



FALCON WILD

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ONE



Stark senses my fear and pulls at the jesses around her feet. I stroke her breast feathers to calm us both. Trainers should never show nerves to a bird of prey.

I try to slow my breathing as I listen to Dad introduce lure training—my part of the demo. It’s my specialty. His falcon, Gremlin, isn’t even hooded and sits patiently on his fist, making me regret my insistence on showing Stark. She’s not as seasoned as Gremlin. This is her first school demonstration with me. Surveying the crowd, I can’t remember why I thought this would be a good idea.

My favorite lure is hidden in my satchel. It’s a weighted, stuffed bit of leather in the shape of a duck at the end of a long string. I’ve already attached a tidbit of meat with the ties in the center. The lure is ready, and Stark is ready. But for the first time since I started helping with demos, I’m not sure I am ready.

“Is it heavy?” asks a girl on the bench behind where I’m

standing. She's probably my age, since we're doing this demo for an eighth-grade biology class. Her straight, blond hair falls in a glossy sheet over her shoulders, nothing like my frizzy, auburn hair.

She points to Stark, and the two girls sitting next to her giggle. I realize I'm still staring at her and rush to answer.

"Gyrfalcons are the largest falcons in North America. And females are bigger than males, so she can get heavy. Almost the same weight as a bowling ball," I say. "I mean, the small kinds of balls. You know the kind you bowl with when they have all the neon lights going, like it's a party? It actually was my party. We went on my birthday."

From the look on her face, I know I need to stop rambling. But I hear myself reaching to keep her attention. "My neighbor Michelle came bowling with us. She lives a few houses down. We've been friends for ages even though she's three years older than me. She goes to school." *Stop talking. Stop it.* "Maybe you know her, Michelle Miller?"

Before the girl can answer, I feel a shift in the audience as all eyes turn to me. My attention snaps back to Dad.

"My daughter, Karma, is one of the best bird handlers in Montana. She'll show you how fast falcons can fly by swinging a lure for Stark to chase," he says. "Stark is a gyrfalcon, the same family as Gremlin, my peregrine here. Are you ready to meet her?"

I give the girl an apologetic smile, then stand taller and walk to the center of the pit. One of the teachers starts a round of polite clapping. The October sky hangs blue and clear. A brisk northerly picks up speed coming off the

mountain range to the west and sweeps across the sagebrush. A perfect day for a flight. I turn on my headset microphone and launch quickly into my speech.

“Here at the education center, we have hawks, falcons, eagles, and owls. We call them all raptors, which is a term for birds of prey. Falcons, like Stark here, have long, thin toes.” I point to her gorgeous, yellow feet.

“Their beaks are short, with a notch that acts like a tooth. It fits between the neck vertebrae of their prey. Falcons kill prey by breaking their necks. Hawks, however, have strong feet and talons for gripping and puncturing vital organs. That’s how *they* kill prey.”

As I recite my speech, I walk the perimeter so everyone can see Stark up close. Later they’ll have a chance to hold one of the kestrels, our smallest falcons.

“Some raptors’ talons can apply four hundred pounds of pressure. Humans can maybe squeeze twenty pounds.” I pause for effect before the punch line. “Depends how much you work out.”

Scattered laughter makes me smile as I make eye contact with everyone. All the best performers make eye contact. The blond girl doesn’t smile back. She talks to her friends behind her hand. My stomach tightens as I wonder if they’re talking about me.

I keep my left arm angled to comfortably hold the three-pound falcon and not tire myself. Normally, all of my attention is on the bird on my fist, but I can’t help sneaking glances at the three girls. Are they impressed with Stark’s white plumage? Maybe they wish they owned a falcon. I

should have said more about falcons instead of bowling. Why do I always do that? If I'd been more interesting, maybe they would've wanted to visit, which could've led to a friendship—and then to sleepovers with pizza and sharing secrets and braiding each other's hair. All the regular things friends do.

Stark holds her beak partially open as she shuffles on my gloved hand, and I automatically pinch the jesses between my fingers to keep her from flying off.

“Falconers like to stick with tradition and use the old words for things,” I say. “For example, we call this glove I'm wearing to protect me from the talons a gauntlet.”

I point to the other pieces of equipment. “The leather bracelets on Stark's legs are called anklets, and the thinner leather straps that hang down from the anklets are jesses. The legs are the strongest part of the bird.”

