

JOSEPHINE ANGELINI

“A gorgeous, haunting saga.”

—Lauren Kate, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *FALLEN*

STARCROSSED





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JOSEPHINE ANGELINI

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Chapter One

“But if you bought me a car now, it would be yours when I go away to school in two years. Still practically new,” Helen said optimistically. Unfortunately, her father was no sucker.

“Lennie, just because the state of Massachusetts thinks it’s okay for sixteen-year-olds to drive . . .” Jerry began.

“Almost seventeen,” Helen reminded.

“Doesn’t mean that I have to agree with it.” He was winning, but Helen hadn’t lost yet.

“You know, the Pig only has another year or two left in her,” Helen said, referring to the ancient Jeep Wrangler her father drove, which she suspected might have been parked outside the castle where the Magna Carta was signed. “And think of all the gas money we could save if we got a hybrid, or even went full electric. Wave of the future, Dad.”

“Uh-huh” was all he’d say.

Now she’d lost.

Helen Hamilton groaned softly to herself and looked out over the railing of the ferry that was bringing her back to Nantucket. She contemplated another year of riding her bike to school in November and, when the snow got too deep, scrounging for rides or, worst of all, taking the bus. She shivered in anticipated agony and tried not to think about it. Some of the Labor Day tourists were staring at her, not unusual, so Helen tried to turn her face away as subtly as she could. When Helen looked in a mirror all she saw were the basics—two eyes, a nose, and a mouth—but strangers from off island tended to stare, which was really annoying.

Luckily for Helen, most of the tourists on the ferry that afternoon were there for the view, not her portrait. They were so determined to cram in a little scenic beauty before the end of summer that they felt obliged to ooh and aah at every marvel of the Atlantic Ocean, though it was all lost on Helen. As far as she was concerned, growing up on a tiny island was nothing but a pain, and she couldn’t wait to go to college off island, off Massachusetts, and off the entire eastern seaboard if she could manage it.

It wasn’t that Helen hated her home life. In fact, she and her father got along perfectly. Her mom had ditched them both when Helen was a baby, but Jerry had learned early on how to give his daughter just the right amount of attention. He didn’t hover, yet he was always there for her when she needed him. Buried under a thin layer of resentment about the current car situation, she knew she could never ask for a better dad.

“Hey, Lennie! How’s the rash?” yelled a familiar voice. Coming toward her was Claire, Helen’s best friend since birth. She tipped unsteady tourists out of her path with artfully placed pushes.

The sea-goofy day-trippers swerved away from Claire like she was a linebacker and not a tiny elf or a girl perched delicately on platform sandals. She glided easily through the stumbling riot she had created and slid next to Helen by the railing.

“Giggles! I see you got some back-to-school shopping done, too,” Jerry said as he gave Claire a one-armed hug around her parcels.

Claire Aoki, aka Giggles, was a badass. Anyone who took a look at her five-foot-two frame and delicate Asian features and failed to recognize her inherent scrappiness ran the risk of suffering horribly at the hands of a grossly underestimated opponent. The nickname “Giggles” was her personal albatross. She’d had it since she was a baby. In her friends’ and family’s defense it was impossible to resist calling her Giggles. Claire had, hands down, the best laugh in the universe. Never forced or shrill, it was the kind of laugh that could make anyone within earshot smile.

silence, it was the kind of laugh that could make anyone within earshot smile.

“Fo-sho, sire of my BFF,” Claire replied. She hugged Jerry back with genuine affection, ignoring her use of the dreaded nickname. “Might I have a word with your progeny? Sorry to be so rude, but it’s top secret, high-clearance stuff. I’d tell you . . .” she began.

“But then you’d have to kill me,” Jerry finished sagely. He shuffled obligingly off to the concession stand to buy himself a sugary soda while his daughter, the chief of the food police, wasn’t looking.

“Wacha got in the bag, dad?” Claire asked. She grabbed Helen’s loot and started rifling through. “Jeans, cardigan, T-shirt, under . . . whoa! You go underwear shopping with your dad? Ew!”

“It’s not like I have any choice!” Helen complained as she snatched her bag away. “I needed new bras! Anyway, my dad hides at the bookstore while I try everything on. But trust me, even knowing he’s down the street while I shop for underwear is excruciating,” she said, a smile on her reddening face.

“It can’t be all that painful. It’s not like you ever try to buy anything sexy. Jeez, Lennie, do you think you could dress more like my grandma?” Claire held up a pair of white cotton briefs. Helen snatched the granny panties and shoved them to the bottom of the bag while Claire stretched out her magnificent laugh.

“I know, I’m such a big geek it’s gone viral,” Helen replied, Claire’s teasing instantly forgiven, as usual. “Aren’t you afraid you’ll catch a fatal case of loser from me?”

“Nope. I’m so awesome I’m immune. Anyway, geeks are the best. You’re all so deliciously corruptible. And I love the way you blush whenever I talk about underpants.”

Claire was forced to adjust her stance as a couple of picture-takers barged in close to them. Working with the momentum of the deck, Claire nudged the tourists out of the way with one of her ninja balance moves. They stumbled aside, laughing about the “choppy water,” clueless that Claire had even touched them. Helen fiddled with the heart necklace she always wore and took the opportunity to slouch down against the railing to better meet her friend’s small stature.

Unfortunately for achingly shy Helen, she was an eye-grabbing five feet nine inches tall, and still growing. She’d prayed to Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad, and Vishnu to make it stop, but she still felt the hot splinters in her limbs and the seizing muscles of another growth spurt at night. She promised herself that at least if she topped six feet she’d be tall enough to scale the safety railing and throw herself off the top of the lighthouse in Siasconset.

