

me, my elf & i 

heather swain

**speak**

an imprint of penguin group (usa) inc.



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# Caught!

“Zephyr!” Mercedes points straight at me, her eyes wild.

I am freaking out. I’ll have to make a run for it. Get away. Hide in the subway like a rat. But what if I get caught? Where will they take me? What will they do to me?

“What about her?” Ari demands.

“The ELPH camera!” Mercedes yells.

At the mention of the word “elf” I spring to my fingers and toes in a runner’s stance. When I hear the word “camera” I scan the room for recording devices, then locate the doors, planning my escape, praying I can outrun whatever surveillance they’ll use to track me so I can get home in time to warn my family. We’ll have to flee. This is terrible. My mom and dad were right. This was too much for me to handle. I should’ve never thought I could be normal. Now I’ve ruined everything. Just as I push off with my feet to take off, I slip on a paper napkin and wind up sprawled on the floor like a squashed bug.

Ari grabs my arm and pulls me up. “Perfect!” he yells. He looks deeply into my eyes. “Zephyr,” he says urgently. I squint, turn my head away, afraid of what he’ll say. “Do you have an agent?”

I open one eye and peek at both Ari and Mercedes, who are inches from my nose. “Huh?” I ask, trying desperately to figure a way out of this mess. This is the time when knowing how to lie would come in handy. Or being able to cast a backward timespell. But since I can’t do either, I’m stuck.

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4 LJ + Em. BFF. Thnx.

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## chapter 1

“**ARE YOU LOST ?** ” The man is big. Bigger than any other man I’ve ever seen in my life and for a moment I can’t say anything. My grandmother, back in Alverland, would call this man an ogre, even though he’s the only person out of all the people rushing past me in this subway station nice enough to notice that I’m completely confused.

Everyone else just jostles on by, jabbing me with elbows and banging me with overstuffed shoulder bags. I feel as if I’m caught in the middle of a moose stampede during a forest fire. (Only instead of being surrounded by burning trees, I’m in a smelly underground passage with dirty walls covered by advertisement posters for a million things I’ve never heard of.) I hug my bag to my chest and nod without making a sound. The man leans down closer to me. It’s not just that he’s tall. I’m used to tall people. Everyone in my family is tall. He’s also wide, soft, pillowy. I think of sinking into my grandparents’ large goose-feather bed with my brothers and sisters and cousins surrounding me, anticipating my grandmother telling us a tale about giants and ogres.

The man’s skin is dark, too, and I’m captivated. Everyone in Alverland is fair. Our hair is light and straight and our eyes are almost always green. Drake, my father, who’s been out of Alverland more than anyone else, told us that there are many kinds of erdlers (that’s what we call people who aren’t from Alverland) and you can judge them based only on their actions, not on how they look. So I know I shouldn’t stare at this guy. Or any of the people rushing past me. Especially because I know how it feels to be different.

“Where are you trying to go?” he asks.

It’s bad enough that I took the wrong subway three times. I mean, how was I supposed to know? I’ve never even ridden a bus before today. But now that I’m finally at the right station, I can’t find my way outside. I unclutch the piece of paper wadded in my fist and show it to him. I clear my throat and try to get out my voice. “The Brooklyn Academy of Performing Arts High School,” I tell him, but the words come out tiny, as if I’m six years old. Great, my first time alone in Brooklyn and I can’t even talk like a regular fifteen-year-old girl. How will I ever make it through a day of high school?

He takes the paper from me and studies it with a frown. “Never heard of it,” he mumbles, and I think he’ll walk away, leaving me stranded forever. I wonder if I give up now, could I find my way back to our house near the park? Tell my mom and dad that they were right. I’m not ready for regular school. I should let them teach me at home like they wanted to in the first place.

Then the man looks up and nods. “But I do know this street, Fulton Avenue. Come on. I’m walking that way. I’ll show you.” He takes off and I hesitate. Everyone back in Alverland warned us not to talk to strangers, never to go with people we don’t know, and to keep to ourselves. But this guy has my paper with the school’s address on it. So I force my legs to move and I skitter after him, weaving through the rushing people in this dingy underground passage.

He leads me to a stairway and I can see sunlight again, although the air doesn’t smell any cleaner up there than it does down here. I press my sleeve over my nose and mouth to keep from gagging on the car fumes. He takes the steps two at a time and I run to keep up with him. He glances over his shoulder

and smiles kindly at me.

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“New to the city?” he yells over the roaring traffic. I see him chuckle.

“Yeah,” I yell back, defeated. “First day of high school.”

