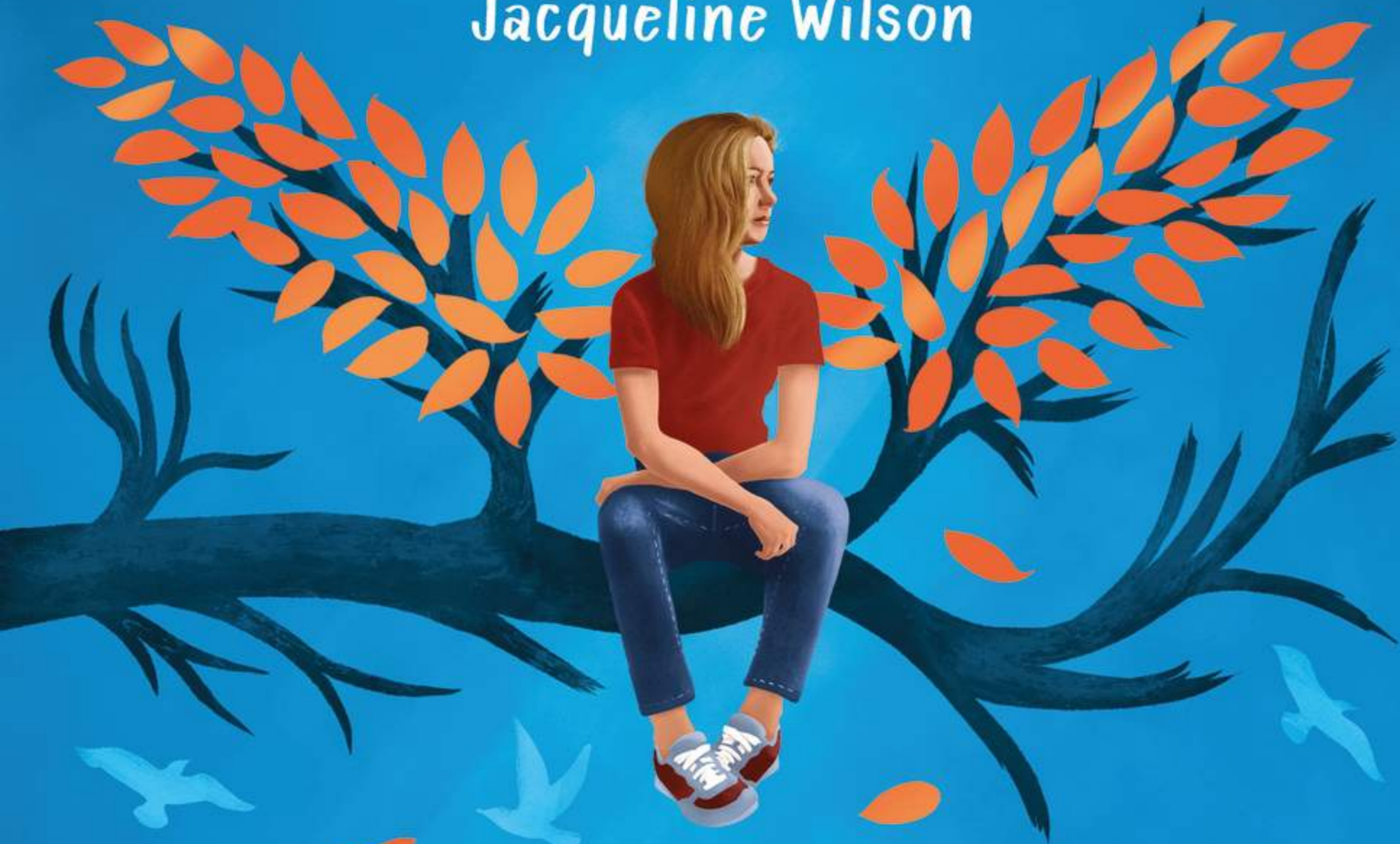


'A strange, lovely book about fear and trust ... and birds!'