Salespeople were always telling her how lucky she was, but not even they could find her pants that fit. Helen had resigned herself to the fact that in order to buy affordable jeans that were long enough she had to go a few sizes too big, but if she didn’t want them to fall off her hips, she had to put up with a mild breeze flapping around her ankles. Helen was pretty sure that the “wicked jealous” salesgirls didn’t walk around with chilly ankles. Or with their butt cracks showing.

“Stand up straight,” Claire snapped automatically when she saw Helen slouching, and Helen obeyed. Claire had a thing about good posture, something to do with her super-proper Japanese mother and even more proper, kimono-wearing grandmother.

“Okay! On to the main topic,” Claire announced. “You know that huge kazillion-dollar compound that the New England Patriots guy used to own?”

“The one in ’Sconset? Sure. What about it?” Helen asked, picturing the house’s private beach and feeling relieved that her dad didn’t make enough money at his store to buy a house any closer to the water.

When Helen was a child she had very nearly drowned, and ever since had secretly believed that the Atlantic Ocean was trying to kill her. She’d always kept that bit of paranoia to herself . . . though she still was a terrible swimmer. To be fair, she could tread water for a few minutes at a time, but she was

still was a terrible swimmer. To be fair, she could tread water for a few minutes at a time, but she was rotten at it. Eventually, she sank like a rock no matter how saline the ocean was supposed to be and no matter how hard she paddled.

“It finally sold to a big family,” Claire said. “Or two families. I’m not sure how it works, but I guess there are two fathers, and they’re brothers. They both have kids—so the kids are cousins?” Claire wrinkled her brow. “Whatever. The point is that whoever moved in has a bunch of kids. And they’re all about the same age. There are, like, *two boys* that are going to be in our grade.”

“And let me guess,” Helen said, deadpan. “You did a tarot reading and saw that both of the boys are going to fall madly in love with you and then they’ll tragically fight to the death.”

Claire kicked Helen in the shin. “No, dummy. There’s one for each of us.”

Helen rubbed her leg, pretending it hurt. Even if Claire had kicked Helen with all of her might, she still wouldn’t be strong enough to leave a bruise.

“One for each of us? That’s uncharacteristically low drama of you,” Helen teased. “It’s too straightforward. I don’t buy it. But how about this? We’ll each fall in love with the same boy, or the wrong boy—whichever one doesn’t love us back—and then you and I will fight *each other* to the death.”

“Whatever are you babbling on about?” Claire asked sweetly as she inspected her nails, feigning incomprehension.

“God, Claire, you’re so predictable,” Helen said, laughing. “Every year you dust off those cards you bought in Salem that time on the field trip and you always predict that something amazing is going to happen. But every year the only thing that amazes me is that you haven’t slipped into a boredom coma by winter break.”

“Why do you fight it?” Claire protested. “You know eventually something spectacular is going to happen to us. You and I are way too fabulous to be *ordinary*.”

Helen shrugged. “I am perfectly happy with ordinary. In fact, I think I’d be devastated if you actually predicted right for a change.”

Claire tilted her head to one side and stared at her. Helen untucked her hair from behind her ears to curtain off her face. She hated to be watched.

“I know you would. I just don’t think ordinary’s ever going to work out for you,” Claire said thoughtfully.

Helen changed the subject. They chatted about their class schedules, running track, and whether or not they should cut bangs. Helen wanted something new, but Claire was dead set against Helen touching her long blonde hair with scissors. Then they realized that they had wandered too close to what they called the “pervert zone” of the ferry, and had to hastily backtrack.

They both hated that part of the ferry, but Helen was particularly sensitive about it; it reminded her of this creepy guy that had followed her around one summer, until the day he just disappeared off the ferry. Instead of feeling relieved when she realized he wasn’t coming back, Helen felt like she had done something wrong. She had never brought it up to Claire, but there had been a bright flash and a horrible smell of burnt hair. Then the guy was just *gone*. It still made her queasy to think about it, but Helen played along, like it was all a big joke. She forced a laugh and let Claire drag her along to another part of the ferry.

Jerry joined them as they pulled into the dock and disembarked. Claire waved good-bye and promised to try to visit Helen at work the next day, though since it was the last day of summer, the outlook was doubtful.

Helen worked a few days a week for her father, who co-owned the island’s general store. Apart from a morning paper and fresh cup of coffee, the New Store also sold saltwater taffy, penny candy,

a morning paper and fresh cup of coffee, the News Store also sold saltwater taffy, penny candy, caramels and toffee in real crystal jars, and ropes of licorice whips sold by the yard. There were always fresh-cut flowers and handmade greeting cards, gag gifts and magic tricks, seasonal knickknacks for the tourists, and refrigerator essentials like milk and eggs for the locals.

About six years ago the News Store had expanded its horizons and added Kate's Cakes onto the back, and since then business had exploded. Kate Rogers was, quite simply, a genius with baked goods. She could take anything and make it into a pie, cake, popover, cookie, or muffin. Even universally loathed vegetables like brussels sprouts and broccoli succumbed to Kate's wiles and became big hits as croissant fillers.

Still in her early thirties, Kate was creative and intelligent. When she'd partnered up with Jerry she revamped the back of the News Store and turned it into a haven for the island's artists and writers, somehow managing to do it without turning up the snob factor. Kate was careful to make sure that anyone who loved baked goods and real coffee—from suits to poets, working-class townies to corporate raiders—would feel comfortable sitting down at her counter and reading a newspaper. She had a way of making everyone feel welcome. Helen adored her.

When Helen got to work the next day, Kate was trying to stock a delivery of flour and sugar. It was pathetic.

"Lennie! Thank god you're early. Do you think you could help me . . . ?" Kate gestured toward the forty-pound sacks.

