

VAULTING THROUGH TIME

a young adult novel

NANCY McCABE

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THROUGH
TIME**



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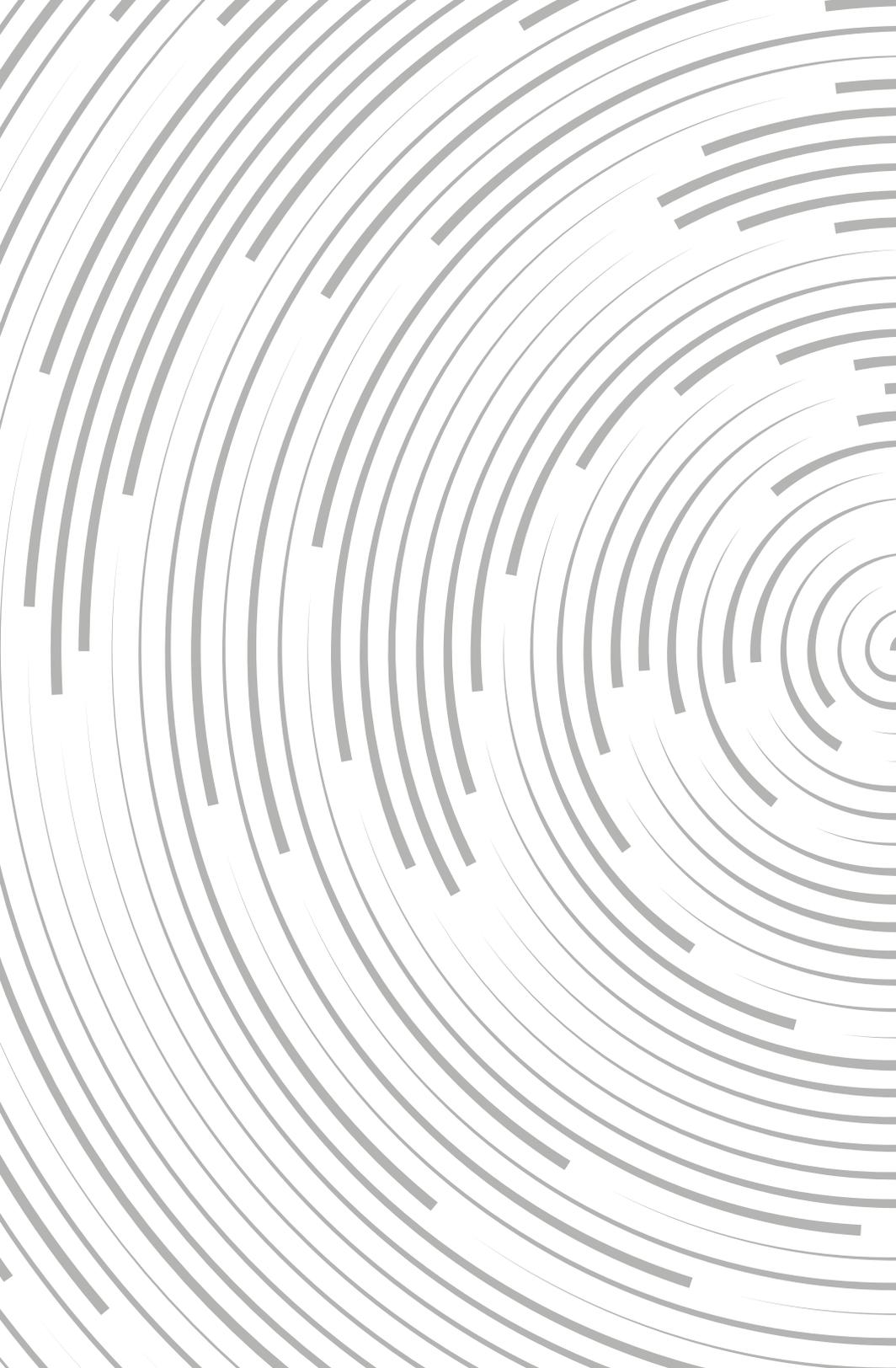
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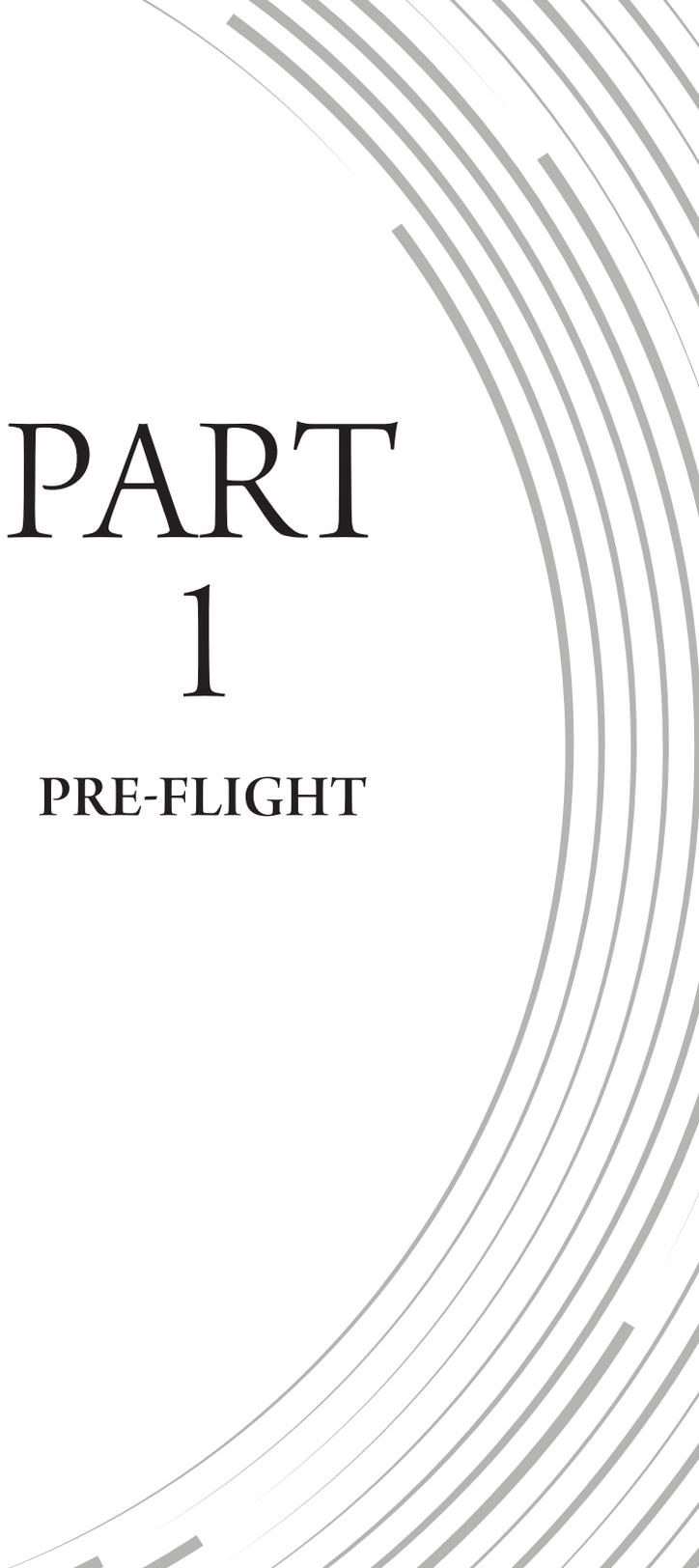
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FOR SOPHIE, AS ALWAYS





