

The book cover features a woman's long, dark, wavy hair blowing in the wind against a blue sky with a full moon and several glowing white feathers. The title 'the next full moon' is written in a pink, cursive font across the middle of the hair. The author's name 'CAROLYN TURGEON' is at the top in white, all-caps, sans-serif font.

CAROLYN TURGEON

the next full moon



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DEDICATION

To my mother, father and sister

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Love, Carolyn





CHAPTER ONE

*I*t started with a feather. One little white rounded feather resting on her pillow. Ava didn't think much of it, though, considering that it was a bright Sunday morning and there were only three weeks left of school and in just over a month she would turn thirteen and the whole summer stretched out before her like a long, shimmering gift. She jumped out of bed, letting the feather blow to the ground, where it landed on the dark wood floor and, after skittering a few inches in the faint breeze, came to a stop. Any passerby might have thought it was a bit of fur and indeed the cat, Monique, eyed it suspiciously as she slinked past Ava's room and to the kitchen.

Ava stepped over it as she rushed to her bathroom, to the big mirror. She'd spent the day before lying in the backyard on a towel and hoped that for once her skin might have turned tan and smooth, like Jennifer Halverson's, who, with her sun-drenched blond hair and brown skin, looked like she spent her whole life at the beach even though she lived right smack in the middle of Pennsylvania like the rest of them. Ava half expected to have turned blond and dark-skinned herself overnight, but there she was, staring back at herself, the same as ever. Pale, though now more pink than white, and dark-haired, with navy blue eyes. Boring. She sighed and turned away.

Ava Gardner looks, her grandmother called them. *Like the old-time movie star. Women used to walk around with umbrellas to have skin as beautiful as yours.* Ava would roll her eyes. "That was like a thousand years ago," she'd say. When she looked in the mirror, it was like a ghost girl looking out.

But this morning was too beautiful for a little paleness to ruin it. Summer was almost here! The windows were wide open and the air smelled like grass and flowers and trees. The white curtains on her windows fluttered in the breeze, which felt warm and wonderful against her skin. Not too hot, just warm enough.

She clicked on her computer and saw that Morgan was already on IM. "Ready to go?" she typed. "We can work on our tans before anyone else gets there."

"Sure," MORGANISAWESOME typed back. "Come'n get me."

"Be there in 10."

Ava pulled off her nightshirt and shimmied into her new bathing suit, which she'd been saving. It was the first day her friends and classmates would be going to the lake, where they'd spend the rest of the summer hanging out, day after long blissful day. Ava loved it down there: the trees hanging over the water, the canoes and paddleboats whirring in the distance, the long line of beach, and of course the old carousel next to the stands selling flavored ice and lemonade. She could hardly wait. And she knew that Jeff Jackson would be there—she'd heard him and all his friends planning it the week before.

Even thinking about him here, alone in her room, made her blush.

She wondered what Jeff would think when he saw her in her new suit. Nervously, she examined herself in the mirror, twisting this way and that, worrying that he'd think her stomach wasn't flat enough, that her thighs were too big. She had to admit that the suit looked good on her, that the red was striking against her long dark hair.

Lately, she was sure that Jeff had started noticing her. He'd smiled at her in the hallway last week, and she hadn't been able to focus on anything for hours after. But of course she was far too shy to talk to him. In her imagination, though, she'd smiled back and leaned on a locker alluringly. "Going to the lake this weekend?" she'd asked, giving him a wink.

“Maybe I’ll see you there.”

Now she shook her head and pulled on some shorts and a t-shirt, grabbed her bag and some flip-flops. She should be a little more brave, she thought. After all, she was about to be a teenager.

“Dad, I’m ready!” she called out, rushing to the kitchen to grab a banana and a granola bar.

No answer.

“Dad!”

Monique stood by the kitchen window and even she ignored Ava, glancing over her shoulder once and then turning back to the hummingbird fluttering about the birdfeeder outside.

Ava rolled her eyes and stomped down to the basement. Her father would be in his workroom, of course. If he wasn’t teaching or out in the creek fishing, he was there. She couldn’t understand how he could pass hours happily sitting in one spot, making bamboo fishing rods by hand. But he loved it—working with wood, putting together rods and lures that he’d give away or use to fish in the creek. They didn’t even eat the fish he caught! Her dad could spend all day catching fish after fish and then tossing them back into the water. What was the point?

Crazy.

“Dad!”

She rushed down the stairs. Loud jazz was playing behind

his shut door. She banged on it, then pushed in.

“Dad!”

His head shot up in surprise, and he looked even more out of sorts than ever, with his wild salt-and-pepper hair and crooked glasses, a mess of bamboo spread out in front of him on the table. The room smelled like wood and varnish.

“Are you trying to give your dad a heart attack?” he asked.

“Your music was on. And you promised to take me and Morgan to the lake.”

“What time is it?”

“Ten a.m. The sun is shining, and I should be outside. So should you!”

“Ten already, huh?” He sighed and grabbed the car keys lying on the table. As he stood, his hand reached out to grab something floating down in the air.

“What’s this?” he asked. He opened his palm. One white feather with blood on the tip. He looked at it and then up at her, his face suddenly worried.

Ava shrugged. “How would I know? You’re the one who spends your whole life down here in the dark. Come on, Dad, we’re late!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, placing the feather on the table and turning to the door. “Let’s go, earlybird.”

Her heart pounded with excitement as they drove to Morgan’s house. Morgan was waiting outside, her bright pink

towel rolled up and sticking out of her tote bag. She ran down to the car, all long red hair and freckles and gangling legs and arms, and bounced into the backseat.

Morgan was Ava's best friend, even though she could be embarrassing with her loud laugh and sometimes—well, oftentimes—spastic behavior. But they had been best friends since nursery school and there was no turning back now. Plus, Morgan was the funniest girl in school.

The drive to the lake was beautiful, as they left their little college town and headed into the countryside, where the roads turned narrow and winding and everything was bright green and charming little cabins popped up on the side of the road. They crossed mountains that looked over entire valleys coated in a morning mist. Finally, they turned down the gravel lane that led into the lake parking lot.

The girls gathered their things and Ava assured her father that she'd be home by dinnertime, that Morgan's mother would be picking them up in the afternoon.

"What are you doing today, Dad?" she asked, feeling suddenly guilty for leaving him alone. He was alone so often.

"I think I might head to the creek, do some fishing," he said. "Get a little sun." He made a face at her.

"Maybe you should go out with some friends or something," she said. "I hear some people actually like that kind of thing. Friends and stuff."

"Ha ha. Now off with you both."

Ava watched after him as he drove away and then she and Morgan rushed down to the lake. She tried to walk as calmly as she could, aware at every moment that Jeff could be there already. She scanned the beach, which was not yet full of people the way she knew it would be later. She and Morgan were the first ones there from their school. A smattering of other people were setting out towels and picnic baskets.

They set down their bags and towels in a prime spot, close to the water, and stripped down to their bathing suits.

As Ava started rubbing herself with tanning lotion, Morgan pulled out a huge pair of pink, heart-shaped sunglasses and put them on. "I'm sorry, my friend, but you are glowing," she said.

"I laid out yesterday."

"You're supposed to lay out in the *sun*, dummy."

"I *did*, you dork. And look how white you are, too."

"I'm a redhead, I'm supposed to be the color of porcelain. Like Nicole Kidman."

"Whatever. Your glasses are stupid. They clash with your hair."

"Stupid awesome, maybe."

Ava sighed loudly and lay back on the towel. "Well. Don't come crying to me when you get heart-shaped tan lines on your face."

They both broke into giggles. The sun beat down, already making them sweat.

"I wish it could stay summer forever," Morgan said, after a few minutes.

"Me, too."

"Let's move to California."

"Okay. We can be movie stars there."

"And have a pool."

"And a convertible."

Ava closed her eyes and pictured the two of them riding around in a convertible with scarves around their necks, blowing kisses as people waved at them from the streets. Jennifer Halverson would come running up for an autograph and Ava would push down her sunglasses and ask, "Do I know you?" Of course Jeff Jackson would be in the car with them and he wouldn't remember her either.

"Let's swim a little," Morgan said, after a while.

"Okay," Ava answered, reluctantly coming out of her reverie. The beach was much more crowded now. Towels and bodies were spread out in every direction.