“Sheez.” He shakes his head. “Rough start. But it’ll get better.” He points to a street packed with cars, trucks, motorcycles, blue-and-white buses, and bicycles. A flood of people spill out of the underground stairways. Like ants on a mission, scurrying over rocks, past sticks, through gullies just to get their crumbs, the people keep moving along the crammed sidewalks, across the streets, and into the hulking buildings surrounding us. He and I join this throng and I realize that his size is a plus because at least I won’t lose sight of him. On the opposite corner he stops and points. “This is Fulton Avenue. The address says four thirty-six, which has to be down this way on the left side. If you get lost, ask somebody. New Yorkers aren’t rude. They’re just in a hurry, but somebody’ll always help you if you ask.” He hands me my piece of paper and walks off into the crowd.

“Thank you!” I yell after him. “Thank you for helping me!” I wave my paper over my head as I disappear beneath the shadows of skyscrapers. Then I’m alone again in the middle of hundreds of people. For a moment I consider zapping everyone around me with a hex, maybe some kind of skin pox or limping disease of the knees so that they’ll all fall down moaning and I can step over them, one by one, as if walking on rocks across a stream to find my way to school. But of course I don’t. First of all, I’m not really old enough to hex an entire crowd of moving people, and secondly, my mother warned me, No magic in Brooklyn!

I finally find the school, but I’m late, of course, even though I left my house hours earlier. In Alverland, nothing is more than a ten-minute walk away, so spending this much time getting anywhere seems absurd. Standing in the middle of the empty hallway I wonder why I insisted, fought, begged, bartered, made promises, and endlessly cajoled my parents into letting me attend public high school at a new place. Am I out of my mind? Did somebody put the donkey hex of stupidity on me? I thought this was going to be easy. All I’d have to do is dress like an erdler and I’d fit right in. As if I could waltz into this school, playing my lute, and everything would be fine. Obviously I’m an idiot.

I’m about to turn around and head out the big green doors of the school. Back into the chaotic, smelly street, where I’ll probably wander around lost for years before I find my way to the subway, I go alone all the way home. I’m about to chuck it all, tell my parents they were right, and hole up for the rest of my existence in my new cramped bedroom at the top of the stairs in our house, when someone says, “Why are you out of class?”

I turn around to face a tiny, angry woman scowling at me. She has small sharp features like a mouse. Her hands are balled into fists, which she holds on her hips like weapons. Plus she’s wearing all green. She looks just like the mean little pixies my grandmother used to tease us about. “I said what are you doing out of class? Do you have a hall pass? What’s your name?” the pixie lady demands.

That’s when I lose it. Lose it like a snot-nosed, diaper-wearing, thumb-sucking, toothless, babbling baby. I drop my bag to the floor, let my knees go weak, slump over into a heap of quivering jelly, and cry miserably. The pixie lady stares me down while I wail. I swear she checks her watch and taps her foot impatiently until I pull it together enough to lift my head and squeak, “I don’t know where to go.”

She rolls her eyes. “Do you always get this worked up when you’re lost?”

I suck back the snot streaming down my face, wipe my hands across my moist eyes, and say, “I’ve never been this lost before.”

“For God’s sake, girl,” she hisses. “You’re inside a school. How hard can it be?”

This only makes me cry harder, because I know she’s right. “But I, but I, but, but . . .” I sputter. “First the trains . . . and I went the wrong way . . . was it the F or the A or the 2 or 3 . . . and who can figure out those maps with all the colors? Red! Blue! Orange! How was I supposed to know which platform, which staircase, which end of the train I’m supposed to get on? Not to mention the subway stations! There are rats down there. And it smells. Terrible. And all those people? Where are they all going? Where could so many people be going?” I come out of my rant clutching my hair and stamping my feet as if I’m having a temper tantrum, which, actually, I am.

The pixie grabs me by the upper arm and pulls. I scoop up my bag and go tripping behind her. “How many drama queens can one school hold?” she mutters to herself as she drags me down the empty hallway.

We pass closed doors through which I hear teachers’ voices over groups of kids laughing. I also hear music (drums, pianos, a trumpet from far away) and feet stomping in unison as if dancing. Posters cover the walls inviting me to “Join Student Government” or “Come to the First Chess Club Meeting Tonight” or “Help Plan the Halloween Dance!” I drag my feet to slow the pixie down so I can read every flyer on a large bulletin board. This weekend there’s going to be a film festival and a “open mic night,” whatever that is. And today after school I could go to a free talk about poverty in Africa or even learn how to crochet. I could never do those things in Alverland, but here, I can do anything, and that’s why I came today.

The pixie stops and I bump into her, nearly sending her to the floor. “Good God!” she says to the ceiling. “Not even nine o’clock yet and this is my day already.” She points to a half-open door and gives me a little shove. “In you go,” she says. “Tell it all to the shrinky dink, drama queen.”