Jacqueline Wilson



EXTRAORDINARY BIRDS

SANDY STARK-MCGINNIS

BLOOMSBURY



EXTRAORDINARY BIRDS



SANDY
STARK-MCGINNIS



BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America in 2019
by Bloomsbury Children's Books
First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © Sandy Stark-McGinnis, 2019

Sandy Stark-McGinnis has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act,
1988, to be identified as Author of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or
by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information
storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-0315-9; eBook: 978-1-5266-0314-2

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit
www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters



1

At the third tier of branches my heart starts to beat fast. Birds need a fast heartbeat. It helps move oxygen through their bodies. Oxygen, lots of it, they need in order to fly.

There's always a point when I look down. It doesn't scare me, but seeing the green of the grass, and the gray of sidewalks, does make me think of gravity.

Karen is talking. It takes a lot of energy for her to use her "concerned" voice. I lean against the thickest part of a branch and take out my biography. There's a feather etched in the purple leather cover. I carry *Bird Girl: An Extraordinary Tale* with me wherever I go. No one's ever read it. It's my story, and it belongs to only me.

The best part about the book is I can turn to any page and be reminded of what I am, and where I came from. Like on page three:

Early in the morning, her mom had found a bird's feather lying on the kitchen floor. The feather was a sign. Less than an hour later, her mom gave birth to her. With icicles hanging from walnut trees in the orchard outside their house, her mom gave her a name.

“December, get down!” Karen yells. “You’re not a bird,” she says, like she knows my secret. “You’re a girl, a human. You belong on the ground, where you’re safe. If you had wings, I’d think you were some sort of evil spirit the devil made. Now come down out of that tree.”

Karen talks a lot about Jesus and God, and told me God created everything and doesn’t make mistakes. So why does she think if I had wings, I’d be an evil spirit instead of a beautiful creature?

“If you don’t come down now, I’ll have to send you back. Is that what you want?”

Yes, that’s what I want. I can never stay in a house with someone who believes if I had wings I’d be evil. If she found out my secret, Karen would think she had to protect the world from a creature like me, and she’d lock me in a room with no windows and one door only she had the key to unlock.

I close *Bird Girl*, wrap it in a sweatshirt I never wear, and tuck it at the bottom of my backpack.

I keep climbing. I'm an amazing climber. When I grow up, I could, if I wanted, make my living climbing rocks and mountains, climbing the tallest tree in the world, which right now is a redwood tree growing somewhere in California. Its name is Hyperion and it's three hundred seventy-nine feet tall.

But a tree like Hyperion is not my flight tree. The tree I'm destined to take flight from is unique, but easier to find. Live oak trees grow everywhere around here. The hard part has been finding the right one. It will be an older live oak, its branches gnarled and twisting out and up, with lots of perfect places to build a nest. The tree, my flight tree, will stand by itself in a field somewhere, like it's been waiting for me all its life.

I'm getting better at ignoring being scared, the fast heartbeat, sweaty palms, the breathing. I don't have a choice. I am built to climb, but I was born to fly. I don't have much weight to carry, and I have bones that are light, but strong and flexible.

"You're going to fall!" Karen says. She's wearing an orange shirt. I don't like orange. It's the opposite of blue, my favorite color.

Of course I know I'm going to fall. That's how baby birds learn to fly. The first few times they try, they usually fall to the ground, but they learn they can make the impact easier by spreading their wings.

Karen wraps her arms and legs around the tree trunk, but she's built like a polar bear and doesn't get far. Even though polar bears aren't birds, they're still amazing creatures. They're born deaf and blind and grow to be one of the largest land animals on earth. So there's nothing at all wrong with being built like a polar bear, and I'd tell Karen this if she'd stop yelling.

"You're going to be in big trouble if you don't come down now!" If orange had a sound, it would be Karen's voice.