They headed to the water, and Ava broke into a run. She never felt more happy or free than she did here. It was summer, finally! The lake was a dark, beautiful blue. Morgan dashed ahead of her.

"It's freezing!" Morgan called as she plunked her foot into the lake.

Ava didn't care. The cold never bothered her. She dove straight in, and, as always, it was like entering another world.

All the sounds went mute, the smells went away, and the world turned hushed and dark. She smiled into the water as she pushed forward. Twisting around, moving onto her back and her sides, coming up for air and then pushing back under. There were people all around and yet she couldn't have felt more alone than she did then. But in the best possible way.

She pushed her head above water again and swam out to the buoys. In the distance, a line of trees, like fringe, reached up to the sky.

And then behind her, laughter.

She turned.

Morgan was standing in the water laughing, talking to him. Jeff Jackson. Tall and manly. Well, maybe not manly, but surely the only boy in seventh grade who was almost as tall as her father, with broad shoulders, a dimpled chin, and bright blond hair.

He caught her eye and without thinking she immediately ducked her head under water. Wishing she could hide away.

Then she realized how stupid she looked.

She wanted to disappear at the bottom of the lake. Why did she always have to be so dorky? Why couldn't she act like the girl in her fantasies?

She squeezed her eyes shut and played a movie in her head of what she should have done: smiled at him elegantly, tossing her hair like Jennifer Halverson was always doing. *Doesn't the water feel divine, Jeffrey*, she might have said as she

walked toward him, shaking her hips back and forth like an old-time movie actress.

Then she imagined what was happening right now. Lord knows what embarrassing things Morgan was telling him while she hid in the lake.

Suddenly she desperately needed more air. She shot her head above the water and immediately started to cough and heave.

Jeff and Morgan were standing right there watching her.

“Smooth move, ex-lax,” Morgan said, as if Ava wasn’t horrified enough.

But Jeff was just smiling at her. The sun shining behind his head made his hair glow, as if he’d dropped straight down from heaven.

“Hey do you want to get a lemonade with me?” he asked.

Before she could stop herself, she turned around to make sure he was really asking her, Ava Lewis, to go and get a lemonade with him.

“He means *you*,” Morgan hissed.

Ava stared at him, stunned. He’d never spoken to her before. For a moment she thought this might be some kind of practical joke. A few months before a few of the popular kids had gotten together and told poor Beth Miller that Ian Franklin wanted to “go with her.” Everyone knew that Beth was madly in love with Ian. Beth said yes right away and went up to Ian, who actually laughed when Beth called him

her boyfriend. Beth had cried and gone home early. It was awful.

But this was Jeff Jackson in the flesh and he didn’t seem to be joking.

She stared at him so long he started to smile, then break into laughter. “Come on, it’s just a lemonade,” he said. “I won’t kidnap you, I promise.”

“Okay,” she croaked. Her face burned with embarrassment. She was such a dork.

She glanced back at Morgan as they walked away together, and her friend smiled and gave her the thumbs-up sign. Ava quickly looked away.

Jeff was as smooth and relaxed as ever, striding beside her. They passed a group of the popular girls, who must have all just arrived, and she could feel them eyeing her. Especially Jennifer Halverson, who did not look at all happy. Ava walked with her chin up, trying not to think about them all staring at her—not only walking with Jeff Jackson but in a *bathing suit* no less. She sucked in her stomach.

“I never really talked to Morgan before,” Jeff said. “She’s pretty funny.”

“Yeah,” she said. She tried to think of something to add but her mind went pathetically blank. It always went blank when she needed to say something important.

“She says you live alone with your dad, who’s some kind of professor?”

“Yeah.”

“My dad is, too. That’s what I want to be, a professor.”

“Of what?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Maybe bugs.”

“Bugs?”

“Yeah, I love them. I collect beetles.”

“Oh.”

Fortunately, they walked up to the lemonade stand right then, so Ava didn’t have to say anything about his gross collecting habits.

“Two lemonades,” Jeff said, pulling out a five-dollar bill.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the drink. She took a sip, and it was like drinking candy. She smiled at him happily.

“You want to walk over to the carousel?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said, wondering if he was going to start looking for beetles. She thought if he did, she might die.

The music from the ride, old-timey and tinny, was blaring from the old wooden structure. It was one of Ava’s favorite places in the world. Even with all the disgusting bug talk, she couldn’t imagine anything better than this moment, right now. Summer was here, and she was drinking a lemonade by the carousel with the cutest boy in school.

That is when she noticed a weird kind of itching on her arms. She tried to scratch them nonchalantly as they walked over to the multicolored carousel animals bobbing up and down.

“My favorite is the deer with the antlers and jewel eyes,” she said, to distract him.

“Where?”

She turned, shifting her back to him and furiously scratching her arm, and pointed. “That one.”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “I like that one. But my favorite is the lion.” And then he gave her a funny look. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

“Like what?” she asked, dropping her arms and turning back to him with wide eyes. It was a look she’d practiced in the mirror. Wide eyes, like Marilyn Monroe.

“Um, I think you’re like bleeding or something. In back.”

The carousel spun around and around, flashing its lights. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Jennifer and her friends approaching.

Bleeding? She felt the oddest sensation then, a prickling across her arms and shoulders, down her back. As if she’d gotten tangled up in brambles in the forest. And then she started to itch all over.

“Are you okay?”

She tried to stammer an answer, but just made a strange strangled sound instead. She wanted to scratch herself *everywhere*. What was happening to her? She thought about Lucy Spiegel, how she’d spent a whole day last year walking around school with her skirt tucked into her underwear. And now here Ava was, standing in front of everyone in her new

bathing suit, with some hideous thing happening to her body that she couldn't even see. Her mind spun in horror.

Before it got any worse, she turned and ran. Past the lemonade stand, past Jennifer and her friends, past the beginning of the beach line and over to the bathrooms. Her skin prickling and itching. She touched her arms as she ran, and felt little bumps that hadn't been there before. Thankfully, the girl's room was empty and she rushed inside and slammed the door shut.

Scratching furiously, she peered into the mirror at her own horrified face and then at her arms and shoulders, the strange bumps she'd felt under her fingers. As if . . . something was growing from her skin.

Just then, another feather drifted into the air. Bright white, like the one in her father's workroom.

Was it coming from... her? It seemed her body was always playing tricks on her nowadays. Everything growing, changing, becoming monstrous and gross and strange...

Outside, someone started banging on the door. "Are you okay, Ava?" It was Morgan. "Ava, what's going on? Why'd you run away like that? He's gonna think you're crazy."

She moved right next to the door and pressed her lips to the crack.

"Morgan," she said, whispering as loudly as she could. "Can you bring me my cell and my clothes?"

"What's going on? Ava, you're being crazy!"

"Just bring them! Please!"

"Okay, okay. You know, other people need to get in here."

"Then hurry! Run!!"

All she wanted now was to get out of there. Get back to her pale pink room and shut the door. Then she could cry as much as she wanted to. All she had to do was hold herself together till then.

A few minutes later, Morgan was back, yelling for Ava to open the door.

Ava opened it a crack, grabbed her clothes and phone, and then pushed it shut again. "Just give me a minute," she yelled, slipping back into her clothes and trying to dial her father at the same time.

He answered on the first ring. "What is it?"

"Dad," she said. "Please come get me. Right away."

To her surprise, he didn't ask any questions. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes," he said. "Will you be okay until then?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then wait for me in the parking lot." They hung up, and she looked once more into the mirror, ignoring Morgan and other voices now, just outside the door.

Other than her watery, terrified eyes, she looked normal.

A normal almost-thirteen-year-old who couldn't stop scratching her weird, pale, not-even-slightly-tan skin.

She slipped on her T-shirt and shorts, then opened the door and left the bathroom. An angry woman pushed past

her inside.

“What’s wrong?” Morgan asked, her face pained. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Ava said. She felt bad for her friend, who was so worried, but what could she say to her? She had no idea what was wrong. All she wanted to do was curl up and die. “I just want to go home.”

“Okay.” Morgan reached out and hugged her, and Ava hugged her back. “I’ll tell Jeff you only freak out like a loonytunes on Sundays.”

Ava smiled. Morgan was a good best friend even if she was a huge dork. “I’ll text you later.”

Her father raced into the parking lot like an ambulance driver, looking visibly relieved to find Ava all in one piece.