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PART

1

PRE-FLIGHT



1

BRADFORD, PA, NOVEMBER 9, 2018

4:30 P.M.

You know those dreams where you're flying? Suddenly your feet are no longer touching the ground. You're rising, weightless, airy and astonished. By force of will, you aim your body toward the sky and find yourself floating and soaring, amazed at your new skill. Why haven't you been doing this your whole life? It's as easy as walking or running. You've beaten gravity. Your spirits lift. You feel euphoric, no longer tethered to earth—or obligations, responsibilities, or expectations.

I've always been proud that I can fly without dreaming. I'm airborne when I swing from the high bar, flip across a spring floor, or launch into my beam dismount. It used to be that if I was in a funk, a fog, feeling blah, gymnastics could lift me right out of that, show me the world from new angles until I landed somewhere different from where I'd started.

Lately, not so much.

Lots of girls quit by the time they're sixteen, but not me. I'm one of the oldest girls on the team. Eventually, Coach Amy once said sadly, a gymnast's body starts developing. Eventually a gymnast's center of gravity changes.

Eventually she gets distracted by hormones and life. I'm stubborn. Up till now I've stayed the course. But lately—secretly—I've begun to falter. After breaking my foot on a vault landing last year, I'm more nervous about throwing my body backward. And I've become even more distracted as I constantly chase thoughts out of my head of the boy I'm crushing on who is totally wrong for me.