I reach for Stark's hood, but my attention strays to the girls. The moment the hood is off, Stark's sharp beak sinks into my bare arm just above the glove. I yelp in pain and surprise.

Fighting the same panic that surely courses through Stark's own body, I force myself to calmly gather the jesses between my fingers and go still. The worst thing to do is what I want to do—scream and shake my arm.

I am calm. I am not afraid. I am safety.

Guilt sticks in my throat as she releases her bite and bates, trying to fly away from me. The jesses prevent her from leaving my fist. She hangs upside down, flapping. I wait until she pauses, and then I swing her upright, my jaw

clenched. I should've noticed she was unsure of the crowds. I should've paid attention.

The blood is thick and red as it trickles into my gauntlet and down my wrist.

Her wings deliver blows across my face. To avoid them, I straighten my arm and accidentally loosen my fingers, releasing her jesses—something I haven't done since I was seven. Stark rises into the sky with her jesses still attached. If she flies to a tree and they tangle in the branches, I will never forgive myself. I'm supposed to keep her safe, but I've let her down.

Students shriek and point in the air, shoving each other. Dad secures Gremlin to a block and then swings a lure. He whistles to my bird in the sky.

Shamefaced and shocked, I stare at the skin of my forearm, already purpling around the punctures. Now that I don't need to pretend composure for Stark, my hands begin to shake. My knees won't work properly. I gape at the chaos of kids pointing and laughing, teachers shouting orders, and the three girls now covering their heads and screaming. Dad's voice comes through the speakers, telling everyone to stay calm. I stand there watching it all happen in slow motion.

Stark goes for the lure, making everyone yell again and duck for cover. When Dad picks her up, he allows her the tidbit she earned from the lure. We can never forget that the birds come first. Only when Stark is secured to a block does he dart over to me.

"I don't understand what just happened. Are you okay?"

He quickly inspects the bite, but then looks back to the crowd of people still sitting in our ring.

This is very bad. It's the opposite of what we're trying to do with a school group. We want to show them how well mannered and amazing the birds are. I've never been bitten without food involved. It's not something raptors usually do. And now it's happened here, in front of everyone.

"Get into the house, Karma. Go call your mom," Dad orders.

I race to the house and yell for Gavin. He's supposed to be practicing his times tables, but I bet he's reading.

"Get Mom on the phone, Gav!" I shout. "Stark nailed me!"

He bursts out of his room, eyes round, holding a *Spider-Man and the X-Men* comic book.

"What?"

"Mom. Phone. Nailed." I whip off my gauntlet and flex my fingers. How could I have let this happen? Especially after Stark footed me already this month. I still have the marks where she grabbed me with her talons. I knew she might not work as an education bird, but I thought I could fix bad imprinting.

Feeling as if I'm going to be sick, I slump into a chair, rest my head on the kitchen table, and prop my arm carefully across the top.

Gavin hands me the phone. "Let me see. Oh, there's blood!"

I forget sometimes he's only nine. My vision blurs as I try to dial Mom's shop.

“Red Rock Flower Power,” a cheerful voice says.

“Debbie? Can you get my mom?” My voice trembles.

Debbie’s tone softens. “She’s with a customer, sweetheart; hold a sec.”

“It’s getting on the floor.” Gavin points to a drop of bright blood on the cream linoleum.

“Karma?” Mom says. “What’s wrong?”

For some reason the sound of her voice causes my throat to close up, and I can’t talk. I let out a squeak.

“Mom!” Gavin yells. “Karma’s bleeding all over the floor!”

“Where’s your father?”

“Out with a class.” I’m ashamed of how my voice shakes. “Stark’s a good bird. It was my fault.”

“It’ll take me fifteen minutes to get home. Call Aunt Amy. Lie down. Get Gavin to apply ice. You can . . .”

I don’t hear the rest. The phone slips from my fingers, and I slump to the ground.

TWO



In my tree house, I curl up on my red-tailed-hawk bedspread. At least I think it's supposed to be a redtail, but the colors on the terminal band are all wrong, even for a hawk that's molting. I try not to let the obvious error bother me. Grandma Barritt bought it for me, and she doesn't know much about birds.