“What’s going on?” he asked, as she slipped into the car. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine!” she said, folding her arms and turning to the window.

“You’re fine?”

She held back tears. “Dad, please! I just need to go home!”

He looked at her and sighed. “Ava, don’t you find this behavior a little odd? Are you trying to give your old dad a heart attack?”

“You’re not that old,” she lied, leaning her forehead

against the glass. In the distance, she could see Jeff and his friends. They were probably all talking about what a complete spazz she was. “Dad, can we just go, please?”

“We’re going, we’re going,” he said, pulling back onto the country road that led to the lake.

After an excruciating ride with her nosy father, Ava ran into her room and closed the door, then pulled off her T-shirt and shorts and bathing suit. A cluster of feathers—tiny ones, little baby feathers—fell to the floor, bloody at the tips.

She looked down at it, then turned her back to the mirror and looked over her shoulder.

Her skin looked strange and jagged and bumpy, but soft, too. Kind of magical. She looked more closely and gasped. There were tiny little feathers all across her back, as if she were some kind of winged animal. They were sprouting all over her back now, across her shoulders and down her upper arms. Some were fully formed feathers, some just the tips, pressing out. And all over, she tingled and itched.

And Jeff had seen!

She started rubbing her palms down her arms, trying to find some relief.

It was too much. Ava moved away from the mirror, lay on her side on the bed.

Monique was curled up by the pillow and Ava pulled her to her chest, but the cat wriggled out of her arms just as another feather wafted into the air. Monique leapt up and

swatted at it, watching with fascination as it drifted to the floor.

For a few minutes Ava just lay there. Then she reached out and picked up the photo of her mother that she kept on the nightstand. A black-and-white photo of her staring into the camera. Impossibly beautiful, with inky black eyes and long pale hair.

“Mama,” Ava whispered, letting go, letting tears roll down her face. “Please. Come back.”



CHAPTER TWO

*A*va had not even been three years old when her mother died, and yet she swore she could remember her, even if those memories were like fragments from dreams.

But she kept those bits of memory close to her heart: the smell of her mother’s hair, the feel of her mother’s skin as she held Ava in her arms, the image of her laughing in the sunlight. In her closet, she kept a box filled with her mother’s things: a scarf, a few pieces of jewelry, a bottle of the perfume her mother wore, which Ava occasionally took out and held to her face, breathing in, imagining she could conjure her mother to her right then. And then she had photos. Like the

one next to her bed, which her father had taken one day out in the backyard, under the weeping willow. This was how Ava always thought of her. The sunlight streaming down on her light hair so that it seemed almost white, her beautiful laughing face.

Her mother.

Her father never wanted to talk about her. Though it had been more than ten years since her death, he had never even looked at another woman since. You'd think she was still alive, the way he wore his wedding ring and spoke of her, on the rare occasion that he did at all, as if she were right around the corner. Even Ava knew this was not exactly the most healthy behavior. The only person Ava could *really* talk to about her mother—the only other person who had known her mother, that is, who was still around—was her grandmother, and Grandma Kay was old and losing her memory. Ava's mother didn't even have any family of her own, so when she died there was no one left. No one to remember her, or tell stories about her when she was young.

And so Ava's mother was a secret thing, something only for her.

Sometimes, Ava liked it that way—or maybe she didn't like it, but she was at least okay with it—having this secret mother who lived in dreams and photographs. Other times, like now, she would have given anything to have her mother back. A real mother who would hold her and comfort her

and explain what was happening and tell her that everything was going to be okay.

Sitting in front of the mirror in her bedroom, with the door locked, Ava stared at herself in disbelief. She couldn't look away, the sight was so horrible.

In the few hours since she'd returned home from the lake, the itching had stopped but the feathers seemed to be *multiplying* . . . growing up and down her arms, over her shoulders. And they were becoming larger, some as long as her pinky finger. She put her hand over her arm, felt them pushing against her palm. They prickled across her back, her shoulders, her arms. Coating her until it was impossible to see the skin underneath.

She picked a feather up off the floor and brought it to her face. It seemed normal enough, for a feather, though it was bright white and seemed to glitter when the light hit it.

She ignored the plinks coming from her computer and the buzzing coming from her cell—no doubt Morgan IM-ing and texting her to see what had happened. She couldn't deal with Morgan right now, couldn't deal at all with the awfulness of what was happening, and the one big truth that it all pointed to . . .

That she was a *freak*. A total, complete freak.

To think of all the times she'd been embarrassed by her pale skin, her too-tall body, her pooching belly. She'd give

anything now, to just go back to normal. Suddenly nothing about her normal life seemed so bad at all. So what if she wasn't one of the popular girls? So what if she could barely speak and in fact had a tendency to dive underwater like a huge dork when Jeff Jackson was around?

Now everything was ruined. She would never be able to show her face in public again. All her dreams of growing up and moving to a big city like New York and maybe getting a job writing for a magazine or owning a flower shop or becoming a psychiatrist were shattered. She would obviously never be able to leave her house again, let alone Pennsylvania or the seventh grade. Not only would Jeff Jackson never like her, but no boy ever. Unless he was blind. And lived in a bubble.

Ava refused to leave her room all that afternoon and evening, even when her father knocked on the door and told her that *Pretty in Pink* was on (she loved old John Hughes movies!) and that he was thinking of ordering a pizza for dinner and would even let her pick the toppings.

"I'm not hungry! And I'm so over that movie," she lied, immediately realizing she was starving. "I'm already in bed."

"Can I bring you anything?"

A new life, she thought. "No!"

"Okay. Well, there will be leftovers in the fridge if you feel better later. Get some rest."

"I'm *trying*," she said, making her voice sound raspy

and weak. There was no way she could go back to school tomorrow. Or anywhere again, ever, for that matter. But how was she going to explain that to her dad?

Later, when the television was silent and the house dark and she knew her dad was in bed, she slipped on her favorite hoodie and tiptoed into the kitchen, grabbed a slice of pizza and a yogurt and went back to her room.

She ate the pizza and yogurt, and then she went back to the kitchen and ate the rest of the pizza, until it was gone. What did it matter? At least she could console herself with yummy food since obviously she could never go out in public again. She imagined her days from now on. Locked in the house, empty pizza boxes strewn around her. She'd end up being like that guy she saw on TV who had to be carried out of his house with a crane. Except of course that guy didn't have feathers.

She moaned out loud. Never in her life had she felt this sorry for herself, or this envious of everyone else. Even the most uncool girl in school was cooler than she was right now. Becky Rainer with her unwashed hair and funny walk and braces with bits of food in them, even *Becky* was cooler than she was. She thought of Becky, with her smooth greasy unfeathered skin, and wanted to cry.

Plus, her stomach hurt now.

She took off the hoodie and lay on the bed, careful to lie with the feathers flat—it hurt, she realized, to bend them,

and it was a relief to expose them to the air. She stared out the window. There was a bright, big moon, nearly full, shining through the tree branches, surrounded by thousands of stars. Ava shifted her head, moving her pillow down, until she could stare right into the moon, unobstructed. As soon as she did, she felt her body relax, and sleep start to come over her.

Her grandmother had told her to look for her mother in the moon and the stars. “On the night of the full moon,” her grandmother had said, “you can see her, sometimes sitting on the moon, sometimes spread out over the stars, flying across the night sky.”

The moon glowed behind the trees, and the stars all seemed to be spinning.

“Are you there?” Ava whispered.

The leaves rustled in a slight breeze.

She tried to stay awake, but her eyes were so heavy now. Outside, the breeze picked up, and the tree itself started to sway. The stars made shapes in the sky. The Big Dipper and Little Dipper, which her father had pointed out to her, the day he showed her how to find the North Star. She imagined her mother there, among the constellations, imagined she could make out her mother’s long hair, her large eyes, in the stars. And just as she drifted off to sleep, she was sure she saw her mother’s face looking down at her, smiling.

When Ava woke, the sun was streaming in through the window. She blinked, disoriented, as her room came to life around her. The pale pink walls and the Ava Gardner poster her grandmother had given her the year before, the little rocking chair covered with discarded clothing. She sat up, yawning. What strange dreams she’d had: She’d been flying, she remembered, great big wings stretched out on either side of her body, the stars surrounding her, the sky like black water, thick and warm.