"I got it. No, don't tug the corner like that, you'll hurt your back," Helen warned, rushing to stop Kate's ineffectual pulling. "Why didn't Luis do this for you? Wasn't he working this morning?" Helen asked, referring to one of the other workers on the schedule.

"The delivery came after Luis left. I tried to stall until you got here, but a customer nearly tripped and I had to at least pretend I was going to move the blasted thing," Kate said.

"I'll take care of the flour if you fix me a snack," Helen said cajolingly as she stooped to pick up the sack.

"Deal," Kate replied gratefully, and hustled off with a smile. Helen waited until Kate's back was turned, lifted the sack of flour easily on her shoulder, and sauntered toward the workstation, where she opened the sack and poured some flour into the smaller plastic container Kate used in the kitchen. While Helen neatly stacked the rest of the delivery in the storeroom, Kate poured her a bubbly pink lemonade, the kind that Helen loved, from France, one of the many foreign places she was dying to visit.

"It's not that you're so freakishly strong for someone so thin that bothers me. What really pisses me off," Kate said as she sliced some cherries and cheese for Helen to snack on, "is that you never get winded. Not even in *this* heat."

"I get winded," Helen lied.

"You sigh. Big difference."

"I've just got bigger lungs than you."

"But since you're taller, you'd need *more* oxygen, wouldn't you?"

They clinked glasses and sipped their lemonade, calling it even. Kate was a bit shorter and plumper than Helen, but that didn't make her either short or fat. Helen always thought of the word *zaftig* when she saw Kate, which she had a notion meant "sexy curvy." She never used it, though, in case Kate took it the wrong way.

"Is the book club on tonight?" Helen asked.

"Uh, huh. But I doubt anyone will want to talk about *Kundera*," Kate said with a smirk, jingling the

Oh-huh. But I doubt anyone will want to talk about Kallioera, Kate said with a smirk, jiggling the ice cubes in her glass.

“Why? Hot gossip?”

“Smokin’ hot. This crazy-big family just moved to the island.”

“The place in ‘Sconset?” Helen asked. At Kate’s nod, she rolled her eyes.

“Oh-ho! Too good to dish with the rest of us?” Kate teased, flicking the condensed water from the side of her glass in Helen’s direction.

Helen play-shrieked, and then had to leave Kate for a moment to ring up a few customers. As soon as she finished the transactions, she came back and continued the conversation.

“No. I just don’t think it’s that strange for a big family to buy a big property. Especially if they’re going to live in it year-round. It makes more sense than some old wealthy couple buying a summer home that’s so huge they get lost on the way to the mailbox.”

“True,” Kate conceded. “But I really thought you’d be more interested in the Delos family. You’ll be graduating with a few of them.”

Helen stood there as *Delos* ran around her head. The name meant nothing to her. How could it? But some echoey part of her brain kept repeating “Delos” over and over.

“Lennie? Where’d you go?” Kate asked. She was interrupted by the first members of the book club coming early, wound up and already in the throes of wild speculation.

Kate’s prediction was right. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was no match for the arrival of new year-rounders, especially since the rumor mill had revealed that they were moving here from Spain. Apparently, they were Boston natives who had moved to Europe three years ago in order to be closer to their extended family, but now, suddenly, they’d decided to move back. It was the “suddenly” part that everyone spent the most time discussing. The school secretary had hinted to a few of the book club members that the kids had been enrolled so far past the normal date that the parents had practically had to bribe their way in, and all sorts of special agreements had to be made to ship their furniture over in time for their arrival. It seemed like the Delos family had left Spain in a hurry, and the book club agreed that there must have been some kind of falling-out with their cousins.

The one thing Helen could confidently gather from all the chatter was that the Delos family was rather unconventional. There were two fathers who were brothers, their younger sister, one mother (one of the fathers was a widower), and five kids, all living together on the property. The entire family was supposed to be unbelievably smart and beautiful and wealthy. Helen rolled her eyes when she heard the parts of the gossip that elevated the Delos family to mythic proportions. In fact, she could barely stand it.

Helen tried to stay behind the register and ignore the excited whispering, but it was impossible. Every time she heard one of the members of the Delos family mentioned by name, it drew her attention as if it had been shouted, irritating her. She left the register and went over to the magazine rack, straightening the shelves just to give her hands something to do.

As she wiped down the shelves and stocked the candy jars, she mentally ticked the kids off in her head. *Hector is a year older than Jason and Ariadne, who are twins. Lucas and Cassandra are brother and sister, cousins to the other three.*

She changed the water for the flowers and rang up a few customers. *Hector won’t be there the first day of school because he’s still in Spain with his aunt Pandora, though no one in town knows why.*

Helen pulled on a pair of shoulder-length rubber gloves and a long apron, and dug through the garbage for stray recycling items. *Lucas, Jason, and Ariadne are all going to be in my grade. So I’m surrounded. Cassandra is the youngest. She’s a freshman, and only fourteen.*

She went to the kitchen and put a load in the industrial dishwasher. She mopped the floors and

She went to the kitchen and put a load in the industrial dishwasher. She mopped the floors and started counting the money. *Lucas is such a stupid name. It's all wrong. It sticks out like a sore thumb.*

"Lennie?"

"What! Dad! Can't you see I'm counting?" Helen said, slamming her hands down on the counter so hard she made a stack of quarters jump. Jerry held up his hands in a placating gesture.

"It's the first day of school tomorrow," he reminded her in his most reasonable voice.

"I know," she responded blankly, still unaccountably irritable but trying not to take it out on her father.

"It's almost eleven, honey," he said. Kate came out from the back to check on the noise.

"You're still here? I'm really sorry, Jerry," she said, looking perplexed. "Helen, I told you to lock the front and go home at nine."

They both stared at Helen, who had arranged every bill and every coin in neat stacks.