Mom, Dad, and Aunt Amy are having a "conference" in the house, which I'm sure has something to do with my doctor visit yesterday. I can practically hear my apprenticeship gasping a dying breath. My only goal in life, besides having a normal sleepover with an entire roomful of real friends, has been to get my apprentice license as soon as I turn fourteen. Aunt Amy is a falconer, and I am going to be her apprentice.

Though I'm pretty sure falconers don't get bitten in front of a crowd of people because they weren't paying attention.

A knock on the door. Dad climbs up through the trapdoor in my floor. When he stands, he has to stoop under the low ceiling. He sighs, flicks his dark braid off his shoulder, and runs his hand along one of the studs of my walls.

“You’re really going to stay out here for a whole year? Montana winters aren’t anything to sneeze at.”

We built the tree house this summer in the sturdy branches of a cottonwood for one of our Outdoor Classroom homeschooling projects, complete with wiring and heating. After it was finished, I convinced Dad to let me live in the tree house as a social experiment. I promised to write an essay on my findings. But I think we both know the real reason I wanted to live here is so I can sleep in a tree like a wild raptor. I’ve heard him tell people that I like to understand outdoor things. That I’m better with birds than with people.

I roll over to face him. “I guess I’ll find out soon if we did a good enough job insulating,” I say, patting the wall beside me.

Dad sits on my cot. “Falconers don’t mope.”

“I am not! And I’m not a falconer.” Yet. Only nine months until I get to begin the apprenticeship.

He smiles but looks away, and something about his uncertain expression makes my chest tighten. “Family meeting in the kitchen,” he says.

“That bad?”

“Come on down, hon.”

When I go through the kitchen door, Gavin jumps out at me and pokes my bandaged arm. “Does that hurt?”

“Not at all,” I say. “Come closer so I can demonstrate how much it doesn’t hurt.”

Mom is already sitting at the table in her usual spot directly across from the door. She’s wearing her purple sweat suit that she tends to put on right after shedding her work clothes. Under the same frizzy, auburn hair that I’ve inherited, her sharp eyes have the focused look of a hawk.

She reaches for me, but I wave her off.

“It’s fine,” I say, not wanting to draw attention to my wound.

“Doctors sent her home with antibiotics, Kate. Nothing to it,” Aunt Amy says.

I throw her a look of thanks, and she winks at me. I might have Mom’s hair, but I’ve got Aunt Amy’s dislike of being fussed over.

Dad sits at the end of the table, where he’s sat for just about every indoor homeschool lesson he’s ever given us. Mom’s and his shared look makes me want to run outside again. I don’t want to hear that I won’t be allowed to help with demos anymore. Won’t be allowed to fly Stark anymore.

I slide into my chair and scan the photos covering the fridge. They’re mostly of our kid-friendly short-winged birds being held by various customers. I always smile at Tank, Aunt Amy’s crazy goshawk. The newest picture is of Aunt Amy’s apprentice Mike. He’s holding his redbill, Chaos, a week after they trapped her.

And then I find it, my favorite photo: Stark and me after her first successful free flight. She holds her head with the exact same tilt as mine, almost as if we planned our pose.

I found her on the side of a road early this summer and brought her to Aunt Amy, who sometimes rehabilitates injured birds. Stark was so emaciated that I had to feed her every few hours with an eyedropper until she was strong enough to eat on her own. I'd never handled a gyr before. We posted her leg-band information online, but no one came forward to claim their missing falcon.

A screech behind me lets me know that Pickles the owl is in the house again. She's usually the star of the demos, but yesterday I think Stark was. I turn to see her on a perch, shredding a dog toy. Like any other imprinted bird in the world, she craves attention.

"Can you say a word, Pickles?"

"Hoo. Hoooo. Hoo," the bird coos.

"That's three, smarty-pants. Where'd you learn to count?" I laugh at her, then spin around again when I hear Dad.

"Well, we have something to discuss."

The smile slips from my face.

"I'm sorry, Karma," Dad says, "but Stark's owner contacted Aunt Amy this afternoon. He saw our posting from months ago and wants her back."

I feel as though I've been footed in the chest. As if a giant golden eagle has stabbed its talons into the center of me. I actually sink back into the chair.

For a few moments the only sound in the room is the hum of the fridge. Then Dad adds gently, "She's from a breeder just across the Canadian border. I've offered to take her back to him."

No, no, no.