It's a stormy Friday afternoon and I'm waiting for my turn on the bars. It's one of those nonstop late fall showers that brutalizes the last leaves, beating them off the trees. Then the rain turns to snow and all of the branches are bare and it's suddenly winter.

The downpour batters the gym roof as if someone is emptying jarfuls of pennies onto it. The sound nearly drowns out the level-4 compulsory floor music. Otherworldly strains reach my ears, my thoughts looping with the monotonous instrumental music that plays over and over. Warming up, little girls pitch forward, kicking over in unison, leaving behind one struggling teammate, legs flailing in the air.

Distracted and restless, I wish I could astrally project myself somewhere else. I keep feeling this way lately, like there's an old me and a new me in parallel universes. There's the disciplined one who still loves gymnastics, and there's the free-floating one who daydreams and follows whims. The daydreamy me cuts intricate patterns down the sides of my T-shirts and watches YouTube tutorials on how to weave my curly hair into fancy French braid variations. Who stays home in a cozy bathrobe editing selfies so that I'm wearing butterfly wings or floating among the stars.

Zach thinks I'm just a headstrong, driven athlete. I imagine proving to him that I can be geeky and creative and inventive too.

My thoughts are always floating involuntarily in that direction lately, the same way whenever I'm home my gaze drifts toward his bedroom window across the driveway from mine. Why do I care what my ex-best friend, a judgy guy with big, clumsy hands and big, stinky feet, thinks of me, anyway?

Zach and I have known each other all our lives. His family moved here when we were three. We used to make faces at each other across the driveway,

our bedroom windows only a few feet apart. When we were eight, we rigged up a tin-can telephone between those windows. When we were ten, we entered the district science fair together with a project on sound waves. We won a blue ribbon.

Now I order my stomach to stop flip-flopping when I think about him. I mean, ick. He's like a brother to me. And also, he's boring—always talking about stuff like comic books and parallel universes and time travel and quantum physics.

I absolutely refuse to crush on Zach O'Mara.

Besides, I haven't spoken to him in months and I have no intention of resuming now.



“Have you thought about getting a straightening iron?” asks Molly, the girl waiting in line behind me. Her tone implies that she's making a helpful suggestion. But then, in the same overly earnest tone, she adds, “Maybe that would make your hair less witchy.”

Molly has blond hair pulled up into a perky ponytail. It looks like the swirl on the top of an ice-cream cone, like something frothy and sweet, but she is anything but. I am darker than most of the other girls, tanning easily in the summer. Sometimes they make comments. “Are you sure you're not an Indian?” they ask.

“I think the term is Native American or Indigenous, but no,” I answer, proving that I am totally my mother's daughter, because that's what she'd say. I do my best to ignore the way the other girls make faces and laugh at me.

Behind Molly, Callie, who wears her long, light hair in a tight French braid, giggles at Molly's jab about my hair. That hurts. Molly and Callie are both a year younger than I am, but I thought that Callie and I were friends.

Coach Amy strides across the floor toward us. “Hey,” she says to all of us, but her gaze lingers on me. “I'm taking the top two from each optional level to the USAG meet next month. What do you think?”

“Sounds fun,” I say, even though my first reaction is dread. As a YMCA gymnast, I should have been nothing but excited for the rare chance to compete with girls from private clubs, USA Gymnastics girls preparing to go elite and even compete internationally.

“You don’t think you’re going to be picked, do you?” Molly mutters after Coach Amy moves on to the group waiting for the beams. “You’re such a baby about tumbling. I’m way better than you are.”

Molly is fearless about throwing herself into back tucks and layouts. Fearless but sloppy. She and Callie have both surpassed my skills on everything but bars, though their technique, all bent legs and loose movements, pulls down their scores. Molly’s constant deductions make her even more pissed off at me. During warm-ups, she tries to psych me out by “accidentally” crashing into me.

“If you’re so much better than me, then do better than me,” I toss back at her now, as if her words don’t sting. She’s not wrong. I am a baby about tumbling backward. And around Molly, I feel like I’m stuck back in middle school, not a junior in high school.

I turn my back on Molly’s eye roll and the other girls’ smirks as I step up to the bars. I close my eyes, shut out everything. My irritation, reservations, errant thoughts, the floor music, Molly’s smug expression, the other bars groaning as a teammate swings into a handstand, the beam thudding as another teammate lands out of her split leap. All I have to do is score in the level-7 top two at the meet this weekend. Piece of cake. I’m almost always first or second all-around.