"I got sidetracked," Helen said lamely.

After sharing a worried glance with Jerry, Kate took over counting the change and sent them home. Still in a daze, Helen gave Kate a kiss good-bye and tried to figure out how she had missed out on the last three hours of her life.

Jerry put Helen's bike on the back of the Pig and started the engine without a word. He glanced over at her a few times as they drove home, but he didn't say anything until they parked in the driveway.

"Did you eat?" he asked softly, raising his eyebrows.

"I don't . . . yes?" Helen had no idea what or when she'd last eaten. She vaguely remembered Kate cutting her some cherries.

"Are you nervous about the first day of school? Junior year's a big one."

"I guess I must be," she said absentmindedly. Jerry glanced over at her and bit his lower lip. He exhaled before speaking.

"I've been thinking maybe you should talk to Dr. Cunningham about those phobia pills. You know, the kind for people who have a hard time in crowds? Agoraphobia! That's what it's called," he burst out, remembering. "Do you think that could help you?"

Helen smiled and ran the charm of her necklace along its chain. "I don't think so, Dad. I'm not afraid of strangers, I'm just shy."

She knew she was lying. It wasn't *just* that she was shy. Any time she extended herself and attracted attention, even accidentally, her stomach hurt so badly it felt almost like the stomach flu or menstrual cramps—really *bad* menstrual cramps—but she'd sooner light her hair on fire than tell her father that.

"And you're okay with that? I know you'd never ask, but do you want help? Because I think this is holding you back. . . ." Jerry said, starting in on one of their oldest fights.

Helen cut him off at the pass. "I'm fine! Really. I don't want to talk to Dr. Cunningham, I don't want drugs. I just want to go inside and eat," she said in a rush. She got out of the Jeep.

Her father watched her with a small smile as she plucked her heavy, old-fashioned bike off the rack on the back of the Jeep and placed it on the ground. She rang the bell on her handlebar jauntily and gave her dad a grin.

"See, I'm just peachy," she said.

"If you knew how hard what you just did would be for an average girl your age, you'd get what I'm saying. You aren't average, Helen. You try to come off that way, but you're not. You're like *her*," he said, his voice drifting off.

For the thousandth time Helen cursed the mother she didn't remember for breaking her father's sweet heart. How could anyone leave such a good guy without so much as a good-bye? Without so much as a photo to remember her by?

much as a photo to remember her by:

“You win! I’m not average, I’m special—just like everyone else,” Helen teased, anxious to cheer him up. She nudged him with her hip as she walked past him, wheeling her bike into the garage. “Now what is there to eat? I’m starving, and it’s your week to be kitchen slave.”

Chapter Two

Still without her own car, Helen had to ride her bike to school the next morning. Normally at a quarter to eight, it would be cool out, even a little chilly with the wind blowing off the water, but as soon as she woke up, Helen could feel the hot, humid air lying on her body like a wet fur coat. She had kicked her sheets off in the middle of the night, wriggled out of her T-shirt, drunk the entire glass of water on her nightstand, and still she had woken up exhausted by the heat. It was very un-island weather, and Helen absolutely did not want to get up and go to school.

She pedaled slowly in an attempt to avoid spending the rest of the day smelling like phys ed. She didn't usually sweat much, but she'd woken up so lethargic that morning she couldn't remember if she had put on deodorant. She flapped her elbows like chicken wings trying to catch a whiff of herself as she rode, and was relieved to smell the fruity-powdery scent of some kind of protection. It was faint, so she must have put it on yesterday, but it only needed to hold on until track practice after school. Which would be a miracle, but oh well.

As she cruised down Surfside Road she could feel the baby hairs around her face pulling loose in the wind and sticking to her cheeks and forehead. It was a short ride from her house to school, but in the humidity, her carefully arranged first-day-of-school hairdo was a big old mess by the time she locked her crummy bike to the rack. She only locked it out of tourist-season habit and not because anyone at school would deign to steal it. Which was good because she also had a crummy lock.

She pulled her ruined hair out of its bonds, ran her fingers through the worst of the tangles, and retied it, this time settling for a boring, low ponytail. With a resigned sigh she swung her book bag over one shoulder and her gym bag over the other. She bent her head and slouched her way toward the front door.

She got there just a second before Gretchen Clifford, and was obliged to hold the door open for her. "Thanks, freak. Try not to rip it off the hinges, will you?" Gretchen said archly, breezing past Helen. Helen stood stupidly at the top of the steps, holding the door open for other students, who walked past her like she worked there. Nantucket was a small island, and everyone knew each other painfully well, but sometimes Helen wished Gretchen knew a little bit less about her. They'd been best friends up until fifth grade, when Helen, Gretchen, and Claire were playing hide-and-seek at Gretchen's house, and Helen accidentally knocked the bathroom door off its hinges while Gretchen was using it. Helen had tried to apologize, but the next day Gretchen started looking at her funny and calling her a freak. Ever since then it seemed like she'd gone out of her way to make Helen's life suck. It didn't help matters that Gretchen now ran with the popular crowd, while Helen hid among the braniacs.

She wanted to snap back at Gretchen, say something clever like Claire would, but the words caught in her throat. Instead, she flipped the doorstep down with her toe to leave the door propped open for everyone else. Another year of fading into the background had officially begun.

Helen had Mr. Hergeshimer for homeroom. He was the head of the English department, and had made a style for a guy in his fifties. He wore silk cravats in warm weather, flashy colored cashmere scarves when it was cold, and drove a vintage convertible Alfa Romeo. The guy had buckets of money and didn't need to work, but he taught high school, anyway. He said he did it because he didn't want to be forced to deal with illiterate heathens everywhere he went. That was his story, anyway. Personally, Helen believed he taught because he absolutely loved it. Some of the other students didn't get him and said he was a wannabe British snob, but Helen thought he was one of the best teachers she'd probably ever have.

ever have.