“But . . . that’s not fair. I saved her life! And how long does it take to notice your bird lost her transmitter? We’ve had her for months. How could he abandon her like that? And what about how bad this person must be at training falcons? Stark has some . . . issues.”

“Clearly,” Dad says.

A desperate idea hits me. “What if we bought her? Did you offer to buy—?”

Dad glances at my arm as I wave it around. His look sets a fire in me.

“No!” I cry. “You’re letting her go because I got bit? This was my fault, not hers.”

“Karma, settle down. That’s not the reason.” Dad leans back and scratches his beard. “First of all, you know we can’t afford to buy a gyr for you. And you know she doesn’t like our hot Montana summers. She’s built for camouflage in snow. It’s better for her to go home.”

“You understood this might happen,” Aunt Amy reminds me. “I know it seemed she’d make a great demo bird with the lure training. But soon you’ll trap your own redbill, and you won’t have time for her once you start your apprenticeship.”

Sneaky, clever Aunt Amy. The assurance that I’m still allowed to be her apprentice makes me feel slightly better.

“You’ll also be starting at an actual school next year,” Mom reminds me. “You won’t have the same flexibility that you have now, at home.”

They all make good points, but they aren’t the ones who made a promise.

“I know you want the best for Stark,” Dad says, glancing at Mom. “And to see the place where she’s from. That’s why I thought you’d like to come.”

“You want me to go with you when we ditch her?” The walls of the kitchen are closing in around me. “I promised her I’d never leave her. I *promised*.” The word catches in my throat. This can’t be happening.

“We’re all going to go. Well, your mom has to work, and Aunt Amy has to care for the birds. But you, me, and your brother will go. We’ll still do our lessons on the road; don’t want to miss those.” Dad grins sheepishly, his eyes full of conflicting emotions. When he searches my expression, he switches tactics and focuses on my brother instead. “What do you say, Gav? Ready for a road trip?”

“Woo-hoo!” Gavin yells.

Typical.

Pickles screeches, and the sound rips through my head. I want to scream with her. I want to shred something.

“How about you think of this as a little vacation from chores,” Mom says. “A fun road trip’s got to be better than cleaning the mews.”

“That shows how much you know!” I feel like I’m going to explode. “I *like* cleaning the mews!” I scream.

“Karma!” Mom and Dad yell at the same time.

“Fledgling,” Aunt Amy says.

The only one quiet in this house now is Pickles. She stares at me, unblinking, as I grab my jacket and flee toward the door.

“You should start packing,” Mom calls after me.

“We leave tomorrow,” Dad chimes in.

As I head outside, Gavin begins singing “O Canada” at the top of his lungs.

THREE



I hurry out to the mews. It's still late afternoon, plenty of light left. I think we deserve one last flight together.

How could this week have started so well and then gone so wrong? The perfect fall breeze, blue sky, and crisp air from yesterday linger today. But everything has changed.

I'm losing Stark.

Of all the raptors I've known, this one bird has gotten under my skin. Literally—the bandage on my arm is a reminder of how much. I open the door.

The mews is a long building. Plywood divides it into smaller sections, and plastic-coated wire stretches across the top of each enclosure. A corridor runs down the length.

In the first few sections we keep the hawks, then the falcons, and then the eagles. The owls are in a separate mews behind this one. Most of the crew, including Stark, is outside in the weathering yard. It's an enclosed area where the birds can sun themselves on their blocks and perches.

I make my way past the meat freezer, the scale, and the shelves loaded with hoods, creance lines, bells, jesses, and other falconry gear. I already have my satchel over my shoulder, and I stuff a tidbit of meat in it along with my lure, my gauntlet, and telemetry equipment so I can track Stark in the air.

Cheeko's bath pan has a casting in it. The chunky, brown ferruginous hawk glares at me as I change the water. His glare has a calming effect.

"Yeah, I know, you didn't get to show off yesterday," I say apologetically.

At the sound of my voice, Bert spreads his enormous eagle wings and bobs his head with impatience.

"What? Someone else getting more attention than you?" I pet Bert's head as though he's a dog, which he loves. He peers at me from under his heavy brow ridge.

I love being surrounded by these birds. I love the sounds and the smells and watching them rouse their feathers, which makes them look like big puffy balls before they lay their feathers down smooth again. I even love the *air* around them, the feel of it. How this wildness sticks to me. It's soothing and pungent and real, and it helps me think clearly.