So what if I’ve been questioning the wisdom of blindly hurling my body backward? So what if I keep throwing in elements to avoid back tucks on floor and back walkovers on beam? I’m a stickler for technique, so my scores haven’t suffered too much. And all gymnasts have fear issues, especially after an injury. Well, maybe except for Molly. Maybe if I try hard enough I can will my fear away the same way I can will away any inappropriate feelings I have for Zach. New energy sizzles through me as I springboard to the low bar, rising from my squat on to a high-bar kip, swinging continuously and big,

casting to handstand and toppling into a back giant, arms and legs straight, toes pointed, no hesitation or extra swings. I defy gravity, flinging myself into a series of rotations and twirling into a flyaway dismount before I slam to the ground.

“You’re on fire!” Coach Amy high-fives me. “Bring your birth certificate tomorrow and we’ll get you registered.”



I anticipate telling Mom about the USA Gymnastics meet as Callie’s mom drives me home. We pass under street lights that bow over the streets, water cascading from them so they look like showerheads. Callie keeps her head turned toward the passenger-side window, making no attempt at conversation, like she’s afraid if she’s nice Molly will find out and turn on her. Whatever. I’m going to beat out her and Molly and go to the USAG meet. When Zach hears about it, he’ll have to be impressed. It’s a win-win.

As soon as I get home, I call Mom at the library, where she’s working late. “I need my birth certificate,” I tell her breathlessly. “Where is it?”

“I thought it was in the secretary downstairs, but last time I looked, it wasn’t there. That’s okay. There’s another copy—” She stops abruptly, and then there’s a long silence. “I’ll find it when I get home.” Her voice sounds funny.

I expect her to ask more questions. I expect her to be excited for me. Instead, she changes the subject, brushing me off. “Don’t you need to submit your English research proposal online by tonight?”

“But—”

She ignores me. “I read it over. It’s good. But look at the first paragraph. Where do you need a comma?”

I don’t want to talk about my stupid English assignment. “Up your butt,” I answer.

I hear a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line.

So maybe I’ve gone too far. I brace myself.

But all she says, after a long pause, is, “No. That’s a colon.”

It takes me a second, but then I hoot despite myself. Mom starts to laugh too, and it takes us a few seconds to catch our breaths.

My teammates think Mom must be stodgy because she’s so much older than their moms, so old they’re always mistaking her for my grandmother. They think it’s weird that we look nothing alike, and I guess I think so too: She’s pale and I have a natural light tan even in winter; she has blue eyes and mine are brown; she had blond hair before she let it go gray, in contrast to my thick curls that people describe as black but are really dark brown—the darkest, richest-possible brown. I’m proud of my hair. Mom’s always said that I take after my dad, but when I’ve asked to see pictures, she reminds me that they were all destroyed when our basement flooded. “Don’t you remember that? We had to throw out so much stuff. That’s why we got the sump pump,” she says. Lately this explanation has nagged at me. I’ve suddenly started to wonder why she would have kept photos in the basement.

More and more things have been getting to me. Like whenever I have a fight with Mom, my teammates say, “Too bad you don’t know your real mom,” even though she is my real mom. Not to mention, no one says that to them when they have fights with their moms.

But they seem to think that conflict is different, less damaging somehow, if you look like your mom. Their moms are small and lithe, former high-school cheerleaders and track stars who now play on company sports teams and run marathons. They all have bodies genetically programmed to produce little gymnasts.

Mom never played any sports and claims she peaked at the cartwheel. We still have all of her old photos, like the school pictures where she’s in the back row, towering over the other kids. When she wants me to think that she relates to me, she describes the back shoulder roll she did in her school’s eighth-grade operetta.

But when we have moments like this, laughing so hard that she makes a honking noise and I have to wipe tears from my eyes, I’m sure she’s my mom. I would never admit it aloud, but I think of Mom as my safe space, my reality

check, the one who'll be supportive of whatever I do but won't hesitate to steer me back on track when I veer off.

Still, the doubts have been crowding in, so much so that I decided to do one of those genetic tests where you spit in a vial and send it to some lab. I had the hardest time working up enough spit. Finally I dripped some lemon juice in my mouth, and that made me salivate big time. I'm pretty sure my genetic results are going to come back any day now saying that I'm 99 percent lemon.

I feel a little guilty, going behind Mom's back, forging her signature. But I just want reassurance that we're really related.



"I'll be home late," Mom says. "I'll email my comments. Get your assignment done and get to bed so you'll be fresh for tomorrow. Also, I think your competition leotard is in the wash."

Idly, I click onto my email. "I put some of my leos in the dryer yesterday," I answer absently. "I think it's there." My heart jumps. The email arrived with my genetic test results while I was at practice.