“Miss Hamilton,” he said broadly as Helen stepped through the door, the bell ringing at exactly the same time. “Punctual as usual. I’m certain you will be taking the seat next to your cohort, but first, a warning. Any exercise of that talent for which one of you earned the sobriquet *Giggles* and I shall separate you.”

“Sure thing, *Hergie*,” chirped Claire. Helen slid into the desk next to her. Hergie rolled his eyes at Claire’s mild disrespect, but he was pleased.

“It is gratifying to know that at least one of my students knows that *sobriquet* is a synonym for *nickname*, no matter how impertinent her delivery. Now, students: another warning. As you are preparing for your SATs this year, I shall expect you all to be ready to give me the definition of a new and exciting word every morning.”

The class groaned. Only Mr. Hergeshimer could be sadistic enough to give them homework for homeroom. It was against the natural order.

“Can *impertinent* be the word we learn for tomorrow?” asked Zach Brant anxiously.

Zach was usually anxious about something, and he had been since kindergarten. Sitting next to Zach was Matt Millis, who looked over at Zach and shook his head as if to say, “I wouldn’t try that if I were you.”

Matt, Zach, and Claire were the AP kids. They were all friends, but as they got older they were starting to realize only one of them could be valedictorian and get into Harvard. Helen stayed out of the competition, especially because she had started liking Zach less and less the past few years. Ever since his father had become the football coach and started pushing Zach to be number one both on the field and in the classroom, Zach had become so competitive that Helen could barely stand to be around him anymore.

A part of her felt bad for him. She would have pitied him more if he wasn’t so combative toward her. Zach had to be everything all the time—president of this club, captain of that team, the guy with all the gossip—but he never looked like he was enjoying any of it. Claire insisted that Zach was secretly in love with Helen, but Helen didn’t believe it for a second; in fact, sometimes she felt like Zach hated her, and that bothered her. He used to share his animal crackers with her during recess in the first grade, and now he looked for any opportunity to pick a fight with her. When did everything get so complicated, and why couldn’t they all just be friends like they were in grade school?

“Mr. Brant,” Mr. Hergeshimer enunciated. “You may use *impertinent* as your word if you wish, but from someone of your mental faculties I shall also be expecting something more. Perhaps an essay on an example of impertinence in English literature?” He nodded. “Yes, five pages on Salinger’s use of impertinence in his controversial *Catcher in the Rye* by Monday, please.”

Helen could practically smell the palms of Zach’s hands clam up from two seats away. Hergie’s powers for giving extra reading to smart-ass students were legendary, and he seemed determined to make an example out of Zach on the first day. Helen thanked her lucky stars Hergie hadn’t picked on her.

She’d rejoiced too soon. After Mr. Hergeshimer handed out the schedules, he called Helen up to his desk. He told the other students to speak freely, and they immediately launched into excited first-day-of-school chatter. Hergie had Helen pull up a chair next to him instead of making her stand and talk across his desk. Apparently, he didn’t want any of the other students to hear what he was going to say. That put Helen a little more at ease, but not for long.

“I see you decided not to enroll in any Advanced Placement classes this year,” he said, looking at her from over his half-moon reading glasses.

“I didn’t think I’d be able to handle the extra workload,” she mumbled, tucking her hands under her

I didn't think I'd be able to handle the extra workload, she mumbled, tucking her hands under her thighs and sitting on them to keep them still.

"I think you're capable of much more than you are willing to admit," Hergie said, frowning. "I know you aren't lazy, Helen. I also know you are one of the brightest students in your class. So what's keeping you from taking advantage of all that this educational system has to offer you?"

"I have to work," she said with a helpless shrug. "I need to save up if I want to go to college."

"If you take AP classes and do well on your SATs, you will stand a better chance of getting enough money for school through a scholarship than by working for minimum wage at your father's shop."

"My dad needs me. We aren't rich like everyone else on this island, but we are there for each other," she said defensively.

"That's very admirable of you both, Helen," Hergie replied in a serious tone. "But you are reaching the end of your high school years and it's time to start thinking about your own future."

"I know," Helen said, nodding. She could see from the worry puckering his face that he cared, and that he was just trying to help. "I think I should get a pretty good athletic scholarship for track. I got much faster over the summer. Really."

Mr. Hergeshimer stared at her earnest face begging him to let it go, and finally conceded. "All right. But if you feel like you need more of an academic challenge, you are welcome to join my AP English class at any point this semester."

"Thank you, Mr. Hergeshimer. If I feel like I can handle AP, I'll come to you," Helen said, grateful to be let off the hook.

As she went back to her desk, it occurred to her that she had to keep Hergie and her father away from each other at all costs. She didn't want them comparing notes and deciding that she needed to be in special classes and go out for special awards. Even the thought gave her a bellyache. Why couldn't they all just ignore her? Secretly, Helen had always felt she was different, but she thought she had done a pretty good job of hiding it her whole life. Apparently, without realizing it, she'd been sending out hints of that buried freak inside of her. She had to try to keep her head down, but she wondered how she was going to do that when she kept getting taller and taller every damn day.

"What's up?" Claire asked as soon as Helen returned to her seat.

"Just another motivational moment from Hergie. He doesn't think I'm applying myself," Helen said as breezily as she could.

"You don't apply yourself. You never do your work," Zach replied, more offended than he should have been.

"Shut it, Zach," Claire said, crossing her arms belligerently. She turned and faced Helen. "It's true, though, Lennie," she told her apologetically. "You never do your work."