She reached down to scratch her arm, expecting to find bare skin.

Instead, her hand pushed into a pile of feathers, which ruffled at the contact. Ava gasped and snatched her hand away. Gross!

She leapt up and ran to the mirror.

There she was: her flowing dark hair, her pale skin, her long neck...and then her long arms, covered, from the shoulder to the elbow nearly, with white sparkling feathers. There were so many now! She turned; they were covering her back, too, from her neck and down. Tight and close to her body, like a thin layer of vanilla icing.

There was no way Ava was going to school the next morning, but of course her father might have something to say about that. He did seem to think that school was awfully important, being a professor and a parent and all. She wrapped herself in her comforter until it was covering

her arms and back and shoulders, and opened the door of her room. Her father was in the kitchen pouring coffee. She shuffled toward him, coughing and trying to look as miserable as possible.

“It lives!” he said, turning and smiling.

“Barely,” she said.

“You look like you need this coffee more than I do, sweetheart.”

“Gross. What I need is my bed.”

“Well, I’m not sure they let you bring beds to school, do they?”

“Dad,” she moaned. “I can’t go to school when I’m this sick!”

He cocked his head and looked at her, squinting. “Are you sure this doesn’t have anything to do with what happened yesterday, at the lake? You seemed awfully upset. Morgan seemed to think it might have had something to do with one Jeffrey Jackson?”

Ava could have killed Morgan then. “No! Dad, I’m really really sick. I was sick yesterday, too, that’s why I was upset.”

“Not sick enough to finish off that pizza, though?”

“I have a *cold*,” she said, coughing for effect. “You can still be hungry with a cold. Hungrier, even!”

He reached over and put his hand against her forehead, frowning. “Well, no fever. No body parts falling off. Maybe we should make an appointment with Dr. Rose.”

“I don’t need a doctor, Dad, I can just stay in bed all day and drink lots of OJ.”

“Who is this Jeffrey fellow anyway?”

Ava felt herself blush from her forehead to her toes. Yet another weird way her body was betraying her. “He’s just a boy at school, Dad.”

“Hmm. How very interesting.” He smiled and raised his eyebrows, his handsome face crinkling, and then pulled her in for a hug. “You stay in bed and you rest. I’ll be home by dinnertime. Call me if you need anything at all, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, careful to keep her comforter wrapped tight around her.

She watched her father’s old truck pulling out of the driveway and into the street. Outside, the sun was bright and shining. It would be an amazing day. When she was sure her father was a safe distance away, Ava threw off the comforter and ran into the backyard.

No matter how miserable her life was, and how freaky she was becoming, it was still a gorgeous day and one that she didn’t have to spend in school like the rest of her friends. And the benefit of living in the middle of nowhere? Was that there weren’t many people around to see you when you grew feathers all down your arms and across your back. She spread her arms and laughed. Hey, maybe she could fly. That might semi make up for being a freak.

She took a running leap into the air, but nothing at all

happened, and she tumbled onto the grass. The feathers stayed tight on her skin. Her arms remained regular arms. Just really really weird regular arms. She sighed.

Flopping over onto her back, she let the sun soothe her. Immediately she felt better. If only every moment could be like this one: the sun warm and lush on her skin, the earth soft underneath her. The vague sound of sprinklers and birds and cars driving by out on the main road.

The air smelled of freshly cut grass. Her dad must have been busy the day before.

She closed her eyes and dreamed. In her fantasy, she was at the lake wearing her bathing suit, and Jeff Jackson was there, smiling at her, taking her hand. They swam, hand in hand, laughing and pushing through the water. She imagined his wet face emerging from the water, him smiling and gazing at her with those blue eyes of his . . .

He was so cute!

That chin with the dimple in it, his super handsome face and blue blue eyes that made her swoon . . . In her fantasies, she'd laugh and tell stories and jokes that sent him howling with laughter. She was easy and normal and not even slightly shy. She was like Jennifer and the other girls who always looked so confident, like nothing at all bothered them, ever. She couldn't imagine any of them dying of embarrassment the way she, Ava, did every day of her life. She had never seen any of their faces turn pink, and then bright red, the

ways hers did whenever a teacher called on her and made her speak in front of the class and all she wanted to do was curl up and hide. They were all pretty and perfect and had beautiful, radiant mothers who dropped them off at school and showed up at school dances to make sure no one did anything bad, like when Kyle Summerfield sneaked in beer one time and passed out in the bathroom.

She could practically feel his hand in hers. Her first kiss, her first boyfriend.

She thought about him buying her lemonade at the carousel, how he had looked at her, all the fascinating things she could have said to him.

But the fantasy didn't last. A bird cry snapped her out of it, and she remembered: She was not a girl who could have a boyfriend like Jeff Jackson, or any boy, really. She was a freak, with feathers growing down her arms. How could she ever show her face anywhere? How could she ever go back to school, or to the lake? What would she do tomorrow? She would have to spend her whole life locked up in her bedroom!

Above her head, a bird was swooping down. A swan. Its huge white wings spread out on either side.

Ava gasped, sitting up.

It was so beautiful, and its black, glittering eyes were staring right at her.

She sat as still as possible, afraid to breathe.

For a moment the bird seemed to be floating. And then

it let out a long, trumpeting sound, passing over her so close she could have reached up and grabbed it. She cried out and bent down, covering her head, and then, after a moment had passed, she looked up again as the swan disappeared in the distance, its enormous white wings sparkling in the sun.

It felt like she'd witnessed something magical. Like the time she'd come upon a great buck in the woods, its antlers rising up into the sky, and they'd stood there watching each other, only feet away, before the animal turned and bolted. Amazing.

She leaned back again, feeling happy suddenly. She stretched out her arms and realized they were sort of beautiful, the feathers. Weird, yes. But sort of beautiful.

In a weird way.

The whole day spread out in front of her. She could watch *Pretty in Pink* maybe, if her dad had Tivo'd it, which he probably had, to be nice. Watching Molly Ringwald make that cool pink eighties dress always made her feel better about the world. She could lay out some more, but was there really a point now? She could play video games, or give Monique a new hairdo. Monique hadn't really been looking so sharp lately.

What she really wanted to do, she decided, was see her grandma. It had been at least a couple of weeks since she'd seen her, and you never knew with old people. Grandma Kay was always saying she had one foot in the grave, which

made Ava imagine her with one foot in a big hole in the ground, her spindly legs stretching out like taffy. Ava loved her grandmother and her little house that always seemed to smell like gingerbread. Even if Grandma Kay was a little nutty sometimes, as Ava's dad put it, she was the one person who could make everything seem normal again.

When Ava stood, finally, there were white feathers all over the grass. From her or from the swan, she couldn't be sure.

"Great," she said out loud. Shouting after the swan like a crazy person. "That's just great! Thank you!"

It was slow going, trying to shower. Feathers kept clogging the drain and she had to scoop them out and throw them into the toilet so the shower wouldn't overflow. Plus the whole feathers-in-the-drain thing might look sort of funny when her dad got home, she thought. Monique didn't make it any easier, perched the whole time on the toilet, eyeing Ava suspiciously and occasionally voicing her discontent.

It felt surprisingly good though, the water moving over her, and she couldn't help but notice how clean and bright the feathers were after. Even cleaner and brighter than they had been before, which was sort of crazy.

She dressed quickly, tearing through her closet to find the hoodie she'd worn all winter and throwing it on. It seemed to cover everything all right as long as she kept the sleeves down and the hood on her head. Which might look strange to

anyone else, wearing long sleeves and a hood in the summer sun, but not as strange as it'd look to be covered in feathers. She could just pretend she was delicate and cold all the time, like Grandma Kay was. Though Grandma Kay was, like, a thousand years old.

Luckily, Grandma Kay wouldn't notice anything; that she could be sure of. Grandma Kay had started losing her sight some years before and by now was nearly blind. Grandma Kay might be her only friend from now on, come to think of it. Though maybe, Ava thought, it would be possible for her to meet other blind people who would accept her. Blind people! The thought was heartening.

Ava felt like a spy as she cut through the woods and took back roads to Grandma Kay's. She loved this route: the wildflowers growing along the sides of the roads, the sweet little houses with porches wrapping around them, the big swaying trees. It might have been a nowhere town, but it was awfully pretty. She loved the little park on her grandma's side of town, with the treehouses and the merry-go-round covered with pictures of snails.