"Is the copy of my birth certificate in the attic?" I click open the email. My eyes rove down the column showing my genetic heritage. I'm 70 percent Northwestern European, with strands of British and Irish, French, and German. No surprises there. Then my eyes stop on the last line.

"I'll find it when I get home." Mom's voice is tight and tense. "Don't get all impulsive the way you do and go rifling through papers and messing up my files."

"But what about—" I start before I realize that she's hung up.

By then I'm too distracted to even consider calling her back as I stare at that last line, which has to be a mistake. It says I'm 30 percent Han Chinese.

Or maybe Mom neglected to tell me the whole story of my dad's ethnic heritage?

Maybe my dad was part Chinese and somehow didn't know it?

Though Mom pays bills at the secretary in the living room, she periodically carries a new pile of insurance policies and bank statements up to the file cabinets in the finished attic room. I can't imagine anywhere else she'd keep documents like my birth certificate, and maybe it will be with other records that will make this make sense.

I close up my laptop and charge up the stairs, even more impatient to see what I can find.



2

BRADFORD, PA, NOVEMBER 9, 2018

8 P.M.

I hurtle to the top of the stairs, then stop short in front of the attic door, suddenly afraid of what I'll find. I pace through the hall and then around my bedroom, adrenaline pumping like crazy, head spinning. There's got to be a rational explanation.

Sitting down on my bed, I reread the results of my genetic test. I reach for the phone to call Mom. Then I drop it. I look over at the window, wishing I could talk to Zach.

But I can't do that either.

The light is on in his room. He's been there, across the way, as long as I can remember. Sometimes just knowing he's there makes my skin tingle, and I miss him terribly.

We hung out together all the time until middle school, when I began to find him totally annoying. If he saw me do a cartwheel or a split leap in the yard, he'd say, "But can you do a flip?"

"There's no such thing," I snapped. "It's called a handspring. Or layout. Or tuck."

After his little sister Zara joined the team and he accompanied his mom to a meet—conveniently, one where I got a first all-around—the pestering escalated. “Can you do a double full twist? Can you do a triple tuck?” His questions made me feel deflated, like all the stuff I *could* do wasn’t good enough. And with all the pressure his questions put on me, I was terrified that I was going to mess up the next time he was watching.

“Don’t come to another meet unless you want to die,” I hissed.

He acted all casual, but I knew his facial expressions well enough to see that I’d hurt his feelings.

A few months ago, when she first joined the team and we were starting to be friends, Callie caught a glimpse of Zach when he came to pick up Zara from practice, and she said to me, “Whoa! He’s hot!”

I raised my eyebrows. Zach, hot? For some reason, I found myself blushing. Then I started avoiding him even more than before. I was busy with gymnastics and school, and he was off geeking out over wormholes or science-fiction movies or whatever, and somewhere along the way, we completely stopped hanging out.

And then things got weird. Once last spring, too impatient to wait till Mom got off work, I walked home from gymnastics practice after dark. Zach happened to be driving by when a carful of guys passed me, shouting out the window. Zach pulled up to the curb, and I felt lit up, unexpectedly happy, when I caught sight of him. I tamped down that feeling as fast as I could and glared at him.

“Get in,” he ordered. “You shouldn’t be walking at night.”

I hate being ordered around, but I was a little shaken by the yelling guys and a lot shaken by this strange new feeling, and I found myself ducking into his car. “Don’t blame the victim, dude. I wasn’t doing anything wrong. Those guys were cackling me.”

“You mean catcalling? Or heckling?”

“Whatever,” I muttered. I was kind of proud of coming up with a new word that meant catcalling and heckling at the same time. Zach didn’t have to act like he was so much smarter than me. Why, when I found him so

irritating, did I suddenly find myself super-attuned to him, my stomach squishy, my skin raw, electricity sizzling along my leg when his hand brushed against it as he shifted the car into gear?

“It’s dangerous to be out by yourself at this hour,” he scolded me. His hair was sticking up funny, and I fought an impulse to smooth it down.

“Okay, Grandma,” I answered. It irritated me to feel so vulnerable. Why did he have such an effect on me?

“Are you trying to get yourself abducted or something?”

“Those guys shouldn’t be yelling at girls,” I argued back. “And anyway, this is a small town. How dangerous can it be?”

When he pulled into his driveway, I jumped out, barely thanking him for the ride, my stomach so unsteady I just needed to get away from there.

Defying my new unwanted feelings, I snuck out one night last summer to meet a senior I’d talked to a few times. I made sure Zach saw me, slipping out my back door when he was in his yard with his dog.