"Yeah, yeah. You can both shut it," Helen said, chuckling. The bell rang and she gathered her things. Matt Millis gave her a smile but hurried away as they left the room. Feeling guilty, Helen realized that she hadn't spoken to him yet. She hadn't meant to ignore him, especially not on the first day of school.

According to Claire, "everyone" knew that Matt and Helen were "supposed" to be together. Matt was intelligent, good looking, and captain of the golf team. He was still sort of a geek, but because Helen was practically a pariah ever since Gretchen had started spreading rumors about her, it was a compliment that everyone thought she was good enough for someone like Matt.

Unfortunately, Helen never felt anything special for him. Zero tingles. The one time they had been shoved into a closet together at a party to make out, it had been disastrous. Helen felt like she was kissing her brother, and Matt felt like he was being rejected. Afterward, he was sweet about it, but no matter how many times he cracked jokes, there was a weird tension between them. She really missed

matter how many times he cracked jokes, there was a weird tension between them. She really missed him but she worried that if she told him he would take it the wrong way. *It feels like everything I do lately is being taken the wrong way*, Helen thought.

The rest of the morning Helen wandered on autopilot from class to class. She couldn't concentrate on much of anything, and every time she tried to make herself focus she felt nothing but irritation.

Something about the day was off. Everyone—from her favorite teachers to the few acquaintances she should have been happy to see—was annoying her, and every now and again while she was walking down the hall she would suddenly feel like she was inside an airplane at ten thousand feet. Her inner ears would block up, all the sounds around her would become muffled, and her head would get hot. Then, as suddenly as it had come on, the discomfort would go away. But even still, there was pressure, a pre-thunderstorm energy all around her, even though the skies were lovely and blue.

It got worse at lunch. She tore into her sandwich thinking that her headache was the result of low blood sugar, but she was wrong. Jerry had packed her favorite sandwich—smoked turkey, green apple and brie on a baguette—but she couldn't force herself to take more than a bite. She spat it out.

“Your dad make another dud?” Claire asked. When Jerry had first partnered up with Kate he'd started experimenting with creative lunches. The Vegemite and Cucumber Disaster of Freshman Year was legendary at their table.

“No, it's good old number three. I just can't eat it,” Helen said, shoving it away. Claire gleefully picked up the remainder and started eating it.

“Mmm, 'is really good,” she mumbled around a full mouth. “Us a 'atter?”

“I just don't feel right,” Helen said.

Claire stopped chewing and gave her a worried look.

“I'm not sick. You can go ahead and swallow,” Helen assured her quickly. She saw Matt approaching and chirped, “Hey!” trying to make up for that morning.

He was deep in conversation with Gretchen and Zach and didn't respond, but still came to his habitual spot at the geek table. Both Gretchen and Zach were so engrossed in what they were saying that they didn't notice that they had wandered into geek territory.

“I heard they were movie stars in Europe,” Zach was saying.

“Where did you hear that?” Matt asked, incredulous. “That's ridiculous.”

“I heard from at least two other people that Ariadne was a model. She's certainly pretty enough,” Zach argued passionately, hating to be wrong about anything, even gossip.

“*Please*. She's nowhere near thin enough to be a model,” Gretchen hissed bitterly, before catching herself and adding, “Of course I think she's *pretty*, if you go for that exotic, voluptuous look. But she's nothing compared to her twin, Jason—or her cousin! Lucas is just *unreal*,” she gushed.

The boys shared a knowing look but silently agreed that they were outnumbered by girls and should probably let it go.

“Jason is almost *too* pretty,” Claire decided solemnly, after giving it a moment's thought. “Lucas, however, is an über-babe. Quite possibly the most beautiful boy I've ever seen. And Ariadne is a stone-cold fox, Gretchen. You're just jealous.”

Gretchen gave an exasperated huff and rested a fist on her hip. “Like you're not,” was all she had for a comeback.

“Of course I am. I'm almost as jealous of her as I am of Lennie. But not quite.” Helen felt Claire turn to her to see her response, but she had her elbows on the table and her head cradled in her hands, rubbing her temples.

“Lennie?” Matt said, sitting down next to her. “Does your head hurt?” He reached out to touch her shoulder. She stood up abruptly, muttering an excuse, and hurried away.

shoulder. She stood up abruptly, muttering an excuse, and hurried away.

By the time she got to the girls' room she felt better, but she splashed a little cold water on her face for good measure. Then she remembered that she had put mascara on that morning in an attempt to make an effort. She looked at her raccoon eyes in the mirror and burst out laughing. This was the worst first day of school ever.

Somehow she made it through the last three periods, and when the bell finally rang she gratefully made her way to the girls' locker room to change for track practice.

Coach Tar was all fired up. She gave an embarrassingly optimistic speech about their chances to win races that year and told them how much she believed in them, both as athletes and as young women. Then she turned to Helen.

"Hamilton. You'll be running with the boys this year," Coach said bluntly. She told everyone to hit the trail.

Helen sat on the bench for a moment, debating her options while everyone else filed out the door. She didn't want to make a fuss, but she was mortified by the thought of having to cross the gender line. The muscles in her lower abdomen started to spasm.

"Go talk to her! Don't let her push you around," Claire said indignantly as she left.

Confused and afraid she was going to get a bellyache, Helen nodded and stood up.

"Coach Tar? Can't we just do it the way we always do?" she called out. Coach Tar stopped and turned around to listen, but she didn't look happy about it. "I mean, why can't I just train with the rest of the girls? Because I am a girl," Helen finished lamely.

"We've decided that you need to start pushing yourself more," Coach Tar responded in a cold voice. Helen had always gotten the feeling that Coach didn't like her much, and now she was sure of it.

"But I'm not a boy. It's not fair to make me run cross-country with them," Helen tried to argue. She jabbed two fingers into the spot between her belly button and her pubic bone.

