in my piece of buttermilk pie. Then she shot me the Look, and was gone.

Even my father noticed the kitchen door swinging in her wake, and pulled an earplug out of one ear. "How was school?"

"Fine."

"What did you do to Amma?"

"I was late for school."

He studied my face. I studied his.

"Number 2?"

I nodded.

"Sharp?"

"Started out sharp and then she sharpened it." I sighed. My dad almost smiled, which was rare. I felt a surge of relief, maybe even accomplishment.

"Know how many times I sat at this old table while she pulled a pencil on me when I was a kid?" he asked, though it wasn't really a question. The table, nicked and flecked with paint and glue and marker from all the Wates leading up to me, was one of the oldest things in the house.

I smiled. My dad picked up his cereal bowl and waved his

spoon in my direction. Amma had raised my father, a fact I'd been reminded of every time I even thought about sassing her when I was a kid.

"M. Y. R. I. A. D." He spelled out the word as he dumped his bowl into the sink. "P. L. E. T. H. O. R. A. As in, more than you, Ethan Wate."

As he stepped into the kitchen light, the half-smile faded to a quarter, and then it was gone. He looked even worse than usual. The shadows on his face were darker, and you could see the bones under his skin. His face was a pallid green from never leaving the house. He looked a little bit like a living corpse, as he had for months now. It was hard to remember that he was the same person who used to sit with me for hours on the shores of Lake Moultrie, eating chicken salad sandwiches and teaching me how to cast a fishing line. "Back and forth. Ten and two. Ten and two. Like the hands of a clock." The last five months had been hard for him. He had really loved my mother. But so had I.

My dad picked up his coffee and started to shuffle back toward his study. It was time to face facts. Maybe Macon Ravenwood wasn't the only town shut-in. I didn't think our town was big enough for two Boo Radleys. But this was the closest thing to a conversation we'd had in months, and I didn't want him to go.

"How's the book coming?" I blurted out. Stay and talk to me. That's what I meant.

He looked surprised, then shrugged. "It's coming. Still got a lot of work to do." He couldn't. That's what he meant.

"Macon Ravenwood's niece just moved to town." I said the words just as he put his earplug back in. Out of sync, our usual timing. Come to think of it, that had been my timing with most people lately.

My dad pulled out the earplug, sighed, and pulled out the other. “What?” He was already walking back to his study. The meter on our conversation was running out.

“Macon Ravenwood, what do you know about him?”

“Same as everyone else, I guess. He’s a recluse. He hasn’t left Ravenwood Manor in years, as far as I know.” He pushed open the study door and stepped over the threshold, but I didn’t follow him. I just stood in the doorway.

I never set foot in there. Once, just once, when I was seven years old, my dad had caught me reading his novel before he had finished revising it. His study was a dark, frightening place. There was a painting that he always kept covered with a sheet over the threadbare Victorian sofa. I knew never to ask what was underneath the sheet. Past the sofa, close to the window, my father’s desk was carved mahogany, another antique that had been handed down along with our house, from generation to generation. And books, old leather-bound books that were so heavy they rested on a huge wooden stand when they were open. Those were the things that kept us bound to Gatlin, and bound to Wate’s Landing, just as they had bound my ancestors for more than a hundred years.

On the desk was his manuscript. It had been sitting there, in an open cardboard box, and I just had to know what was in it. My dad wrote gothic horror, so there wasn’t much he wrote that was okay for a seven-year-old to read. But every house in Gatlin was full of secrets, just like the South itself, and my house was no exception, even back then.

My dad had found me, curled up on the couch in his study, pages spread all around me like a bottle rocket had exploded in the box. I didn’t know enough to cover my tracks, something I

learned pretty quickly after that. I just remember him yelling at me, and my mom coming out to find me crying in the old magnolia tree in our backyard. “Some things are private, Ethan. Even for grown-ups.”

I had just wanted to know. That had always been my problem. Even now. I wanted to know why my dad never came out of his study. I wanted to know why we couldn’t leave this worthless old house just because a million Wates had lived here before us, especially now that my mom was gone.

But not tonight. Tonight I just wanted to remember chicken salad sandwiches and ten and two and a time when my dad ate his Shredded Wheat in the kitchen, joking around with me. I fell asleep remembering.