The guy picked me up at the curb and drove too fast to a college party full of drunk people and smoke, the air reeking of beer and weed. I sipped from a red Solo cup of beer though I didn’t really like the taste. I ended up in a bedroom making out with some guy who wasn’t even that cute, and then I walked all the way home. I glanced up as I crossed our driveway in the moonlight and saw Zach’s dark silhouette in his bedroom window, watching me.

For some reason, I felt pleased at this.

The next afternoon, Zach was walking his dog when I went out to get the mail. He winced when he saw me, like now he thought I was beneath him. Like those boring geeky girls he goes out with, with the fashion sense of middle schoolers, are so superior to me. “Don’t be a creeper,” I said to him.

“God, somebody has to watch out for you,” he answered. “You are so bullheaded and impulsive. You are totally out of control.”

“When did you get so judgy?” I asked him.

“When did you get so immature?” he asked me back.

I lashed out. “Yeah, right, like you’re so much better. Just don’t talk to me anymore.”

Once I said those words, I couldn’t figure out how to take them back, even though he winced, a hurt look crossing his face. “Just mind your own business,” I muttered, storming away, resolving not to care. And ever since then, I’ve ignored him. I pretend like I am completely unaware of his presence, though actually it’s like I have an internal compass that follows his movements whenever he’s near me.

I hate feeling agitated all the time. I hate feeling my mood soar and dip depending on whether he’s in the room.

And the more we avoid talking to each other, the more I miss him. It wasn’t until I could no longer talk to him that I discovered all of these inconvenient feelings.

But I stand by what I said. He had no right to tell me what to do.

Still, I feel like I’m going to burst with this news. Somehow, I have Chinese heritage. With wonder I examine my tan skin and gaze in the mirror at my brown eyes and hair.

Zach would help me make sense of all of this.

Or not. I hear his sensible voice in my head, telling me to calm down and wait for an explanation from Mom. Telling me that maybe there was a mix-up in the genetic results.

I hate it when anyone tells me to calm down. Especially imaginary voices in my head.

I keep remembering Mom’s tense tone, like she’s hiding something. Why wouldn’t she want me to find my birth certificate myself? Why would she be secretive about my heritage?

You are so impatient, I can hear Zach say.

Stop jumping to conclusions, I can hear Mom say.

I pace, second-guessing myself and feeling annoyed at Mom and Zach both. It doesn’t take that big a leap to conclude that something’s not right here, I argue with their voices in my head. People who’ve known you your whole life can be irritating, the way they’re always trying to confine you

to versions of yourself that you've outgrown, or see flaws in attributes that maybe have turned into strengths. Like, am I really so stubborn, and if so, isn't that a good thing for a gymnast? And why should I wait patiently till Mom gets home when I can investigate something she's had sixteen years to explain to me?

And so, resolutely, defiantly, I take the plunge through the attic door, heading up the stairs.

Something about this space spooks me. Sometimes I swear I hear creaks up here, and footsteps, as if the attic is haunted or someone has snuck into the house and is secretly living up here.

At the top of the narrow, steep stairs, I snap on the light, stumbling over a wadded blanket. Mom is a neat freak. It's not like her to leave things lying in the middle of the floor.

The file cabinet is locked. I yank and tug on the drawers, but they don't yield. I pull so hard I'm afraid I'm going to strain my shoulder or pull the file cabinet over on top of me.

I head back downstairs, where I rifle through the secretary. Mom's passport and birth certificate are there. I find our social security cards. But that's it.

Defeated, I settle in the living room to try to concentrate on the proposal for my junior research project. But I'm having a hard time focusing. All I can think about is how to open that file cabinet. I force my attention back to my assignment. I want to write about the history of body image in gymnastics, though I still haven't really found a focus. After glancing through Mom's suggestions and uploading my proposal draft, I scramble some eggs and make toast for dinner. I add some fruit so I can tell Mom I had a healthy meal. After I lay out my competition leo and warm-ups, I lie in bed, still roaming the house in my mind, trying to figure out where Mom put the copy of my birth certificate.

Maybe my dad's is tucked away in the same spot. Maybe there's something on it about his ethnicity. I keep picturing that file-cabinet lock, willing it to open.



When I wake at 2:00 a.m., it's like the quiet of the house amplifies the sound of rain ticking against the roof. My tabby cat, Simone Biles, is curled up next to me, and she purrs like a motor next to my ear. I lie there for a moment thinking about my genetic results and my birth certificate. I consider waking up Mom right now and making her tell me what's going on.