"Cramps?" Coach Tar asked, a touch of sympathy creeping into her voice. Helen nodded and Coach continued. "Coach Brant and I have noticed something interesting about your times, Helen. No matter who you're running against, no matter how fast or slow your opponents are, you always come in either second or third. How can that be? Do you have an answer?"

"No. I don't know. I just run, okay? I try my best."

"No, you don't," Coach said harshly. "And if you want a scholarship, you're going to have to start *winning* races. I talked to Mr. Hergeshimer. . . ." Helen groaned out loud, but Coach Tar continued, undeterred. "It's a small school, Hamilton, get used to it. Mr. Hergeshimer told me that you were hoping for an athletic scholarship, but if you want one you're going to have to earn it. Maybe forcing you to match the boys will teach you to take your talent seriously."

The thought of displaying her speed for the world to see had a physical effect on Helen. She was so afraid that she was going to get some kind of cramp or bellyache that she started to have a mini panic attack. She began to babble. "I'll do it, I'll win races, just please don't single me out like that," she pleaded, the words tumbling out in a rush as she held her breath to hold back the pain.

Coach Tar was a hard-ass, but she wasn't cruel. "Are you okay?" she asked anxiously, rubbing Helen between her shoulder blades. "Put your head between your legs."

"I'm okay, it's just nerves," Helen explained through gritted teeth. After catching her breath she continued, "If I swear to win more races, will you let me run with the girls?"

Coach Tar studied Helen's desperate face and nodded, a bit shaken from witnessing such an intense panic attack. She let Helen go to the girl's trailhead but warned her that she still expected wins. And more than just a few.

As she ran the trail, Helen looked at the ground. An academic scholarship would be great but that

As she ran the trail, Helen looked at the ground. An academic scholarship would be great but that would mean competing with Claire for grades, and that was out of the question.

"Hey, Giggles," Helen said, easily catching up. Claire was panting and sweating away already.

"What happened? God, it's so hot!" she exclaimed, her breath strained.

"I think the entire faculty is trying to see if they can climb up onto my back at the same time."

"Welcome to my life," Claire wheezed. "Japanese kids grow up . . . with at least two . . . people up there. . . . You get used to it." After a few more labored moments of trying to keep up with Helen, Claire added, "Can we . . . slow down? Not all of us are from . . . planet Krypton."

Helen adjusted her pace, knowing that she could pull ahead in the last half mile. She rarely exerted herself in practice but she knew that even without trying hard she could easily finish first. That fact scared her, so she did what she usually did when the subject of her freaky speed came up in her head. She ignored it and chatted with Claire.

As the two girls ran down Surfside and out across the moors to Miacomet Pond, Claire couldn't stop talking about the Delos boys. She told Helen at least three times that Lucas had held the door for her the end of class. That act proved he was not only a gentleman but already in love with her as well. Jason, Claire decided, was either gay or a snob because he had only glanced at her once before quickly looking away. She also took offense at how nice a dresser he was, like he was European or something.

"He's been living in Spain for, like, three years, Gig. He kinda is European. Can we please stop talking about them? It's giving me a headache."

"Why are you the only person in school that isn't interested in the Delos family? Aren't you even curious to get a look?"

"No! And I think it's pathetic that this entire town is standing around gawking at them like a bunch of hicks!" Helen shouted.

Claire stopped short and stared at her. It wasn't like Helen to argue, let alone start yelling, but she couldn't seem to stop herself.

"I'm bored to death of the Delos family!" Helen continued, even when she saw Claire's surprise. "I'm sick of this town's fixation with them, and I hope I never have to meet, see, or share breathing space with any of them!"

Helen took off running, leaving Claire standing by herself on the trail. She finished first, just like she'd promised, but she did it a little too quickly; Coach Tar gave her a shocked look when she recorded the run time. Helen blew by her and stormed into the locker room. She grabbed her stuff and bolted out of school, not bothering to change or say good-bye to any of her teammates.

On the way home, Helen started crying. She pedaled past the neat rows of gray shingled-sided houses with their black or white painted storm shutters and tried to calm down. The sky seemed to sit particularly low on the scoured land, as if it was pressing down on the gables of the old whalers and trying to finally flatten them after a few centuries of stubborn defiance. Helen had no idea why she'd gotten so angry, or why she'd abandoned her best friend like that. She needed a little peace and quiet.

There was a car accident on Surfside; some gigantic SUV had tried to turn onto a narrow, sandbanked side street and turned over. The drivers were okay, but their beached whale of a car blocked off traffic from end to end. Annoyed as she was, Helen knew she couldn't even pedal past the boneheaded off islanders without losing her checkers. She decided to take the long way home. She turned around and headed back toward the center of town, passing the movie theater, the ferry, and the library, which, with its Greek temple architecture, stuck out like a sore thumb in a town that otherwise was an ode to four-hundred-year-old Puritan architecture. And maybe that's why Helen loved it. The Atheneum was a gleaming white beacon of strange smack-dab in the middle of forget-me-now drab, and somehow Helen identified with both of these things. Half of her was no-nonsense Nantucket

and somehow, Helen identified with both of those things. Half of her was no-nonsense Nantucket through and through, and the other half was marble columns and grand stairs that just didn't belong where they had been built. Biking past, Helen looked up at the Atheneum and smiled. It was consoling for her to know that she might stick out, but at least she didn't stick out *that* much.

When she got home, she tried to pull herself together, taking a freezing-cold shower before calling Claire to apologize. Claire didn't pick up. Helen left her a long apology blaming hormones, the heat, stress, anything and everything she could think of, though she knew in her heart that none of those things was the real reason she had flipped out. She'd been so irritable all day.