Before the bell even rang the next day, Lena Duchannes was all everyone at Jackson could talk about. Somehow between storms and power outages, Loretta Snow and Eugenie Asher, Savannah’s and Emily’s mothers, had managed to get supper on the table and call just about everyone in town to let them know that crazy Macon Ravenwood’s “relation” was driving around Gatlin in his hearse, which they were sure he used to transport dead bodies in when no one was watching. From there it just got wilder.

There are two things you can always count on in Gatlin. One, you can be different, even crazy, as long as you come out of the house every now and then, so folks don’t think you’re an axe murderer. Two, if there’s a story to tell, you can be sure there’ll be someone to tell it. A new girl in town, moving into

the Haunted Mansion with the town shut-in, that's a story, probably the biggest story to hit Gatlin since my mom's accident. So I don't know why I was surprised when everyone was talking about her—everyone except the guys. They had business to attend to first.

“So, what've we got, Em?” Link slammed his locker door.

“Countin' cheerleadin' tryouts, looks like four 8's, three 7's, and a handful a 4's.” Emory didn't bother to count the freshman girls he rated below a four.

I slammed my locker door. “This is news? Aren't these the same girls we see at the Dar-ee Keen every Saturday?”

Emory smiled, and clapped his hand on my shoulder. “But they're in the game now, Wate.” He looked at the girls in the hall. “And I'm ready to play.” Emory was mostly all talk. Last year, when we were freshmen, all we heard about were the hot seniors he thought he was going to hook up with now that he'd made JV. Em was as delusional as Link, but not as harmless. He had a mean streak; all the Watkinses did.

Shawn shook his head. “Like pickin' peaches off the vine.”

“Peaches grow on trees.” I was already annoyed, maybe because I'd met up with the guys at the Stop & Steal magazine stand before school and been subjected to this same conversation while Earl flipped through issues of the only thing he ever read—magazines featuring girls in bikinis, lying across the hoods of cars.

Shawn looked at me, confused. “What are you talkin' about?”

I don't know why I even bothered. It was a stupid conversation, the same way it was stupid that all the guys had to meet up before school on Wednesday mornings. It was something I'd

come to think of as roll call. A few things were expected if you were on the team. You sat together in the lunchroom. You went to Savannah Snow's parties, asked a cheerleader to the winter formal, hung out at Lake Moultrie on the last day of school. You could bail on almost anything else, if you showed up for roll call. Only it was getting harder and harder for me to show up, and I didn't know why.

I still hadn't come up with the answer when I saw her.

Even if I hadn't seen her, I'd have known she was there because the hallway, which was usually crammed with people rushing to their lockers and trying to make it to class before the second bell, cleared out in a matter of seconds. Everyone actually stepped aside when she came down the hall. Like she was a rock star.

Or a leper.

But all I could see was a beautiful girl in a long gray dress, under a white track jacket with the word *Munich* sewn on it, and beat-up black Converse peeking out underneath. A girl who wore a long silver chain around her neck, with tons of stuff dangling from it—a plastic ring from a bubblegum machine, a safety pin, and a bunch of other junk I was too far away to see. A girl who didn't look like she belonged in Gatlin. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Macon Ravenwood's niece. What was wrong with me?

She tucked her dark curls behind her ear, black nail polish catching the fluorescent light. Her hands were covered with black ink, like she had written on them. She walked down the hall as if we were invisible. She had the greenest eyes I'd ever seen, so green they could've been considered some new color altogether.

“Yeah, she’s hot,” said Billy.

I knew what they were thinking. For a second, they were thinking about dumping their girlfriends for the chance to hit on her. For a second, she was a possibility.

Earl gave her the once-over, then slammed his locker door. “If you ignore the fact that she’s a freak.”

There was something about the way he said it, or more like, the reason he said it. She was a freak because she wasn’t from Gatlin, because she wasn’t scrambling to make it onto the cheer squad, because she hadn’t given him a second look, or even a first. On any other day, I would’ve ignored him and kept my mouth shut, but today I didn’t feel like shutting up.

“So she’s automatically a freak, why? Because she doesn’t have on the uniform, blond hair and a short skirt?”

Earl’s face was easy to read. This was one of those times when I was supposed to follow his lead, and I wasn’t holding up my end of our unspoken agreement. “Because she’s a Ravenwood.”