Instead I look up YouTube videos on picking a file-cabinet lock. Then I tiptoe down to the kitchen for a knife.

At the edge of my vision, I catch a flash of light from the deserted yellow house next door.

Startled, I move toward the kitchen window, straining to see beyond my own shadowy, ghost-like reflection, past raindrops standing on the glass. For a second, I imagine I see the silhouette of a woman in the shadows under the fog-rimmed streetlights, her belly rounded. I turn to flip off the kitchen light and swivel back to look out the window.

Our yards are empty. A tree branch from next door has wrapped around the partial fence that separates our properties, entwining with the slats like an arm casually slung across someone's shoulder.

Upstairs, the house remains quiet except for the steady hum of the fan, a branch that scrapes against a window, and the rain that spatters against the roof. Our old house has thick walls and doors, which made it easy for me to sneak out last summer. Still everything seems so noisy when you're trying to be quiet.

The creak of a stair, the pounding of my heart.

Up in the attic directly above Mom's bedroom, I aim the knife toward the file cabinet lock and insert it, shifting the lock counterclockwise. It's way too easy. The top drawer releases and slides open.

My heart is drumming. I find a thick pile of papers labeled "Abstract," consisting of four pages chronicling the house's legal history. In almost a hundred years, there have only been three owners. The entries go backward from Mom to someone named Abby Grant to a guy, named Lucas Grant,

who built it in 1920. The deeds are monotonous and repetitive, mostly consisting of detailed discussions of the location of property lines.

Other folders contain boring stuff, receipts for home and car repairs, my parents' marriage license, my dad's death certificate. Receipts for property taxes on our house and, for some reason, the deserted yellow house, along with old electricity and water bills and a contract with a cleaning service.

Mom has been paying for years to maintain an empty house that belongs to someone else?

Score! My birth certificate, a single sheet of paper stamped with a Pennsylvania seal, is one of two thin documents tucked away in a manila folder. It says that I'm Elizabeth Arlington, born in Bradford, Pennsylvania to Joan Wilson Arlington and Philip Arlington. So this means I'm definitely their child? I wasn't adopted or something? The word *Deceased* appears under *Father's Occupation*. My dad was killed in a trucking accident eight months before I was born. The section under *Name and address of attending physician or midwife* is blank. I'm disappointed that there are no lines related to race or ethnicity.

I unfold the second paper, a letter signed by Mom with a notary seal near the bottom:

Elizabeth Arlington was born at home during a snowstorm. The streets had not been plowed and ambulances couldn't get through. Labor happened suddenly and there were no witnesses. I am requesting an affidavit of live birth. I enclose statements from my minister and my employer attesting that my husband died eight months ago. Grieving and on a leave of absence from my job, I didn't realize I was pregnant for several months. I did not seek prenatal medical care.

The sentences look wavy and disjointed as my eyes dart up and down the page. I read them again, and then a third time, trying to comprehend. I wasn't born in a hospital, but at home? Here, in this house? And Mom was all by herself?

Why hasn't she ever told me this?

The room tilts and whirls around me, as if I'm wandering through a dream that doesn't make any sense. My hands are shaking as if they aren't attached to me anymore as I sit back on my heels. I remember asking her once, "So you found out you were pregnant after Dad died? Were you scared about raising me alone?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Terrified."

"But were you happy?" I prodded her. "Didn't you think it was sort of romantic to have something left of him?"

"I guess," she said dubiously, then saw the stricken look on my face. "No, no, I was thrilled," she hastened to add. "I mean, it was shocking at first, but once I got used to the idea of being a mom, it was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Wouldn't that have been the freaking moment to tell me about the weird circumstances of my birth?

I plop down with my legs crisscrossed, running my eyes over the affidavit again and again, trying to pull more answers from the short paragraph. It's true that there are lots of odd things about us. A mom who looks nothing like me. A dad, probably a mixture of Asian and Caucasian, who died before I was born. Both only children; no other relatives. My parents were in their forties by the time I was conceived. Especially in this town, where everybody seems to be related, it's always felt weird that I don't know anyone else who shares my last name. Sometimes we run into people who remember my dad. Why has no one ever said anything about him being Asian? It seems like that's something people would comment on in a town like this, where almost everyone is white. I reach to the back of the cabinet for another pile of papers: pages torn from a coloring book, yellowed around the edges. Matching pictures of dolphins and elephants, two of each. A gray elephant and a green polka-dotted elephant. Yellow daisies and purple ones. A rainbow striped puppy and one decorated with snail-like curlicues.