But when I go out the back door and my gaze meets Stark's, a fresh twist of pain grips my heart.

Stark bobs her head as I approach, and I pretend the dance she does on her block is because she's happy to see me. Even though she'd be able to pick me out in a roomful of people, Stark is slow to show me affection. Maybe that's why I keep trying so hard with her. I sense she's had a rough

life. I want to prove to her that she can trust me. I keep my eyes averted, but I want to stare in awe at her. Once you fly a bird—see it soar free and wild, then come *back*—it’s like the bird owns your heart.

In one smooth movement I hold my gloved hand in front of her legs and gather the jesses. She flaps twice as she steps onto my fist and studies me. There is no memory of what happened in her gaze, no remorse or unease. I don’t flinch as I bring my cheek next to hers, breathe in her slightly feral scent, and croon to her. I swear she likes this. She stands bold and proud, and I admire how her mottled white coloring contrasts with the black trim on her tail and primary feathers. Her breast feathers are coarse under my hand as I run my fingers through them.

I counted the days until her molt was over last month. When her new set of feathers grew in, I could start flying her. That’s when I could finally tell that she was lure trained. And so smart. It made me seethe to think someone just ditched her. Or didn’t care that her transmitter got lost and she couldn’t be tracked. She didn’t know how to feed herself, or how to get home, or how to live in the wild. She nearly died. How would it feel to be abandoned like that? I wanted her to know someone cared. I told her I’d always be there for her.

“So, I found out where you’re from.” I can hardly say it out loud. “But don’t worry, I’m going to go with you so I can meet this guy and see your mews. If it doesn’t seem good enough for you, I’m bringing you right back here, okay?”

Stark studies me and then sneezes, misting me with her bird snot.

“I agree. Let’s do one more together.” I slip a transmitter over her head and check the signal on the frequency. Her hood goes on next. I cinch the braces with my free hand and teeth. This way, she is calm as I carry her to the back field. Still, nervous energy charges through me.

I cup my hand, making a triangle with the side of my thumb and first knuckle. This is the place a falcon sits, right on your fist. Stark’s long talons clench and unclench as she balances on my gauntlet while I walk. I ignore the ache in my arm where she nailed me. My breathing matches her grip. I face into the breeze, and it ruffles through her feathers, making her hop with excitement.

“I know how you feel,” I tell her. With a wind like this, she wants to fly so badly, and a part of me does too.

I stop in our usual place. The prairie sage sways in the open field, and my skin tingles with anticipation. I try to ignore that this is our last flight together. A quiver travels up my chest and ends on my lip. *Don’t let her see you unsure.* I shake my head and grow a smile.

“Here you go, girl.” I pull off her hood, this time fully focused, and watch her take in her surroundings. She looks around, rouses, and poops—shooting a healthy-looking mute straight down. She glances at me briefly before crouching and leaping off my gauntlet.

When she unfolds her wings to their full size, the sun reflects off her white plumage. It makes my throat tight. She is fit for a king. No wonder gyrfalcons were once flown only by royalty.

Watching Stark soar, my next breath hitches. I’m not

supposed to wonder if my bird will come back, but I can't help it after what happened yesterday. The scariest part of falconry is being so attached to an animal that can break your heart in a moment. All she has to do is keep flying and disappear.

She pivots back and hurtles past my head, then rises again to begin climbing like stairs in the sky, spiraling up and up, all around me. I start to breathe again.

I let her ride the thermals. When I fly her like this, it's as if I'm soaring with her. I can almost feel the biting wind in my face. I am free and wild and brave.

Stark swivels her head in my direction. She fixes her steady gaze on me as she soars. I must be patient, but the hope inside me is so big I can hardly stand it. Will she fly higher still, like a falcon is supposed to? Will I be able to swing the lure right, letting her hurtling body get close, but not hitting her with it? There are so many ways to fail, and I want our last flight together to be perfect. I automatically scan the sky above her for eagles. Even more, I don't want this flight to end in disaster. She could be killed in an instant by a passing owl or eagle.

Once she's about two hundred feet above me, I pull out the lure with my right hand and begin to swing it in a large arc beside me. The rest of the string I hold loosely in my left. I let out a whistle I've perfected.

Stark pivots in the air. I watch her fold up and dive. She drops out of the sky, and my heart plummets with her.