Grandma Kay lived in a house that felt more like home than anywhere Ava had ever been. As she approached, she already started feeling like everything would be all right. But how could it be, really?

"Grandma!" she called, pushing through the screen door in back, which was never locked.

There was no answer.

"Grandma!"

"Is that you Ava?"

"Yes, where are you?"

"In here!"

Ava followed her voice into the den, where her grandmother sat in her old chair, rocking back and forth. A small, elegant woman, she was beautifully dressed in a filmy top and skirt.

"What are you doing, Grandma?" Ava asked, concerned.

"Just sitting here, thinking about your grandfather."

"Oh." Ava sat down on the couch. "Don't be sad, Grandma."

"I'm not sad at all honey. How are you, doll? Shouldn't you be at school?"

"I stayed home sick today."

"Is that right? And yet you managed to make your way here. I'm so impressed!"

Ava laughed. "Well." Her grandma always seemed to know when she was lying. She seemed to know lots of things.

"Is everything all right with you, Ava? Your grandfather seems to think that you're having a hard time right now."

Ava hesitated. "But, umm. Grandpa is dead, Grandma."

"I can still talk to him, though, dear."

"Really? How?"

"He lives in here." Grandma Kay pointed to her chest,

where her heart was.

Ava felt tears spring to her eyes. “Oh. Well. I just . . . I don’t know what to do. Something is . . . happening to me. Like, with my body.”

Her grandmother smiled, fixing her pale blue eyes on Ava. “You’re becoming a young woman, dear. Your body does all kinds of things at this age. Don’t be afraid of what’s happening. It’s natural. More natural than you think.”

Ava looked at her grandmother. Did she know? She had the oddest expression on her face, as if she were looking at a ghost. It was the same kind of expression she’d had when she read Ava’s palm or laid out her tarot cards, when Ava was a kid. Grandma Kay had always been funny like that, and Ava and Morgan had loved to spend afternoons over here when they were little, listening to Grandma Kay talk about love lines and hangmen and magicians. But that was before Grandpa died and Grandma Kay started losing her vision and Ava’s father told Grandma Kay to stop with the kooky stuff altogether. “You’re corrupting their pure young minds,” he’d said.

Ava shook her head.

Of course Grandma Kay didn’t know.

She sighed. “It’s not natural, though, what’s happening. It’s . . . weird. And gross.” Ava almost took off the hoodie to show her grandmother the feathers, or at least let her feel them, but then she stopped herself. What could her

grandmother, a blind old woman, do to help? Grandma Kay might have been kooky (and wonderful!), but she couldn’t make miracles happen. Ava just wanted to see her, be here. Lie for a while on the couch and talk to her grandma while eating ginger snaps out of the box.

Forget, and feel like everything would be fine.

“Honey, you’re becoming who you’re going to be. That I know. And you’re going to be wonderful. All you have to do is sit back and let it happen.”

“Sure,” Ava said. “Just let it happen.”

What other choice did she have?





CHAPTER THREE

When Ava tried to stay home from school a second day, her father would have none of it. Especially when she'd acted suspiciously normal the night before as they sat together watching a movie he'd Netflix'ed for her. An old Ava Gardner movie that actually wasn't too bad for being black and white.

"You should really get to know your doppelganger," he'd said.

"Doppelganger?"

"Your twin."

She was certainly regretting watching that movie now

and letting her father see her acting so healthy and un-sick. But it was hard to spend hours on end pretending to be sick in bed when it was so beautiful outside, when she'd just spent a long lovely afternoon with her grandmother, and when her father insisted on making his famous Italian meatballs that he rolled by hand, plus a big salad with artichoke hearts and olives, two of her favorite things, and *then* put on a movie with a gorgeous old movie star he claimed was her twin. The movie star she'd been named after, no less.

There were worse twins to have, she had to admit. As her grandmother would say, that Ava Gardner was one tall drink of water even if she was only five foot five.

Now there was no way she could stay home, though she definitely felt sick. Felt like she was dying, in fact. Didn't that horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach count for something?

"I think it's called I-don't-want-to-go-to-school-itis," her father said. "Believe me, I've had it, too. And why have you suddenly decided to wear a hoodie every day in June? What's going on under there? Do you think Ava Gardner ever wore a hoodie?"

"Dad, I'm twelve!" she cried, and then ran into her room and slammed the door.

How could she possibly go to school and face Jeff Jackson and Jennifer Halverson and all the rest of them? Not only did she have thick white feathers all down her arms and across

her shoulders and back, but now the skin around the feathers seemed to be wrinkling, drying up, separating. It was getting worse! And even more gross, which hadn't seemed possible the day before. By this time next week she could look just like Big Bird.

The hoodie hid everything, but on top of looking totally ridiculous in this weather, it also made her look like she'd gained twenty pounds.

Which she hadn't. At least not *yet*.

"Ava, you are going to school if I have to drag you there by that ridiculous hood!" her father yelled, banging on the door. "You have less than two weeks left, all your exams, and no child of mine is going to fail the seventh grade!"

"How can they fail me for being *sick*!" she yelled back, from behind the door.

She knew she was being ridiculous, but what was she supposed to do? It was all so unfair!

"Ava, we both know you are not sick. If you'd tell me what is actually going on, I could possibly help you. You can tell me anything, you know. Whatever's going on with you. I am an adult and fairly intelligent as well."

"You can't help me!" she said, throwing open the door. A dramatic gesture worthy of a movie star, she thought, Ava Gardner flashing through her mind. "You would never understand!"

Her father rolled his eyes and threw up his hands. "You're

not even a teenager yet, Ava. What am I going to do with you? Now get dressed and I'm taking you to school myself."

"Fine," she said, slamming the door shut again and throwing herself onto her bed.

She would just have to wear hoodies every day until school was over and then she had the whole summer to lock herself in her room—well, maybe hang out in the backyard, and in the woods, and in the den in front of the big-screen television, and maybe at Grandma Kay's house, though only if her father dropped her off and she rode in the trunk of the car—to be a freak by herself. And after that? She'd obviously have to run off and join the circus.

That wasn't a bad idea, she realized. Imagining herself, suddenly, covered in white feathers, her black hair piled on top of her head, riding around on the top of an elephant. The crowds would laugh and roar and applaud as she guided the elephant around the ring. Maybe she'd stand on the elephant's back and wave a baton with tassles on the end the whole time. Tassles on *fire*.

"Ava!"

"I'm coming!" she said, jumping up from the bed and throwing on her hoodie and a pair of jeans, a feather drifting to the ground behind her.

She grabbed her school bag and her cell phone, which she flipped open for the first time in two days. She'd finally silenced it the night before to avoid Morgan's calls. Now

she had thirty-one missed calls, and nearly twenty text messages. At least Morgan loved her. Morgan *was* like her sister. Maybe Morgan would still love her when she turned into a giant bird.

“WHERE RU?” was the last text.

Ava wrote back. “Was sick, coming today.”

She spent the rest of the ride deleting her in-box, one message from Morgan after another, until they pulled up to the front of the ugly gold brick building with the words HOUGHTON MIDDLE SCHOOL across it.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?” Ava’s father asked, turning to her. “Or at least take off that hood?”

He looked so loving and worried. She felt terrible for him suddenly. Not only had he lost his wife and never really even looked at another woman since, but now his daughter was covered in feathers and very likely going to join the circus or go live in a cave. On impulse, she reached over and kissed his cheek.

“I’ll think about it, Dad,” she said. “Thank you for driving me to school and caring so much about my education even though I am deathly ill.”

He laughed. “No problem, kiddo. I love you, too. Now go knock ’em dead.”

The school loomed up in front of her, kids standing all around and hanging out on the front steps. She took a deep

breath. It was worse than she thought. It was as if no one had ever seen a girl in a hoodie on a hot June day before. She walked hunched over, with her head down, but she could still feel everyone staring.

It *was* hot. High of ninety degrees, the weather forecast had said. Already she was starting to sweat, which made her feathers stick together. As if she didn’t feel like enough of a freak already. Everyone else was dressed as if they were living in a California beach town rather than the center of Pennsylvania. Louis Woods was even wearing a surfer shirt that hung to his orange fake-tanned legs. Ridiculous.