The air outside was heavy and still. Helen opened all the windows in the two-story Shaker-style house, but no breeze blew through them. What was with the weird weather? Still air was practically unheard of in Nantucket—living so close to the ocean there was always wind. Helen pulled on a thin tank top and a pair of her shortest shorts. Since she was too modest to go anywhere dressed so scantily, she decided to cook dinner. It was still her father's week as kitchen slave and technically he was responsible for all the shopping, meals, and dishes for a few days yet, but she needed something to do with her hands or she'd use them to climb the walls.

Pasta in general was Helen's comfort food, and lasagna was the queen of pasta. If she made the noodles from scratch, she'd be occupied for hours, just like she wanted, so she pulled out the flour and eggs and got to work.

When Jerry came home the second thing he noticed, after the amazing smell, was that the house was swelteringly hot. He found Helen sitting at the kitchen table, flour stuck to her sweaty face and arms, worrying the heart-shaped necklace, which her mother had given her as a baby, between her thumb and forefinger. He looked around with tense shoulders and wide eyes.

"Made dinner," Helen told him in a flat voice.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked tentatively.

"Of course not. Why would you ask that when I just cooked you dinner?"

"Because usually when a woman spends hours cooking a complicated meal and then just sits at the table with a pissed-off look on her face, that means some guy somewhere did something really stupid," he said, still on edge. "I have had other women in my life besides you, you know."

"Are you hungry or not?" Helen asked with a smile, trying to shake off her ugly mood.

Hunger won out. Jerry shut his mouth and went to wash his hands. Helen hadn't eaten since breakfast and should have been starved. When she tasted the first forkful she realized she wouldn't be able to eat. She listened as best as she could while she pushed bits of her favorite food around her plate and Jerry devoured two pieces. He asked her questions about her day while he tried to sneak a little more salt onto his food. Helen blocked his attempts like she always did, but she didn't have the energy to give him more than monosyllabic answers.

Even though she went to bed at nine, leaving her dad watching the Red Sox on TV, she was still lying awake at midnight when she heard the game finally end and her father come upstairs. She was tired enough to sleep, but every time she started to drift off she would hear whispering.

At first she thought that it had to be real, that someone was outside playing a trick on her. She went up to the widow's walk on the roof above her bedroom and tried to see as far as she could into the dark. Everything was still—not even a puff of air to stir the rosebushes around the house. She sat down for a spell, staring out at the fat, black slick of the ocean beyond the neighbors' lights.

She hadn't been up there in a while, but it still gave her a romantic thrill to think about how women in the olden days would pine away on their widow's walks as they searched for the masts of their husbands' ships. When she was really young, Helen used to pretend that her mother would be on one of these ships, coming back to her after being taken captive by pirates or Captain Ahab or something

of those ships, coming back to her after being taken captive by pirates or Captain Anab or something just as all-powerful. Helen had spent hours on the widow's walk, scanning the horizon for a ship she later realized would never sail into Nantucket Harbor.

Helen shifted uncomfortably on the wooden floor and then remembered that she still had her stash up there. For years, her dad had insisted she was going to fall to her death and had forbidden her from going up to the widow's walk alone, but no matter how many times he punished her, she would eventually sneak back up there to eat granola bars and daydream. After a few months of dealing with Helen's uncharacteristic disobedience, Jerry finally caved and gave her permission, as long as she didn't lean out over the railing. He'd even built her a waterproof chest to store things in.

She opened the chest and dug out the sleeping bag she kept in there, spreading it out along the wooden planks of the walk. There were boats far out on the water, boats she shouldn't be able to hear or see from such a distance, but she could. Helen closed her eyes and allowed herself the pleasure of hearing one little skiff as its canvas sails flapped and its teak planks creaked, way out on the gently lapping swells. Alone and unwatched, she could be herself for a moment and truly let go. When her head finally started to nod she went down to bed to give sleep another shot.

She was standing on rocky, hilly terrain, blasted so hard by the sun that the bone-dry air wriggled and shook in streaks, as if parts of the sky were melting. The rocks were pale yellow and sharp, and here and there were angry little bushes, low to the ground and lousy with thorns. A single twisted tree grew out of the next slope.

Helen was alone. And then she wasn't.

Under the stunted tree's crippled limbs three figures appeared. They were so slender and small Helen thought at first they must be little girls, but there was something about the way the muscles in their gaunt forearms wove around their bones like rope that made Helen realize that they were also very old. All three of them had their heads bent, and their faces were completely covered by sheets of long, matted, black hair. They wore tattered white slips, and they were covered in gray-white dust down to their lower legs. From the knees down, their skin grew dark with streaks of dirt and blackening blood from feet worn raw with wandering in this barren wilderness.

Helen felt clear, bright fear. She backed away from them compulsively, cutting her bare feet on the rocks and scratching her legs on the thorns. The three abominations took a step toward her, and their shoulders began to shake with silent sobs. Drops of blood fell from under the skeins of rank hair and ran down the fronts of their dresses. They whispered names while they cried their gory tears.

Helen woke up to a slap. There was a prickly numbness in her cheek and the steady note of a dial tone whining in her left ear. Jerry's face was inches away from hers, wild with worry, and starting to show signs of guilt. He had never hit her before. He had to take a few shaky breaths before he could speak. The bedside clock read 3:16.

"You were screaming. I had to wake you," he stammered.

Helen swallowed painfully, trying to moisten her swollen tongue and closed-off throat. "S'okay. Nightmare," she whispered as she sat up.

Her cheeks were wet with either sweat or tears, she didn't know which. Helen wiped the moisture away and smiled at her dad, trying to calm him down. It didn't work.

"What the hell, Lennie? That was not normal," he said in a strange, high-pitched voice. "You were saying things. Really awful things."

"I like what?" she croaked. She was so thirsty

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