I have to time the arc of the lure with her approach, always swinging the lure away from her. When she gets close,

I pull the lure away, slicing the string back with my left hand and swinging in a figure eight. Stark reels up to miss the ground. She rolls and tucks and dives again. I let her get closer, and then pull the lure around. It's easy to see how smart she is when we play like this. She watches and calculates and swivels her body as she tucks, spirals, and dives.

She is so clever, trying to guess my moves. She flies straight into the sun; I can hardly see her, which I think she does on purpose. Suddenly she summersaults backward and stoops so fast that I gasp at the impact when she smashes into the lure. It's such a savage, primal thing that always brings up my blood.

"Good!" My hands shake as I retrieve the lure from the ground, where she's sitting on it. I'm so proud, though I'm not sure what part I'm proud of. Proud of how pretty she is? Proud that she hit the lure with deadly accuracy? Or that she chooses me over flying free?

When I pluck her from the ground, she's flapping and jazzed. I can feel her mood through the pressure of her grip on my fist. She grabs the lure back with an outstretched talon and holds it with one foot. I let her break into the meat I'm clutching between my fingers. She eats on my fist.

"I'm going to miss you so much." My throat aches a little as I watch her. Her sharp eyes glance dispassionately my way, then go back to her kill.

FOUR



“We’ll be gone four days, Gav. You think you’ll have enough reading material?” I ask as Gavin lugs out another box of comics from his room.

“One-box limit,” Dad says.

“But I have to bring issues thirty-seven through forty-nine for traders,” Gavin explains. “What if I meet someone who has issue number three, and he wants to trade?”

Gavin is obsessed with his quest for number three. He spends most of his Internet Forty-Five on it. I hardly ever use my daily forty-five minutes of computer time, since it doesn’t take me long to check my Facebook page. I have twenty-eight friends. My neighbor Michelle who goes to a real school has 781. I have no idea what it would be like to have *that* many friends.

“One box,” Dad repeats. “You’re just going to have to make a decision. Life is full of tough choices.”

Gavin mutters something as he turns to bring his box

back to his room. My bag is only half full since this isn't going to be like a vacation, more like a funeral. I've packed jeans and black T-shirts. Also my hoodie, which is my favorite color—white.

When we load Stark into a tall and narrow wooden box built into the back of our green van, I hope that she will rage. I want her to fight against the hawk box. To flap and squawk and show Dad that she wants to stay here. But she goes in with no problem.

The guilt I feel burns me from the inside out. She doesn't realize we're taking her away. After all my time getting her to trust me, now I'm betraying her. Inside my head, I'm raging for her.

"Text me when you get there," Mom says, handing Dad his phone.

He leans in to kiss her, then she kisses us, and we roll out of our long driveway, under the arch that reads "Beaver-tree National Forest, Birds of Prey Education Center" in red letters.

"We're already late," Dad says. "I wanted to be on the road before eight. We've got one day to get there and one day to see Stark settled in. Then I thought we'd detour on the way back through Glacier National Park, do some camping. May as well take a few days for Outdoor Classroom, huh?"

"Yeah, Dad. That's great," I say.

"All right! Who's up for 'I spy'?" Dad yells, as if he can change the mood in the car with the force of his voice.

"Me!" Gavin has an insatiable obsession with our family

version of I spy, or wildlife ID. It usually consists of describing species that aren't even found in Montana. But if you can correctly describe color, shape, and distinguishing markings of what you "happened to see," then you get a point.

"Dad, we haven't even reached town yet." I stare out the window from the backseat, the closest I can get to Stark's box.

"Never too early for games, my little wild child," Dad says. "I spy . . ."

I tune them out as I stare at the colorful sedimentary rock and low buttes. The prairie on the left of us, the pine forest on the right.

"Something mottled brown with dark brown tips!" Gavin calls out.

It's going to be a long trip.

I settle further into the seat as I take out my apprentice study guide and look at the photos of bumblefoot infection, but I can't concentrate. Even though Stark is in her crate behind me, I'm the one who feels caged.



Later I'm woken by the van slowing as Dad pulls into a gas station. I stretch my kinked neck, trying to figure out where we are. The sharp silhouettes of two mountain peaks rise up in the distance. I grab the phone from the console in front of me and text Mom.

Almost at Free Hold. What's world record for longest I-spy game?

A moment later she responds.