And right there by the front doors, Jeff Jackson was standing alone. She glanced up and met his eyes. He was staring at her. She could feel herself blushing wildly. He had to think she was completely mad after what had happened, not to mention hideous and deformed and totally impolite. But to her surprise, he smiled and waved.

Immediately she looked down, and then caught herself and looked up again, forcing herself to wave back. Ava Gardner would have waved back. The circus star who could stand on an elephant and twirl batons would have waved back. She forced herself to keep walking, even though every instinct told her to turn around and run. Her heart was pounding in her chest. What if feathers starting spilling from her body and onto the ground?

He obviously wanted to talk to her. He was actually

smiling and gesturing for her to come over.

Nervously, she walked toward him. She wracked her mind for something to say, to explain her strange behavior at the lake. Maybe she could explain that her body had been temporarily taken over by extremely dorky aliens? Maybe he found it charming that she lacked any kind of social grace?

As she walked toward him, a group of girls burst out of the front doors of the school and skipped down the stairs. Within seconds Jeff was surrounded.

“Jeff!” they called, giggling. “What’s going on?” one voice in particular asked. Jennifer Halverson’s voice. Of course.

Jeff gave Ava a small smile and a shrug as Jennifer threw her arms around him.

Awkwardly, Ava changed direction to pass the group of them on the left, and almost stumbled.

“Nice outfit,” Brenda Mulligan called out. Brenda was one of the small group of girls who seemed to follow Jennifer everywhere. A zombie, Morgan called her. “All those girls are zombies,” Morgan had said. “Except they don’t even *want* brains!”

Ava ignored the group’s laughter. If they were laughing at her, which they probably were, she didn’t want to know.

“Hey, cut it out,” Jeff said.

Ava looked up in shock. He was defending her! She couldn’t believe it. He was so gallant, like Cary Grant. She wanted to run up right then and there and plant one on him.

She gave him a bright smile as she passed, just to annoy Jennifer even more, and a thousand fantasies filled her head as she raced up the front steps of the school.

She imagined herself and Jeff going down a wedding aisle. Her sitting on her elephant and wearing a big white feathered dress, him in his swimming trunks, his tanned muscles gleaming, his handsome face smiling as he vowed to defend her and love her and act just like Cary Grant but even more awesome until they were old and dead.

As she pushed through the front doors, she was jumping down from the elephant’s back and into Jeff Jackson’s arms.

“Ava!” Morgan’s voice called out, piercing through the hallway chatter.

Ava tried to pretend she couldn’t hear her friend. Suddenly the hallways seemed impossibly crowded—and dangerous. All she had to do was get to homeroom and she’d be safe. She shouldn’t have even been here. What she should have done, she realized, was walk right past the school and loiter all day at the supermarket down the street, or out in the woods like some juvenile delinquent.

“Ava!”

Morgan was right in front of her. Despite herself, Ava was impressed that her friend could move so quickly. Morgan wasn’t the most graceful girl ever, not that Ava could talk.

“I have a test, I need to study.”

“Bull. What happened?” Morgan stood with her hands

at her waist, refusing to budge. Her red hair wild around her freckled face.

"I got sick. What do you mean?"

"Something *happened*, at the lake. You weren't sick, you freaked out."

"You misunderstood."

"I did *not*. One minute you were making out with the most popular boy in school, the next minute you were freaking out in the bathrooms."

"We didn't make out."

"Whatever. You would have, if you hadn't freaked out."

"Quit saying that!"

They were standing in front of a classroom, and now kids were pushing by them to get inside. People were starting to stare.

"Ava! Why are you being so weird? And why are you wearing that hood?"

Ava took Morgan's hand and started pulling her down the hallway to the girls' bathroom.

"You better tell me what's going on," Morgan said, "if you're going to make me miss homeroom. I already have three tardies, you know."

"Listen, something really terrible is happening, okay?" Ava said, pulling Morgan into the girls' room.

She'd expected to find a safe haven there, but she realized, too late, that they weren't alone. Jennifer Halverson's BFF

Vivienne Witmer was standing at the mirror smearing gloss over her perfect Angelina-Jolie lips.

"I hope everything is okay," Vivienne said, turning to them with exaggerated concern.

"Thanks," Ava said.

"You must really be having a bad hair day," Vivienne said as she walked past and out the door. "See you!"

"She is so unpleasant," Morgan sniffed. "It's just because Jeff Jackson likes you, you know. Now are you going to tell me what's going on or not?"

Ava studied her friend. If she had to tell anyone, it would be Morgan. She probably should tell someone what was going on in case the feathers killed her or something, or she suddenly turned into a giant bird. But just the thought of talking about it out loud made her feel sick.

"How bad can it possibly be? We live in Pennsylvania and we're *twelve*. Do you have some weird rash or something?"

"No!"

"Why do you have your head covered? Did you get a bad perm? Or cut off all your hair?" Morgan's eyes widened. "Oh my god, you shaved your head."

"Why would I shave my head?"

"You totally liked that girl's shaved head on *America's Next Top Model*. You did it, didn't you?"

"No!"

"Do you need me to help you shop for a wig?"

"No, I do not."

"Ava, look on the bright side. You could get a pink bob or something."

"*Okay*," Ava said. "I'll tell you what happened, and what's happening, but you won't believe it. And you have to swear you will not tell one single other soul."

"I swear!"

"But I can't tell you here. Can you come over after school? My dad gets home around six so we'll have a couple of hours."

Morgan crossed her arms and leaned against one of the sinks. "You can't make me wait until after school. It's only first period! Which we are missing, by the way, *thankyouverymuch*."

"You might freak out when I tell you."

"I promise not to freak out, okay? No matter what it is."

"You swear?"

"Yes!"

Ava took another deep breath. Outside, the halls were quiet now. Normally she would never have skipped a class, but nothing about today was normal, was it? She thought wistfully of her straight A's and how little good they would do her in the world now. Obviously, it was all downhill from here.

Morgan stood waiting, her big green eyes watching Ava worriedly, impatiently.

"Let's go into a stall," Ava said. "Just in case anyone comes in. And then I'll show you. The one at the end."

"Okay," Morgan said.

Ava checked all the other stalls, just to be sure, even though all the doors were wide open. She would die if anyone overheard what she was about to tell her friend.

And then she followed Morgan into the last stall and latched the door.

"Okay," Ava said. "So . . ."

Her voice caught in her throat. To her surprise, she started to cry.

"Ava," Morgan said softly, reaching out to touch Ava's arm, "whatever it is I will help you. You're my best friend."

Ava nodded. Even with Morgan, it was so unbelievably embarrassing. She had to just do it quickly if she was going to do it at all.

"Well," she said, sighing, "just look, then. And no screaming."

And she unzipped her hoodie and pulled it off. Under, she was wearing a black Rolling Stones T-shirt her dad had given her, which she took off, too, until she was standing in her flowered bra.

Wincing, she looked up to see Morgan's reaction.

Her friend stood there with her mouth hanging open, staring in wonder.

"You have. . . ." Morgan reached out her fingers and

touched Ava's arm.

"Yes. They just started coming in at the lake, and now . . . Well, this."

"Wow. They're . . ."

"Feathers," Ava whispered.

"Beautiful."

Ava just stared at Morgan, who was softly touching the feathers on her arm with a dazzled look on her face. "What?"

"They're beautiful," Morgan said. "It's like you're wearing this completely glamorous, fantastic old feather jacket. It's so amazing. Like in one of those old movies your dad is always making us watch. With all those ladies who lie in bed and faint and stuff."

"But it's *not* a jacket."

"Let me see the back. It totally looks like you're wearing a jacket. Look how they go down your back and stop at your neck, and end perfectly at your elbows. It's totally weird."

"Yeah, thanks, I KNOW it's weird."

"But weird and *beautiful*, Ava. They're all glittery and perfect. Like, if you sold this in a store it would cost a million dollars."

Ava stamped her sneakered foot in frustration. "I can't take it off though! What am I supposed to do??"

Morgan shrugged, and then her face changed. "Wait a second . . ." She furrowed her brows.

"What?"

"Look." Morgan was touching Ava's arm near the elbow, lifting one of the feathers. "It looks like . . . Like they're starting to peel or something."

"What?!!" Ava snatched her arm away in panic. How much worse could it get? The tears returned then, hot and streaming down her face. What was wrong with her? "I'm such a freak!" she cried.