I’m inside a bright, sunny office with a wilting jade plant in the window and sad yellow daisies in a vase. Without thinking I whisper one of the first incantations my grandmother taught us, “Flower flowers please don’t die, lift your heads up to the sky!” Slowly the jade plant unfurls its drooping leaves and the daisies stand tall in the vase. Then I remember that I shouldn’t be casting spells, no matter how harmless. What if someone saw me? How would I explain? I consider undoing the incantation, but that would be more magic. I have to be careful now. I must remember to act like an erdler.

I hear quick footsteps in the hallway. I peek out the door and see a couple hurrying by, holding hands. The girl’s hair flies over her shoulder as she looks up at the guy. “We’re so late,” she says, and they both laugh, then they’re gone around a corner.

I’m left with a tingly feeling in the pit of my stomach. Before my family left Alverland, my cousin Briar and I spent hours in the branches of a sycamore tree, talking about how erdlers fall in love, date, fight, and break up with broken hearts. Or so we’ve heard.

“Do you think you’ll have a boyfriend there?” Briar had asked me a hundred times.

“That’s not why I want to go,” I told her as I picked layers of shaggy bark off the peeling tree trunk. “I just want the chance to see another part of the world, try new things, eat food I’ve only heard of.”

But secretly I wondered if I would find an erdler boy in Brooklyn. Then again, I can barely find my way to school, so how will I ever find a boyfriend? I need to focus on the real reason I'm here: music, art, experience! All of the things missing in Alverland.

I drop onto a little couch and try to regroup. I need to break the problem into manageable steps, my mother likes to say. I take a deep breath and try to remember My Plan for Life in Brooklyn. First, make friends. (But how?) Second, get a boyfriend. (Yeah, right!) Third, and most important, find a million ways to perform as possible. I have one year here, and I'm not going to waste it.

I look around the office again. Beside me on a little table is a big black binder titled "Upcoming Auditions." It's filled with dozens of pages with information about trying out for plays, musicals, bands, ensembles, improv troupes, and commercials. I get prickly chills up and down my back. *This is it!* I think. The real reason I'm here. In Alverland we do the same pageants and plays every season—welcome in the harvest, to give thanks for bountiful hunting, to celebrate the equinox. It's always the same songs, in the same order, on the same day. Nobody writes plays about a different topic or makes up new songs except my dad. It's not that I don't like singing in the sugar shack when we make syrup for the Festival of Maple Trees, but there's more to life than pancakes!

As I browse through the binder of possibilities, a door across the room opens and a woman walks in. She's too preoccupied with reading the paper in her hands to notice me, so I take a second to get a good look at her. She wears a full, rippling purple skirt with tiny bells sewn on the hem that jingle as she moves. On top she wears a long flowing white shirt, not unlike what we wear in Alverland. She has three necklaces of brightly colored beads, lots of bracelets on both wrists and even around one ankle above her soft leather sandals. She tucks a loose strand of her brown hair behind one ear and I see that she has silver rings on nearly every finger. I like her already.

"Are you the shrinky dink?" I ask.

"Yow!" she shrieks, and gives a little jump so that all her bracelets, necklaces, rings, and bells clink and clatter. "The shrinky dink?" she asks, as if she can't believe I said that.

"Sorry." I cringe. "That's what that woman told me." I point to the door where the lady in green left me, but of course she's long gone, vanished just like a mean little pixie would. "Am I in the wrong place?"

She narrows her eyes to study me. "Who are you?"

"My name is Zephyr," I tell her, then remember how the erdlers always use last names, to "Zephyr Addler."

"Ah ha!" She grins. "So you are Zephyr. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"You have?" I ask, and for the first time since I kissed my mom good-bye this morning, I smile.

She nods. "I'm Ms. Sanchez, your *guidance counselor*," she tells me carefully. I get the hint that "shrinky dink" is not what I should call her. I imagine how the pixie will look after I zing her with a nasty little hair-loss spell for embarrassing me like this. Then I remember my no-magic promise to my mom.

"So you made it," Ms. Sanchez says as she perches on the edge of her desk.

"Barely," I admit.

Ms. Sanchez pulls a red file folder off her desk. I see my name printed on the tab. "So you've never been to a regular school?"

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I shake my head, more embarrassed now. "I didn't realize everyone in the universe would know that about me."

Ms. Sanchez laughs. "Only your teachers and I know that about you. And you're not the only homeschooled student we've ever had. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Especially with test scores like yours."

"Thanks," I mumble. "But being smart hasn't stopped me from being an idiot today."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," she tells me. "It's tough coming to a new school as a sophomore, especially a week after everyone else started."

"Oh no," I groan and clutch my knapsack to my chest. She makes it sound so terrible!