Glad you're having fun. Call me when you arrive. Love you.

I stick the phone back in the console, next to Dad.

"Just a quick pit stop," Dad says as he pulls up to a pump. "I know it's past lunchtime, but we'll eat and stretch at Denny's. How does that sound?"

"Shocking, Dad. We only stop there every time we do Outdoor Classroom near Free Hold," I say.

He meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. "What? You saying your old man is predictable?"

I tug on his ponytail and then automatically point to Gavin beside me, indicating he did it.

While Dad fills the van, I notice a teenage boy leaning against the side of the store. He's wearing blue jeans and a dark windbreaker. There's something about the way he stands hunched over that makes me watch him closer. With an exaggerated flourish, he flicks his candy wrapper away, not bothering to walk the few paces to the garbage can.

Dad knocks on the window. "You guys want anything?"

"Doritos!" Gavin yells.

"Water," I say.

When I glance back, the boy is staring at me from under long, brown bangs. Our eyes meet, and his gaze is strangely familiar to me, though I've never met him. He reminds me of Stark when she first arrived. Fierce and afraid and desolate. There's a wildness to him that I recognize.

As Dad approaches him, the boy pulls his features into a smile, pushes his hands into his pockets, and stands straighter. He says something that looks like it's meant to

be charming. Dad pauses and pulls out his hand. They shake before Dad continues into the store. The boy glares at me, and I look away. A wooden sign on the lawn next to him reads “Home of the Free Because of the Brave.”

When I glance back, the boy is gone.

A few minutes later, Dad returns with a bag of snacks. He passes my water to me, hands the bag to Gavin, and buckles in. “Save those for after we eat, Gav.”

We pull out onto the highway again, and just as I’m about to ask Dad what the boy said, I see him. He’s walking backward along the side of the road, with his thumb sticking out.

“Oh, that kid asked me for a ride back there,” Dad says.

“*Stop!*” I scream as we pass the boy.

Dad slams on the brakes, pulling us over to the side. “What? What’s wrong?” He whips his head around to look at me.

“I just . . . we have to . . . help him,” I stammer. Maybe it’s because he’s my age. Who knows, we could be at the same school next year. Or maybe it’s because he reminds me of a lost falcon. I just can’t leave him there.

Dad fixes me with the stink eye, but by then the boy has walked up to our van and is peering in the window. Dad slides the window down, heaving a sigh.

“Hello again. You still need a lift, son?”

“Uh, yeah. Where you heading?” His voice is gravel.

“Just a ways down the highway here, not far.” Dad eyes me in the rearview mirror. He is going to kill me later. I can feel his mood like a living thing.

The boy opens the side door as I hastily unbuckle my belt and slide across the seat. For some reason I glance back to make sure Stark's all right. She's perched in the same position as she started in. The boy stares at me from the door.

"Gavin, come up here with me," Dad says.

"Front seat!" Gavin cheers, as he climbs over the console. The boy breaks his piercing gaze to stare at Dad with an offended expression. He slumps into the seat beside me.

"Sup," he says.

"Sup yourself," I say, not exactly sure what that's supposed to mean, but I don't want to sound dumb.

"That's Karma." Dad points to me. Gavin's eyes are round as he takes in everything that's happening.

"I'm Henry, and this is Gavin," Dad says. "What's your name?"

"Cooper."

"As in Cooper's hawk?" I ask. "Very cool short-winged bird—well all birds are cool. But they're cunning predators."

His eyes are hard, and that expression on his face makes me cringe. I've seen it before. It means I talk too much around new people.

"Cunning predators?" the boy asks.

"Good hunters. They fly really well. All accipiters do, they're swift-winged birds. Cooper's hawks are related to sharp-shinned hawks and goshawks; you've heard of those?"

"Cooper, as in my *name* is Cooper," he says, then adds under his breath, "and yours is Crazy."

"Cooper." Dad's voice is tight. "Are you on your way home?"

“No.” And the tone of his response slams the door on any further conversation.

As awkwardness descends over us, I shuffle in my seat. I meet Dad’s eyes in the rearview mirror and feel a tightness in my belly at his look of discomfort.

“So, do you go to school?” I ask, turning toward the boy. He stares at me a moment, then lifts one eyebrow.

“Cause, well, I’m just asking since we don’t. Go to school. Nope. We’re homeschooled because we have to be home to run the Birds of Prey Education Center. Ever heard of it?”