"No, look," Morgan said. "See? When you lift up the feather, it looks like it's starting to peel. And underneath, your skin is perfect. Can you feel that? Like you're . . . shedding or something."

"Oh my god. What is happening to me?"

Morgan was about to respond—though of course she didn't know any better than Ava did what was wrong—when the bell rang outside, signaling the end of first period. Any minute the bathroom would be full of girls.

Quickly, Ava grabbed her T-shirt and slipped it back on. As she was reaching for her hoodie, she noticed the little clump of feathers scattered on the toilet seat and the floor. "Morgan!" She pointed at the feathers, and her friend bent down to pick them up, accidentally knocking into Ava's arm as she did.

Zippering up her hoodie, Ava burst out of the stall just as Jennifer Halverson entered the bathroom with a few of the zombie girls just behind. After flushing the feathers away, Morgan followed Ava out of the stall.

Jennifer laughed. “Having some alone time, girls?” she asked. The zombies all laughed with her.

“Hey, have you seen Jeff around?” Morgan asked, her voice obnoxiously sweet. “He keeps asking about Ava. I think he has a crush or something. Guess we’ll go see what he wants!”

And with that, Morgan brushed past the group of them and out the door.

Jennifer stood looking after her, with her mouth open and her hands on her hips. “Did you hear what she just said to me?”

Ava slinked out the bathroom door and into the crowded hallway, avoiding Jennifer’s evil glare, adjusting her clothes so that no feathers would show, peeling or not.

CHAPTER FOUR

The rest of the day passed by in a haze of embarrassment and humiliation—which wouldn’t have been so different from most other days for Ava, except that this time there was actually a reason for it. School seemed to last forever, even worse than usual. In gym class, she had to muster every ounce of emotion to convince the teacher she was too sick to participate, and then she had to spend the whole class sitting in the grass next to Alison Freeman, watching the other girls play soccer as sweat rolled down her back, in and out of the feathers, and Alison went on and on about some Broadway musical she’d just seen as well as her great love for field hockey.

It was, truly, the worst hour of Ava's life.

Morgan was no help at all, rushing to find her between classes and staring at her with big googly eyes, offering Ava her arm as if she were an old lady.

"I may have feathers all over me," Ava was forced to say under her breath at one point, "but I can still *walk*, Morgan."

Morgan had just opened her eyes even wider and whispered back, "I bet you can fly, too. Do you want me to help you find out?"

"No!"

By the time Ava got home, she thought she might pass out from heatstroke, not to mention humiliation and mortification generally. The house was empty, except for Monique spread out lazily on the couch in front of the television, licking her paws and staring at Ava suspiciously.

"What?" Ava asked, putting her hands on her hips.

Monique narrowed her eyes and placed her paw on one of the fake fur pillows Ava had insisted her father buy. "Ava Gardner would totally have pillows like this," she'd argued at the time.

"Whatever," Ava sighed, heading to her room and tossing her backpack onto the floor. Behind her, Monique let out a loud yowl.

Ava pulled off the horrible hoodie and collapsed on her bed. She clicked on the ceiling fan and let the air move over her. The feathers were so thick now. Why couldn't she have

grown feathers in the wintertime? They might have come in handy then. She closed her eyes and tried to pretend she was somewhere far away. The air and coolness felt wonderful, amazing against her skin, ruffling through the feathers.

She turned over onto her stomach and stretched out. It felt so good, the cool air. She relaxed into the bed, let her mind drift . . .

She woke up disoriented, wrapped in covers. The room was dark. Monique was spread out beside her and moonlight spilled into the room through the window. So bright and silver and glittering, bathing her.

The windows were open, and cool air was blowing down on her from the fan whirring above her on the ceiling. She pulled in the covers more tightly around her.

For a few minutes, she barely knew where she was.

She looked around for a clock. 10:05, it said. It took her a moment to realize: 10:05 p.m. At night. She must have slept all through the evening. Slowly, the day came back to her, a sick feeling in her gut as she remembered school, the way everyone had stared at her, how uncomfortable she'd been.

And Jeff Jackson, defending her. Her heart fluttered. It hadn't been *that* bad a day, when it came down to it.

She got up, throwing off the covers, and pulled on her hoodie again. She tiptoed out of her room. She was hungry, she realized. Starving, in fact.

Her father's bedroom door was open and his bed still made. No wonder the house was so quiet; even if her father were home and asleep, she'd at least hear a snore or two. There was a note on top of the television: "Out fishing, back late. Dinner's in the fridge."

She froze. Realized, all of a sudden, that she'd fallen asleep with the bedroom door open . . . He had to have seen her, checked in on her at least. She felt a sudden resentment that he hadn't awakened her for dinner. And now she was starving and had to fend for herself! But more importantly, she thought, catching herself: Wouldn't he have seen? When had she pulled the covers around herself? Her heart pounded. Plus she hadn't been wearing a shirt! So she was weird, gross, and perverted, all at once. She felt guilty, as if she'd done something horribly wrong and been found out.

The thought crept up on her: but she hadn't done anything, had she? Maybe if he saw, and knew, he could help her.

Immediately she dismissed the idea. Her father had already dealt with the death of his wife, and plus now his own mother not only had one foot in the grave but was also talking to his dead father as if it was perfectly natural. She, Ava, was all he had.

How could she tell him she was covered in feathers?!

She sighed and wandered to the kitchen. As she crossed the living room, she caught sight of the full moon over the

mountains in the distance, through the big sliding glass door.

Of course. Her father always went fly fishing on nights of the full moon. He had for as long as she could remember, though Grandma Kay had told her once that he'd become much more regular and even fanatical about it after his wife died, as a way to cope. *That is what the moon is for*, she'd said. *It lets him see her again.*

Grandma Kay always talked that way, though.

Ava stared at the moon now. Perfectly round in the sky, a bright, glowing coin. Its light turned the whole house to silver. Outside, the trees swayed, and a wind rattled the leaves. It was spooky, but beautiful, strange, like something out of a dream. Everything seemed so otherworldly at night. Especially with the full moon outside and her father out fishing.

Her dad always said that fishing by moonlight was the best, that the trout were different somehow, surfacing for the bright light and getting confused and dazzled when it was not the sun that greeted them. He'd stay out all night and fish until dawn, but he was always happy the next day, glowing even. "They swim right to you," he said. "You could scoop them up with your hands." The forest, too, turned magical under the moon, he said, revealing all its secrets.

"Whatever floats your boat," was her typical response. More trout to throw right back in the water. She always thought how terrible it would be to be a fish in these parts,

getting caught over and over again whenever you just wanted to swim to the surface and get some dinner.

Speaking of which . . . Her growling stomach broke the mood, and she padded over to the kitchen to see what goodies her father had left behind.

Inside, right in the middle of the top shelf, was a Tupperware bowl with a note that said “DINNER, HEAT THREE MINUTES, FROM DAD” taped to the top. She peeked, saw it was his famous spaghetti bolognese, one of her favorites.

Things were starting to look up.

She poured herself a glass of lemonade and stuck the food in the microwave, then wandered back over to the sliding door as the rich scent of meat and sauce began to fill the house.

A figure moved and she cried out loud, almost dropping her drink, before she realized it was her own reflection she was looking at. She stopped, staring at herself. She looked . . . pretty. Even in her stupid hoodie. Tall and lean, her long black hair curling down and her skin pale, ivory, which was nice in this light. Beautiful, even. She set down her drink and stepped forward, curious.

She was entirely alone. Her father wouldn't be home for hours yet.

She unzipped the hoodie and pulled it off. Watched as the feathers spread from underneath her short sleeves down

to her elbow, catching the moonlight and seeming to glitter.

She stepped forward again, focusing in on her reflection in the glass. Shadows fell over her body, but the feathers glimmered and shone in the light, bright as the moon. Her hair fell black down over them. The feathers did really look like a jacket of some kind, like Morgan had said. She twisted around and looked over her shoulder, lifting up her hair to see the feathers covering her back, spreading up to her neck and down to her hips, but perfectly. As if someone had painted in an outline for them to fill.

She turned back around, moving her hair to cover her breasts.

It wouldn't be so bad, she thought, if she could always just walk about at night in the shadows, seeing her reflection in dark glass, by the light of the moon. She could hang out with vampires and wear lots of black.