"You're going to do just fine," she assures me as she flips the pages in the red folder. "Let's see where you're supposed to be now and get you started."

Ms. Sanchez knocks on a classroom door and goes inside. I wait in the hallway but I hear people murmur, papers shuffle, and someone laughing inside the room. "Settle down," an adult says, then a girl comes out in the hall with Ms. Sanchez.

"What's up, Aunt Nina?" the girl asks. Ms. Sanchez frowns for a moment until the girl rolls her eyes and says, "Ms. Sanchez," in a silly voice that makes Ms. Sanchez snicker.

"Mercedes, this is Zephyr. Zephyr?" She turns to me. "This is my niece, Mercedes. She's also a sophomore here and she'll be your official tour guide today."

When Ms. Sanchez steps aside, Mercedes and I face each other as if we're looking in an opposite mirror. I am tall. She is short. I'm as pale as milk. Her skin is the rich, beautiful brown of acorns. My stick-straight, so-blond-it's-nearly-translucent hair hangs down below my shoulders. Her thick, dark ringlets are cropped just above her chin. I am all points and angles: cheekbones, collarbones, elbow knees; she is soft curves from her round cheeks down to her feet.

And it's not just how we're built, it's how we're dressed. I've taken great care today not to look like some hippie wood sprite straight off the commune (which is what most erdlers think of us when we leave Alverland). I purposely left my soft deerskin boots and handwoven tunic dress at home. I didn't even wear my hat or the amulets my grandparents made for me. I gaze at Mercedes in her red-striped tank top over a white T-shirt and skinny jeans riding below her hips and pegged above her silver ball flats. I realize I look nothing like a regular erdler kid. My navy blue pants are too fitted, too new, too stiff, too high up on my waist. I have on a bona fide blouse, aquamarine with pearly buttons all the way up to my chin. And I'm wearing white sneakers. I'm so embarrassed that I wish someone would turn me into a bird so I could fly away and never ever see these people again.

"My aunt told me about you," Mercedes says. "You're the girl from Michigan, right?"

"The U.P.," I say hopefully, but Ms. Sanchez and Mercedes look at me blankly. "See, Michigan has two parts." I hold up my right hand like a mitten with the thumb sticking out to the side. "This is the main part where Detroit and stuff like that is." I hold my left hand sideways over the top of my right

fingertips. “And this is the Upper Peninsula, the U.P.” They blink at me. “All this space between my hands is the Great Lakes. And up here?” I point to the pinky knuckle on my left hand. “That’s where I grew up.”

“Close to Canada then?” Mercedes asks.

“That’s right!” I say, impressed with her grasp of geography. Most people in Michigan have no idea how close we are to Canada.

“Yeah,” she says, smirking. “I can hear your accent. ‘Out and about.’” She laughs because she pronounces it like “oot and about.”

I press my lips together as my cheeks grow warm, embarrassed by how obviously weird I seem even in this school where the brochure says diversity is a good thing.

“But that’s okay, yo, because I’ll have you talking Brooklyn in no time flat.” Mercedes snaps her fingers in front of her face and grins at me, this time nicely.

Ms. Sanchez hands Mercedes a green slip. “Here’s a hall pass. Show Zephyr her locker, then the cafeteria, her homeroom, then escort her to her classes for the rest of the day.”

Ms. Sanchez turns to me. “You can stop by my office anytime if you have a question.” She slips her arm around Mercedes’s waist. “Mercy will be a great tour guide, won’t you?”

Mercedes wiggles out of her aunt’s embrace, but I see her smile. “Yeah, yeah, Aunt Nina.”

“*Ms. Sanchez*,” Ms. Sanchez says playfully over her shoulder as she walks away.

First I ask to stop in the bathroom so I can do something about how I look. I stand in front of the mirror and sigh. “I look like . . .” I say to Mercedes.

She sits on the countertop, kicking her feet into the big rubber trash can stuffed full of used paper towels. “A dork,” she says. “Which is weird because, you’re like, so freakin’ gorgeous and everything. Does your mom make you dress like that so boys won’t be looking at you?”

“No. I mean, I just didn’t know what to wear.” I untuck my shirt and undo the top button. I take off my belt and shove it in my bag. (*A belt!* She’s right. I am a total dork.) I try to squiggle my pants down around my hips, but it’s hopeless. “Is that better?”

Mercedes raises her eyebrows. “Yeah, better, but . . .” She hops down from the counter. “I don’t know what kind of malls they have up there in the U.P., but girl, we’re gonna have to take you shopping or something.”

I follow her out of the bathroom. “Please,” I beg. “I would really, really appreciate that.”