He’s about to speak when Stark chooses that moment to vocalize.

Kek, kek, kek.

Cooper jumps. “What the what?”

“That’s Stark,” I say. “She has special genes.”

Cooper peers at the box with a confused expression, so I elaborate.

“She’s a gyrfalcon, part of the long-winged family. She has a spectacular color morph. . . . I mean, it’s special for a gyr to be pure white like that. They can be brown, black, or silver. They’re an arctic bird, from Greenland, or Iceland, so they blend in with the snow. And you should see how her color sets off her dark eyes. She’s one of the prettiest birds I’ve ever known. And I’ve known a lot of them.”

“Huh.” He’s eyeing me closer now. He takes in my frizzed-out hair, my T-shirt that reads “Do Not Make Me Use My Falconer’s Voice.”

I casually pat my hair to smooth it.

Cooper's gaze finds my book, still open to the bumble-foot infection, and he wipes his hand on his jeans as though the photos were contagious.

"Oh yeah. Those photos," I say. "Gyrs are more susceptible to diseases and stuff. I had to read up on it after I found Stark."

"Riiight," Cooper says.

"Stark's my bird. Well, she was." Talking about Stark makes my voice shaky. "She was my lure demo bird. Not mine for falconry." As I say this, an unexpected yearning comes to me, and I imagine hunting with Stark. I would have loved the chance to hunt with her.

"I haven't got a bird for falconry yet," I continue. "First I have to write an exam to get my apprentice license. Then I start my apprenticeship with my aunt Amy for two years. We start with trapping a red-tailed hawk. The license allows me to trap and hold one raptor for the purpose of training and hunting. They're easier to handle than long-winged birds and using a wild-caught for falconry is best. They make great hunting partners."

Cooper remains silent, so I continue. "Once I'm done with my apprenticeship, I'll become a falconer like my aunt. She lives across our road with Uncle Marco, down the longest driveway in the world."

"That's kinda cool," Cooper says.

"I know!" I smile at him, encouraging him to say more. "I've been around birds my whole life."

"So, you ever killed stuff with a bird?"

I glance at Dad again in the rearview mirror. Time to

change the topic. "I'm going to high school next year, in Red Rock. Is that where you go?"

"No."

"Oh. Where do you go?" I ask.

"Are you apprenticing to be a detective too?"

"No, just for falconry."

He smirks, which makes me even more nervous. Behind him, outside the window, something catches my eye. There's just enough time to see a coyote slink into the scrub brush on the side of the highway. But our wildlife I-spy game has been forgotten.

"So, are you on Facebook?" I can't seem to help my mouth from running.

Cooper stares at me as if I've got something hanging out of my nose.

"If you want to know more about falconry," I continue, casually wiping my nose just to be sure, "I can send you some links. What's your last name? We could friend each other."

"Are you for real?" he asks.

"Are we getting closer to where you want to go?" Dad cuts in. "We're, ah . . . turning off soon."

"Actually, *Henry*, I'm going much farther." Cooper leans over the console toward him and points ahead out the window.

"Well, unfortunately, we'll have to drop you off here, since we're turning at the next road ahead." Dad slows the van as he talks, staring into Cooper's eyes through the rearview mirror. "I'm sure you can find another ride."

We stop, and Dad turns around. “It was very nice to meet you, Cooper.”

The silence hangs between them for a beat. Cooper stays rigid, as if teetering on the verge of a decision. It makes me tense too. In fact, all four of us sit frozen in place, staring at each other.

Cooper opens the door and leaps out. He heads directly to the back of the van, and I’m wondering if he’s looking to come in the back and release Stark or take her box or something. I scramble over the seat to protect her. All I see through the window is the top of Cooper’s brown hair blowing in the wind.

Dad unbuckles his seat belt and leans way over Gavin to peer out of the open window. “What are you doing back there, son?”

“I’m not your son!” Cooper straightens and starts marching along the van, passing us and continuing on ahead. Once he’s on the highway, he turns, scratching his chin with his middle finger and staring at Dad with a challenge. He sticks his thumb out and begins walking backward down the deserted road.

“Oh boy,” Dad says. He straightens and puts the van in drive.

We pass Cooper as we accelerate. I feel strange, as if he were a wounded bird that needed help, but we set him free too soon.