Turning again, she put her palm on her forearm and moved it up, slowly, over her skin and to the feathers.

To her surprise, she could slip her hand in between the feathers and her skin. Right there, near her elbows, the feathers were no longer attached. She almost cried out, it was so unexpected, though Morgan had said something about it earlier in the day. Hadn't she? *Peeling*, she had said. *It looks like it's starting to peel . . .*

Ava had blocked it out until now. It had been hard enough just to get from class to class, insisting she was fine

even as sweat dripped all over her and she was about to die of heatstroke or humiliation, whichever came first.

She pushed her fingers up farther and felt more feathers coming off her skin, as if she actually *were* wearing a jacket, or, worse, picking a scab. The feathers were all stuck together now, it seemed, as if they'd grown into each other. She winced as she felt them come off her skin, as she lifted the feathers and pulled.

It was so gross. There was a slight sucking sound as the feathers pulled off. She reached up to feel her skin underneath, and her fingers stuck into what felt like a web.

She stopped, shuddering, and sat down on the couch, away from the sliding doors now. Catching her breath, she tried not to throw up. Pulling off the feathers couldn't be more gross than actually having them, could it?

She took a deep breath, and pulled some more, terrified she would rip off her own skin or do something similarly awful.

She whimpered out loud. Monique gave her a disgusted look from across the room.

"*You* try growing feathers and then peeling them off," Ava grumbled. Monique rolled her eyes and slinked away.

There was a sound from outside. Quickly, Ava grabbed her hoodie and slipped it on. Feathers fell to the floor.

Had someone seen?

She shuffled to the sliding door and then peeked through,

pressing her face against the glass.

It took her a minute to focus past her own reflection, through the glass and to the yard outside.

There, right in the middle of the grass, was a bright white swan. Ava blinked. She must be dreaming, she thought. This was all so *weird*. When did swans start hanging out in the backyard? She could swear the swan was watching her, too.

Ava took a deep breath, yanked the door open, and stepped outside.

The swan didn't move.

It just stood there . . . staring at her.

It was really beautiful, glittering and shimmering in the moonlight. Ava thought about other swans she'd seen, randomly in her life, like when she and her dad visited her uncle in this city in Florida that had a big lake filled with swans as well as swan sculptures scattered all through town. Her favorite had been a huge bejeweled one painted pink and purple.

But those swans had been sort of . . . ungainly. Strutting around and honking and stretching their long beaks around and burying them in their own feathers.

This one wasn't ungainly at all. It stood there quietly, soft, like a cat.

"Hello?" Ava whispered.

Beyond the swan and the grass the trees rose up and the woods began. A faint breeze passed over the yard and in the

distance, the leaves rattled.

Ava stepped forward.

“Are you watching me?”

She almost expected the swan to answer, and was a little surprised when it just stood there, unmoving, staring at her. A second later, in a swift movement that scared her, made her gasp, it lifted its wings and swooped into the air, disappearing into the woods.

Ava sighed. Not even swans wanted to be hanging out with her now!

And then it hit her.

Of course.

It seemed crazy that it hadn’t occurred to her before.

She was growing feathers, there were all these swans popping up everywhere, with their shimmering, glittering feathers, just like her own . . .

Was she turning into a *swan*? Her mind raced. Had she been bitten by a swan . . . in her sleep or something?

Like . . . SPIDER MAN?

Hadn’t he been bitten by a RADIOACTIVE SPIDER or something?

The world seemed to spin around her.

Had she been bitten by a radioactive swan???? What did a radioactive swan look like? Did they glitter? Did regular swans who *weren’t* radioactive glitter in moonlight?

She entered the house in a daze and flopped down onto

the couch, her mind swirling.

She tried to think of when she might have been bitten by a radioactive swan. She must have been sleeping. Wouldn’t she remember something like that? But then she imagined herself saving kittens trapped in trees with her incredible swan powers. Stopping crimes and arresting bad guys. She’d probably have to move someplace where there *were* bad guys. Her dad would have to let her if she was a superhero, right? She wondered if Jeff Jackson would be impressed when he found out, or if it would be too intimidating for him. Maybe he had a secret superhero identity as well? If not, perhaps she could find a radioactive swan to bite him, too.

Then she bolted up in horror.

What if he wanted to be bitten by a radioactive beetle?

Ava tried to calm herself. The feathers were obviously making her crazy. Totally, one thousand percent looneytunes.

She stood up and took a deep breath, then went to her bedroom and turned on the light. Superheroes were nice and all, but she wanted to be normal. Just a normal girl.

She could save kittens as a normal girl, too. Maybe she would ask her dad if they could go to the SPCA tomorrow. Monique was probably lonely; it’s what probably put her in such a bad mood all the time.

And so she closed her eyes, grabbed hold of the feathers on her left arm, at the base, just above her elbow, and pulled.

The feathers came off with a surprising ease now, almost

as if they were pushing themselves into her hands. Even though it was an unpleasant feeling, she did not allow herself to stop.

The feathers pulled off, making a soft, gross *squiching* sound, and leaving a paper-like, web-like film over her skin.

It was gross and beautiful and astonishing and horrifying all at the same time.

She kept pulling. Finally, the whole thing came off. In one piece, all the feathers. She sat in shock for a moment, holding the feathers in her hand, letting the garment—that's what it was, some kind of jacket—stretch out, the end falling down and scraping the floor. It seemed to have a life of its own. A strange energy, filling the room.

She dropped it onto the floor in horror, watched it smooth out as if it were letting out its breath, and stumbled to the bathroom.

Flicking on the light, she expected a hideous sight to greet her. Her skin disgusting and covered in webs, dead skin, god knows what else. By now she'd believe anything at all.

She blinked against the fluorescent light. And blinked again.

Her skin was perfect. She turned around and looked at her back, over her shoulder, but it was fine. Better than fine. It was her old self staring back at her, and yet . . . her skin was creamy and smooth now, like milk, or porcelain. Her hair looked shiny and thick, falling down, covering her slight

breasts. And there was something else, something less easily definable. She seemed older, more poised or something. More, she realized then, like her mother. A kind of carriage her mother had had that was clear in every photo of her.

Had she imagined the feathers? Suddenly everything seemed so unreal. Ava ran back to the living room, and the feathers were still there, on the floor. She bent down and ran her palm across them, and they were soft, wonderful. As soft as the fancy mink coat hanging in her grandmother's closet, from the olden days, way back when.

She lifted the garment and hugged it to her. It smelled clean and fresh, like winter. The feathers tickled her nose. It was like a giant pet, wasn't it? A much sweeter, softer one than Monique.

Suddenly, a knock came from the front door. Ava froze on the living room floor, horrified. It was just after midnight; her father wouldn't be home for hours.

Immediately, she shoved the feathered garment under the couch, as if it were a suitcase full of stolen diamonds. She pulled on her hoodie, a habit by now, and tiptoed to the front door. Trying to walk so softly that no one could hear, so that she could pretend that no one was home. Monique padded along with her, rubbing herself against Ava's ankles.

Barely breathing now, Ava stood on her toes and looked through the peephole.

It took a second for her eyes to adjust, focus in.

Outside was a woman with long, glowing white hair. She was dressed in a pale dress, and awash in moonlight. Her eyes were icy blue, enormous jewels. And she was staring directly at Ava.

Ava jumped back, terrified. She had to remind herself that the woman could not see her. Then she looked back through the keyhole.

The woman knocked again. She was so beautiful. Why would a woman like that be knocking on their door?

Ava opened the door, her hands trembling.

The woman smiled at her, and it was the kind of smile that felt like cookies in the oven, warm and comforting. Ava smiled back despite herself, even though her heart was pounding and she was more scared than she had ever been. She could feel Monique cowering at her feet.

“Ava,” the woman said, and her voice was soft and musical. “My name is Helen. I’ve come to see you.” She spoke as if it were perfectly normal to arrive at someone’s doorstep for the first time, past midnight, and on a school night no less, being totally beautiful and glowing and having eyes like jewels.

The image of the swan flashed across Ava’s mind. She shook her head, disoriented.

“How do you know my name? Who are you?”

“Well,” the woman said. “I know your mother. I have a message from her.”

“My mother?”

“Yes. I was sent here by your mother. There are things you need to know.”