Mercedes snorts a little laugh. “‘I would really, really appreciate that!’” she mocks, and I have to give her credit, she truly does sound like me. “For real you talk like that?”

I stop and tower over her. “How am I supposed to talk?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. However you talk, you talk, I guess. It’s sweet, kind of. Real nicey nicey. Polite sounding.”

“Is that a bad thing?”



“Naw, just different,” she assures me. “But maybe you want to tone it down a little bit with people you don’t know. Otherwise, you know, they might get the wrong idea.”

“That I’m nice?” I ask. “What’s wrong with being nice?”

“Too nice. Like people can take advantage of you. Push you around. You know. Like that. You gotta be able to hold your own here.”

“Right, hold my own.” Then I realize that again I’m lost. “Hold my own what?”

This time Mercedes cracks up. She leans into me and shakes my arm as she laughs. “Girl, you’re crazy! ‘Hold my own what?’ ” She imitates me perfectly again. “You really are from someplace else, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea,” I tell her. “No idea at all.”

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## chapter 2

**I'M OVERJOYED TO** see Mercedes waiting for me after my algebra class. "Mercedes! Mercedes! Mercedes!" I jump up and down and wave. Everyone around me moves away and stares. I stop hopping.

"Dang, *chica*," Mercedes says. "Simmer down."

"Sorry, I just got so excited," I say. "What are we doing now?"

"Lunch, I guess. How exciting is that?"

I think about this. "Can I eat with you?"

"If you promise not to jump around," she says, starting down the hall.

I promise, but I'm still excited. I follow her. I'm so grateful that she's letting me come with her that I want to give her something. A garland of wild roses to wear in her hair. A bouquet of sweet sage and honeysuckle to tuck into her belt loop. But those are the kinds of things we do in Alverland and I have no idea how erdlers show their appreciation. So I just say thank you, over and over again until finally Mercedes stops short.

"Jeez, Zephyr!" she says loudly. The crowd of kids parts around us. "Stop with all the thank-yous! Would you? I get it! I get it!"

"Sorry." I hang my head.

"Man, you apologize more than anyone I've ever met. 'Sorry, sorry, so sorry,'" she says, mincing around, bobbing her head, exactly like I do. Then she jabs me in the ribs with her elbow and howls with laughter. "You got me bugging, girl! But it's all good."

"Mercy, Mercy, Mercy me!" someone bellows from behind us. I turn around to see a chubby boy, not much taller than Mercedes, with wild dark strands of hair over his eyes. He's wearing black baggy clothes from head to toe, and has even painted the fingernails of his right hand a dark smudgy color. He zigzags through the other kids, singing Mercedes's name.

"Ari!" Mercedes screeches, and holds open her arms. They envelop each other in a long embrace, then begin to dance, hips close together, cheek to cheek, sliding elegantly across the floor. He dips her dramatically and looks up at me through his messy bangs.

"Is this her?" he asks.

Mercedes pops upright. "That's right. This is Zephyr."

"Are you Mercedes's boyfriend?" I ask, full of romance and envy, but also a little bit relieved to think that I finally understand something. But from their reactions, clearly I'm wrong. Mercedes and the boy snort and howl, slap their knees, and nearly fall down they're laughing so hard. People passing by us stare and snicker.

"She's funny," Ari says to Mercedes.

"Yeah," says Mercedes. "She's all right." They each loop one arm through my elbows and pull me

down the hall.

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“So you’re not?” I ask, confused again.

They both crack up, then Ari asks, “Is she for real?”

“I don’t know,” says Mercedes. “But she’s a trip.”

“And gorgeous!” Ari runs his fingers through my hair. “*Oy vey es mir*. What I would give for such hair. And that *punim*?” He tweaks my cheek. “Look at that bone structure! ”

“Stop with the Jewish granny routine,” Mercedes says.

“I love your hair, too.” Ari reaches around to tousle Mercedes’s pretty curls.

“Get your grubby hands off my head.” Mercedes shakes viciously, but I can see the grin lurking on her lips. Ari takes that as an invitation to slip behind her and maul her with his fingers deep into her hair, massaging her scalp. Mercedes leans into him, purring like a cat.

“She loves it,” Ari says to me. And as suddenly as their shenanigans started, Ari stops. They both stare at me. “I think we should make her our mascot,” Ari says. I can feel a stupid grin frozen on my face because I’m so excited that they want to be my friends. Sort of. I try to rearrange my mouth and eyes into something less “nice,” but I can’t really. Nice is who I am. So I shrug, helplessly grinning at them.

“Good golly, Miss Molly!” Ari says with overexaggerated zeal. “Just how tall are you anyway?”

“She’s gotta be like six feet tall,” Mercedes says, peering up at me as if I’m a tree.