The message was clear. Hot, but don’t even think about it. She wasn’t a possibility anymore. Still, that didn’t keep them from looking, and they were all looking. The hallway, and everyone in it, had locked in on her as if she was a deer caught in the crosshairs.

But she just kept walking, her necklace jingling around her neck.



Minutes later, I stood in the doorway of my English class. There she was. Lena Duchannes. The new girl, who would still be called that fifty years from now, if she wasn’t still called Old

Man Ravenwood's niece, handing a pink transfer slip to Mrs. English, who squinted to read it.

"They messed up my schedule and I didn't have an English class," she was saying. "I had U.S. History for two periods, and I already took U.S. History at my old school." She sounded frustrated, and I tried not to smile. She'd never had U.S. History, not the way Mr. Lee taught it.

"Of course. Take any open seat." Mrs. English handed her a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The book looked like it had never been opened, which it probably hadn't since they'd made it into a movie.

The new girl looked up and caught me watching her. I looked away, but it was too late. I tried not to smile, but I was embarrassed, and that only made me smile more. She didn't seem to notice.

"That's okay, I brought my own." She pulled out a copy of the book, hardback, with a tree etched on the cover. It looked really old and worn, like she had read it more than once. "It's one of my favorite books." She just said it, like it wasn't weird. Now I was staring.

I felt a steamroller plow into my back, and Emily pushed through the doorway as if I wasn't standing there, which was her way of saying hello and expecting me to follow her to the back of the room, where our friends were sitting.

The new girl sat down in an empty seat in the first row, in the No Man's Land in front of Mrs. English's desk. Wrong move. Everybody knew not to sit there. Mrs. English had one glass eye, and the terrible hearing you get if your family runs the only shooting range in the county. If you sat anywhere else but right in front of her desk, she couldn't see you and she wouldn't call

on you. Lena was going to have to answer questions for the whole class.

Emily looked amused and went out of her way to walk past her seat, kicking over Lena's bag, sending her books sliding across the aisle.

"Whoops." Emily bent down, picking up a battered spiral notebook that was one tear away from losing its cover. She held it up like it was a dead mouse. "Lena Duchannes. Is that your name? I thought it was Ravenwood."

Lena looked up, slowly. "Can I have my book?"

Emily flipped through the pages, as if she didn't hear her. "Is this your journal? Are you a writer? That's so great."

Lena reached out her hand. "Please."

Emily snapped the book shut, and held it away from her. "Can I just borrow this for a minute? I'd love to read somethin' you wrote."

"I'd like it back now. Please." Lena stood up. Things were going to get interesting. Old Man Ravenwood's niece was about to dig herself into the kind of hole there was no climbing back out of; nobody had a memory like Emily.

"First you'd have to be able to read." I grabbed the journal out of Emily's hand and handed it back to Lena.

Then I sat down in the desk next to her, right there in No Man's Land. Good-Eye Side. Emily looked at me in disbelief. I don't know why I did it. I was just as shocked as she was. I'd never sat in the front of any class in my life. The bell rang before Emily could say anything, but it didn't matter; I knew I'd pay for it later. Lena opened her notebook and ignored both of us.

"Can we get started, people?" Mrs. English looked up from her desk.

Emily slunk to her usual seat in the back, far enough from the front that she wouldn't have to answer any questions the whole year, and today, far enough from Old Man Ravenwood's niece. And now, far enough from me. Which felt kind of liberating, even if I had to analyze Jem and Scout's relationship for fifty minutes without having read the chapter.

When the bell rang, I turned to Lena. I don't know what I thought I was going to say. Maybe I was expecting her to thank me. But she didn't say anything as she shoved her books back into her bag.

156. It wasn't a word she had written on the back of her hand. It was a number.



Lena Duchannes didn't speak to me again, not that day, not that week. But that didn't stop me from thinking about her, or seeing her practically everywhere I tried not to look. It wasn't just her that was bothering me, not exactly. It wasn't about how she looked, which was pretty, even though she was always wearing the wrong clothes and those beat-up sneakers. It wasn't about what she said in class—usually something no one else would've thought of, and if they had, something they wouldn't have dared to say. It wasn't that she was different from all the other girls at Jackson. That was obvious.