Mom saved embarrassing amounts of my toddler and elementary school art: streaky finger paintings; collages of magazine photos, thick with

glue; wobbly clay bowls; drawings of lopsided houses next to bushy-haired trees under smiling yellow suns. They're stored in boxes stacked against the wall. Why did she store these particular coloring-book pages in a locked cabinet?

I replace everything in the drawer and ease it closed, then pull open the next. This one contains a hodgepodge of loose photos, mostly unlabeled ones of people I don't recognize. "J and A" is penciled on the back of one. Mom, no older than twelve, towers over a much older woman. She's always talked about the step-grandma she was close to when she was young.

And then I find myself staring at a photo of a little boy with hair so light it's almost white, the kind of hair that disappears altogether when it's wet. I turn it over.

"Phil, 6," someone has scrawled on the back.

My dad? Or some other guy named Phil? This guy has blue eyes and pale skin.

Below it are piles of packets of photos, bound with rubber bands so fragile they break in my hand.

I flip through them. A light-haired teenager in a tux as if he's headed to a dance, a man angling a fishing pole above a stream, a little boy waving from the window of a truck. In another photo, the man poses with Mom, both of them adults, in a restaurant with white tablecloths. The backs of all these photos are blank.

Maybe Mom had a brother she never told me about.

I pick up a thick bundle of school portraits, colors faded, this same guy turning from a chubby-cheeked boy with a crew cut to a teenager with shaggy hair, barely smiling.

"Phil, first grade," someone wrote on the back of one. "Phil, eighth grade."

Maybe my Mom's secret brother was also named Phil?

Otherwise, this doesn't make sense. This guy looks nothing like me.

"Are you sure I'm not adopted?" I've asked Mom a million times over the years, and she just laughs, says, "Oh, your grandmother was actually

really petite,” or “Maybe we don’t look alike, but we have the same allergies and blood type.”

And I’ve ignored the nebulous doubt that tugs at me.

I turn over another school portrait. “Phil Arlington,” it says, confirming that this person with straight blond hair, with pale, pasty skin, with bright blue eyes, is my dad.

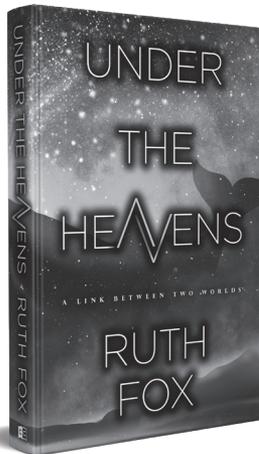
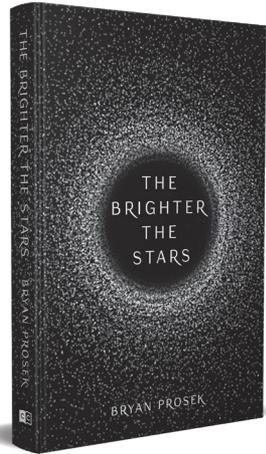
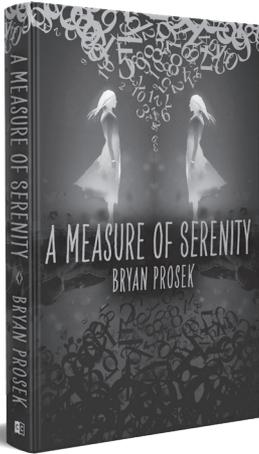
And suddenly my thoughts are whirling through space, flipping, tumbling, spiraling, unable to land on the simple fact that these cannot possibly be my parents.

Mom purposely hid these photographs.

Mom has lied to me my whole life.

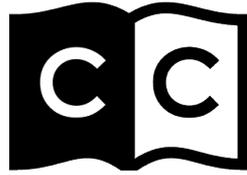


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CAN SHE PERFORM THE VAULT OF HER LIFE TO SAVE HER LOVED ONES— AND HERSELF?

Sixteen-year-old gymnast Elizabeth Arlington doesn't care that her mother is older than the other girls' moms or that she doesn't look anything like her parents. She has too much to worry about like her body changing and how all of a sudden the balance beam is not as easy as it used to be. But when she makes a discovery that throws her entire identity into question, she turns to her ex-best friend Zach, who suggests a way for her to find the answers her mother won't give her: a time machine they found in an abandoned house.

As Elizabeth catapults through time, she encounters a mysterious abandoned child, an elite gymnast preparing for Olympic Trials, and an enigmatic woman who seems to know more than she's revealing. Then when a thief makes off with an identical time machine, Elizabeth finds herself on a race to stop the thief before the world as she knows it—and her future—are destroyed.



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