“And those legs. Up to her armpits with those legs.” I slouch a little, trying to seem less tall as Ari rubs his chin and eyes me. “No boobs.” I cross my arms over my chest. “No butt either. You’re a model, aren’t you?” he asks.

“You’re teasing me, right?” I venture from my tight self-hug.

“For real, you a model?” Mercedes eyes me suspiciously.

I have no idea if they’re trying to compliment me or if they’re being mean, so I stay quiet.

“If you’re not, you should be,” Ari says.

“You could make mad money,” Mercedes tells me as we join the last few stragglers on their way to lunch.

“We should get her on *America’s Next Top Model*,” Ari says.

“Can you see her talking to Miss Tyra?” Mercedes asks. “‘Yes, Tyra! Oh thank you, Tyra! I’m so sorry, Tyra!’ Then Tyra’d be like, ‘Cut the crap, girl, and pose!’” Mercedes shoves one hip out to the side with her hands in the air and sucks her cheeks in.

Ari pretends to take pictures of her while shouting, “Work it! Work it!” as Mercedes hits silly poses after silly pose, making her way down the hall. I scurry behind them, desperate not to be left behind.

When they’re tired of the strange Tyra game they’re playing, Ari turns to me and asks, “So, not a model. Why’d you come to this school then?”

“I want to perform,” I say.

“Duh,” says Ari. “What kind of performing?”

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I stare at them blankly.

“Music? Dance? Drama?” Mercedes asks.

“Everything!” I say. “All three!”

“A triple threat,” says Ari. “I get it.”

“Broadway bound,” says Mercedes.

“But which do you like the most?” Ari asks.

I think for a moment. “Music,” I say.

Ari brightens. “I’m a musician, too.”

“So is my dad,” I tell him.

Mercedes rolls her eyes and blows a puff of air into her bangs. “Musicians,” she snorts.

“Mercy here wants to be a *theater diva*,” Ari says with a British accent, and Mercedes bows deeply. Ari shoves her and she flings herself across the hallway, arms flailing, bumping into passing kids, who bump her back, so that she ends up banging noisily into lockers.

“Oh, I’d love to try acting!” I tell Mercedes, thinking back to that big black binder of auditions in Ms. Sanchez’s office. “I’ll try anything new.”

“Whatever,” says Ari. “Let’s talk about real art. What instrument do you play? Wait. Let me guess. He studies me again for a moment. “You sing.”

“Hey, how’d you know?”

He wiggles his fingers in front of his body as if he’s playing the piano. “I’ve got an accompanist and a sixth sense.”

Before I can ask him what he means or tell him that I also play the lute, Mercedes flings open the double doors that lead into the cafeteria. A deafening roar overtakes us. Talking, laughing, shouting, and singing jumble together over music pumped through speakers in the ceiling. Kids are everywhere. In chairs, on the floor, on top of tables, slouching against the walls, dancing in the corners. I’ve never seen so many different kinds of people together in one place. From dark-skinned to light-skinned and every shade in between. Brown hair, blond hair, blue hair, no hair. Earrings, nose rings, pierced eyebrows, cheeks, and probably lots of places that I can’t see. Three girls in a little huddle are even wearing fairy wings. I want to stand quietly in the doorway for a long time getting used to it all, but Ari comes back to my side, grabs my wrist, and drags me to the lunch line.

With my tray full of fruit and salad I push into the seating area. Ari and Mercedes hang back, surveying the scene. “Hey!” I point to an empty bench on one side of a long table in the center of the room. “Here’s a free space big enough for us.” I hurry over to plunk my tray down before someone else gets the seats, then I turn around and wave my hand over my head to make sure Ari and Mercedes see me. “Over here!” I call. They both stay absolutely still, staring at me with wide, intense eyes. “What?” I ask, and jerk around to see what I’ve done wrong. Am I stepping in a big puddle of spilled

milk? Is the table covered with something disgusting? Did I accidentally pee my pants and not notice?

“Uh, can I help you?” the pretty girl sitting across from my tray says, although she doesn’t really sound like she wants to help me at all.

“With what?” I ask.

“Look, bee-yatch,” the girl says, shaking her head so that her long shiny black hair moves like a curtain across her shoulders. She stares at me with cold, calculating eyes—green and almond-shaped like a cat’s.

I look carefully all around. “I don’t see anything,” I tell her, and the guy sitting on her right starts laughing so hard that orange soda sprays from his mouth.

“Jesus, Timber,” the girl says to the guy, and shoves him hard on the shoulder. Then she wipes tiny drops of his soda off her bare arm while muttering, “Disgusting,” to the three girls on her left.