It was that she made me realize how much I was just like the rest of them, even if I wanted to pretend I wasn't.

It had been raining all day, and I was sitting in ceramics, otherwise known as AGA, "a guaranteed A," since the class was

graded on effort. I had signed up for ceramics last spring because I had to fulfill my arts requirement, and I was desperate to stay out of band, which was practicing noisily downstairs, conducted by the crazily skinny, overly enthusiastic Miss Spider. Savannah sat down next to me. I was the only guy in the class, and since I was a guy, I had no idea what I was supposed to do next.

“Today is all about experimentation. You aren’t being graded on this. Feel the clay. Free your mind. And ignore the music from downstairs.” Mrs. Abernathy winced as the band butchered what sounded like “Dixie.”

“Dig deep. Feel your way to your soul.”

I flipped on the potter’s wheel and stared at the clay as it started to spin in front of me. I sighed. This was almost as bad as band. Then, as the room quieted and the hum of the potter’s wheels drowned out the chatter of the back rows, the music from downstairs shifted. I heard a violin, or maybe one of those bigger violins, a viola, I think. It was beautiful and sad at the same time, and it was unsettling. There was more talent in the raw voice of the music than Miss Spider had ever had the pleasure of conducting. I looked around; no one else seemed to notice the music. The sound crawled right under my skin.

I recognized the melody, and within seconds I could hear the words in my mind, as clearly as if I was listening to my iPod. But this time, the words had changed.

*Sixteen moons, sixteen years
Sound of thunder in your ears
Sixteen miles before she nears
Sixteen seeks what sixteen fears. . . .*

As I stared at the spinning clay in front of me, the lump became a blur. The harder I focused on it, the more the room dissolved around it, until the clay seemed to be spinning the classroom, the table, my chair along with it. As if we were all tied together in this whirlwind of constant motion, set to the rhythm of the melody from the music room. The room was disappearing around me. Slowly, I reached out a hand and dragged one fingertip along the clay.

Then a flash, and the whirling room dissolved into another image—

I was falling.

We were falling.

I was back in the dream. I saw her hand. I saw my hand grabbing at hers, my fingers digging into her skin, her wrist, in a desperate attempt to hold on. But she was slipping; I could feel it, her fingers pulling through my hand.

“Don’t let go!”

I wanted to help her, to hold on. More than I had ever wanted anything. And then, she fell through my fingers. . . .

“Ethan, what are you doin’?” Mrs. Abernathy sounded concerned.

I opened my eyes, and tried to focus, to bring myself back. I’d been having the dreams since my mom died, but this was the first time I’d had one during the day. I stared at my gray, muddy hand, caked with drying clay. The clay on the potter’s wheel held the perfect imprint of a hand, like I had just flattened whatever I was working on. I looked at it more closely. The hand wasn’t mine, it was too small. It was a girl’s.

It was hers.

I looked under my nails, where I could see the clay I had clawed from her wrist.

“Ethan, you could at least try to make somethin’.” Mrs. Abernathy put her hand on my shoulder, and I jumped. Outside the classroom window, I heard the rumble of thunder.

“But Mrs. Abernathy, I think Ethan’s soul is communicatin’ with him.” Savannah giggled, leaning over to get a good look. “I think it’s tellin’ you to get a manicure, Ethan.”

The girls around me started to laugh. I mashed the handprint with my fist, turning it back into a lump of gray nothing. I stood up, wiping my hands on my jeans as the bell rang. I grabbed my backpack and sprinted out of the room, slipping in my wet high-tops when I turned the corner and almost tripping over my untied laces as I ran down the two flights of stairs that stood between the music room and me. I had to know if I had imagined it.

I pushed open the double doors of the music room with both hands. The stage was empty. The class was filing past me. I was going the wrong way, heading downstream when everyone else was going up. I took a deep breath, but knew what I would smell before I smelled it.

Lemons and rosemary.

Down on the stage, Miss Spider was picking up sheet music, scattered along the folding chairs she used for the sorry Jackson orchestra. I called down to her, “Excuse me, ma’am. Who was just playing that—that song?”

She smiled in my direction. “We have a wonderful new addition to our strings section. A viola. She’s just moved into town—”

No. It couldn’t be. Not her.

I turned and ran before she could say the name.