“Who the hell is this nancy at our table?” one of the girls asks while all three of them stare at me. The girls seem a lot less happy to see me than the guy who is grinning so fiercely that I think of a wolf.

“I’m Zephyr,” I say. “Not Nancy. Who are you?” But they must not have heard me over the din in the room because nobody answers.

By then Ari is right behind me. He touches the back of my arm and stands on his tiptoes to shove firmly into my ear, “Not here, Zeph.”

“Oh.” I pick up my tray and smile at them. “Sorry.” The wolf boy leans on his elbows and smirks. I think he’ll lick his lips as he watches me walk backward, bowing and repeating, “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” until his intense gray-blue eyes make my skin itch and burn.

I join Ari and Mercedes huddled in a corner far away from my mistake. They both writhe on the floor, screaming with laughter as they recount over and over again what just happened.

Mercedes sits up tall and arranges her face in the exact look of near horror that the girl at the table gave me. “Uh, can I help you?” she says in a dead-on impersonation.

“With what?” Ari asks breathily, hand pressed against his chest, big eyes blinking in a way that I’m guessing is supposed to be me.

“Look beeee-yatch,” Mercedes spits, wagging her head.

Ari pretends to look all around, up and down, under the table, inside his shirt, then straight back at Mercedes as if challenging her. “I don’t see anything,” he deadpans. “And my name’s not Nancy.” They howl with laughter before playing the entire scene again.

No matter how many times they go over it, I have no idea what I did, or why it was so terrible, or why it was so terribly funny, anyway. All I can think about is the boy called Timber who looked as though he wanted to devour me. I shiver.

When they’ve exhausted themselves, Mercedes grabs both my shoulders with her hands and says, “That was off the hinges, Boo! And what’s so great is, you don’t even know why, do you?”

I shake my head miserably.

“First of all,” says Mercedes, “that’s where the seniors sit.”

“Except for Timber, he’s a junior,” Ari adds.

“Secondly, two words,” says Mercedes. “Bella Dartagnan.”

This sounds like the beginning of a healing spell my mother might mutter when someone has a rash.

“She does commercials, TV, and movies,” Ari says, and I realize that Bella Dartagnan is the name of the girl with the cat eyes.

“She missed five weeks of school last year because she had a speaking part in some new Disney movie,” Mercedes says. “Plus she knows Mary Kate and Ashley.”

Those must be the three girls sitting next to her on the bench.

“Not that that’s cool,” says Ari.

“No, we hate them. But still,” says Mercedes.

“And the guy? Timber Lewis Cahill? You remember him, right?” Ari asks, checking to see just how lame and clueless I am. I shake my head because I’ve never heard of him.

“He had a boy band when he was twelve,” Mercedes says.

“We’re talking major-label record deal,” Ari adds.

“TLC Boyz,” Mercedes says as if I should know.

Ari shimmies his shoulders and sings in falsetto, “Baby want to walk my dog.” Then he turns around and yells, “Pure crap!” over his shoulder.

“We hate him, too. But still,” Mercedes says again.

“And you!” Ari says. “Sauntered right on up to their lunch table, where no mere mortals dare venture.”

A pang of panic darts through my body when he says “no mere mortal.” Did I give myself away? Was it that easy to guess? On my first day?

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” Mercedes is up on her knees shouting and I cringe deeply into myself. If they’ve figured me out, I’m doomed. That’ll be it for me. I’ll have to leave and never come back.

“What? What?” Ari asks breathlessly.

“Zephyr!” Mercedes points straight at me, her eyes wild.

I am freaking out. I’ll have to make a run for it. Get away. Hide in the subway like a rat. But what if I get caught? Where will they take me? What will they do to me?

“What about her?” Ari demands.

“The ELPH camera!” Mercedes yells.

At the mention of the word “elf” I spring to my fingers and toes in a runner’s stance. When I hear the word “camera” I scan the room for recording devices, then locate the doors, planning my escape, praying I can outrun whatever surveillance they’ll use to track me so I can get home in time to warn my family. We’ll have to flee. This is terrible. My mom and dad were right. This was too much for me.

to handle. I should've never thought I could be normal. Now I've ruined everything. Just as I push in my feet to take off, I slip on a paper napkin and wind up sprawled on the floor like a squashed bug.

Ari grabs my arm and pulls me up. "Perfect!" he yells. He looks deeply into my eyes. "Zephyr," he says urgently. I squint, turn my head away, afraid of what he'll say. "Do you have an agent?"

I open one eye and peek at both Ari and Mercedes, who are inches from my nose. "Huh?" I am trying desperately to figure a way out of this mess. This is the time when knowing how to lie would come in handy. Or being able to cast a backward timespell. But since I can't do either, I'm stuck.

"Do you have an agent?" Mercedes repeats.

"An agent?" I ask. "Is that like a lawyer?" Maybe I'll be snatched away to some secret laboratory where I'll be studied like a mouse. My family will come looking for me and then they'll be captured too. The others in Alverland warned us about this. They didn't want us to move to Brooklyn, but my father insisted and I was thrilled. Now I imagine sitting sadly in a large cage with my little sister while erdler doctors poke us with needles.

"Yeah, kinda," says Mercedes. "But a lawyer can only negotiate your contracts after you get a gig. An agent helps you get the gig first."

"What's a gig?" I ask, my heart pounding as urgently as a beaver's warning slap against the water. "Is that like a trial?"

"No, that's the audition," Ari says.

"Audition?" I ask, thinking of the black binder. "What's an audition got to do with it?"

Mercedes sits back on her heels and studies me for a moment. "Look," she says slowly, as if I'm very, very stupid. "Casting agents come to this high school looking for new talent all the time. It's part of the reason everyone wants to go here." They both look at me to see if I comprehend what she's saying. I nod, but I'm unsure what this has to do with my family not being human, because I'm picturing a police raid in Alverland. My aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents rounded up like stray dogs and hustled into the back of unmarked vans.

"Last week," Ari tells me, "the ad agency that's working on a new camera campaign announced that they're going to cast the lead for their new Web ads from this school."

"This camera is called an ELPH, because it's small and cute, you know, like an elf," Mercedes says.

I shake my head, annoyed by the stereotype. Where did these erdlers ever get the idea that all elves are small and cute and slave away in Santa's workshop? The small mischievous ones are the brownies or pixies or magical dwarves of fairy tales, not elves. Not real elves anyway, who are tall, strong, great hunters and healers. Just another race, more or less. Except for the whole magic thing and the fact that we live for hundreds of years. But still, we put our pants on one leg at a time just like everybody else.

"So the idea is," Ari continues, "they'll film a cute, perky girl and then digitally shrink her so she looks small next to the camera. Then they'll put those ads up on the Web and maybe, if they do well, eventually on TV. Do you get it?"

I shake my head. "I have no idea what you're talking about," I admit, still confused and scared.

Mercedes huffs, annoyed with me. "Listen," she says. "Bella Dartagnan gets cast in every freakin' part that comes through this school. I don't know what it is, if her agent has some kind of secret power."

or something. But seriously, she gets everything and we're sick of it."

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"Hey," Ari says to Mercedes. "I thought you were going to audition for the ELPH thing."

Mercedes waves him away. "I audition for everything, but you know I won't get it. I never did. Zephyr, though, she could whoop Bella's butt into Tuesday."

"That's true," Ari adds, looking at me. "You would be the perfect competition for this ELPH thing."

I wrack my brain trying to put it all together. "Why me?" I ask.

"Because," Mercedes explains, "you totally fit the description that the agency wants."

"You're pretty and perky. And you just have this quality. I don't know what it is," Ari says. "You're not . . .," he searches for the right words, "a normal, average girl." I gasp at the insult but Ari looks at me puzzled. "That's a compliment, Zephyr."

"Yeah, Ari's right," says Mercedes. "You're sort of elfin." My mouth drops open. "But not in a bad way."

"Why would being an elf be bad?" I demand, incensed.

"I don't know." Mercedes shrugs. "I meant it as a compliment. Like, you know, you're nice and sweet but also maybe kind of mischievous or something."

Then it hits me. Ari and Mercedes actually think I'm just another kid like them, unlike when my cousins and I would go into Ironweed, the tiny erdler town near my home. The local kids there know we're from Alverland and they torment us. They call us hippies and freaks, say that we're inbred pagan communists. Our parents tell us to ignore them and to be nice so that someday they'll see what kind and loving creatures we are. But here, for the first time outside of Alverland, being a little bit different is a good thing. The heavy weight in my chest lifts. I breathe deeply and a huge smile takes over my face. "So, will you do it?" Ari asks.

"We'll totally help you," Mercedes promises.

I pick myself up off the floor and say, "Sure. What do you want me to do?"

"Audition," Mercedes says.

"For what?" I ask.

"Is there something wrong with her?" Mercedes asks Ari.

"For the camera ad," Ari tells me.

Even though I still don't know what that means, I say, "Yes!" because at this point I'd do anything to keep Ari and Mercedes as my friends. They whoop and slap hands. I sit back and smile because finally things are going according to My Plan for Life in Brooklyn.

When my first day of school is (finally) over, I'm so exhausted that I could fall into a hundred-year sleep, but of course I can't because I still have to get home. As I'm standing with my head against my locker, trying to muster enough energy to leave, I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn to see the wolf-boy from earlier in the cafeteria grinning at me.



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