It didn't take me too long to notice that every time she got mad, a V formed between her eyebrows. It looks like half a bird claw. Even from up in the tree, I can see the V. She's real mad.

But I don't care. She shouldn't try to make me eat food that goes against my nature. I like seeds, sunflower more than pumpkin, and a little bit of meat. This morning I sat down at the table and poured myself a bowl of sunflower seeds instead of Cheerios and then Karen said something about how I was too skinny, and if I didn't eat more than seeds, that one day I'd "up and fly away."

Which is fine with me, but then she got another bowl, filled it with cereal and milk, and stood over me and said, "You're not going anywhere till you eat some real food."

I don't want to jump from too high. I'm not ready. But I have to keep challenging myself. Everyone's concerned

about me getting hurt, that I'll break my arm, or leg. They shouldn't worry. I have a good idea of what I should and shouldn't do, even though most of the foster parents I've lived with would probably have something to say about that.

Like Susan and James. Every time they'd rake leaves and put them in a garbage bag, I'd spread them over the lawn again. The yard looked better covered in the reds and bright yellows of leaves than the dead color of grass.

Like Wes and Linda, where I felt like kicking a hole in the bedroom wall. Something had happened at school that day. A boy tripped a girl while we were playing soccer during PE. He did it just to be mean. I tripped him back, the yard duty person saw, and I'm the one that got sent to the principal's office. Wes and Linda punished me, too.

While Karen's trying to get me to come down, I read from *Bird Girl*, page eleven.

December's wings are blue. She'll use them to fly to find a home. December's home will be a place where there are seasons, where in winter it snows, where in spring flowers are so bright they glow in the dark and birdbaths are always full from rain.

"Yes, hello." Now Karen is on her cell phone. "Yes, this is an emergency."

There are lots of ways to take off and fly. Birds can run into the wind and catch a current beneath their wings, or jump from someplace high and fall into the air.

Lately, I've been falling into the air. It's more dangerous, but the other way wasn't working.

"Just stay there until help comes!" Karen looks up, shielding her eyes from the sun. She wants to get a good look at me. Evil spirit or no evil spirit, deep in her soul she believes I'm an amazing creature.

I think about Amelia Earhart. I did a report on her last year, and I'll always remember reading three things that she said:

"Never interrupt someone doing something you said couldn't be done."

"You haven't seen a tree until you've seen its shadow from the sky."

And, "But what do dreams know of boundaries?"

Sirens are coming this way. A fire truck turns down the street where Karen lives. I'm the emergency.

"Dear Amelia Earhart," I whisper, "please give me the aerodynamics of thin bones, and feathers."

When it's time, I know the scar on my back will tingle and my wings will finally burst through my skin. I just need to step off the branch.

I will fly. Jumping into the air is the easy part.



2

I already know the first question Dr. S is going to ask. She likes “why” ones best.

“Why did you keep dumping the leaves in the yard?”

“Why didn’t you tell the teacher about the boy tripping the girl?”

This time, “Why did you jump out of the tree?”

Pretty sure she already knows the answer to the questions before she asks, but she likes to get my take on them. Getting people to talk is what her job is all about.

“I didn’t jump. My foot slipped and I fell.”

“Karen said you jumped. Your feet were on the edge and you pushed off.”

“Well, she was wrong. I was just standing up there. Maybe it looked like it to her. Karen makes a big deal over small things all the time. Dr. S, I don’t want to jump out of trees, I want to climb them.” Which is half the truth.

“You know, like how some kids like to play Legos, or with dolls. I like to climb trees. That’s not that weird for a kid to want to do, is it?”

“Why do you want to jump out of trees?” She asks the same question a different way. Today Dr. S is wearing purple. Purple has blue in it, but I’m still not letting her trick me into telling her my absolute truth.

I might come close, so she won’t ask me that question again. The story of my wings has to stay a secret. I’m only eleven, but I know a lot about the world. Enough to know I don’t trust people knowing my secret. If they did ever see my wings, people would think I was crazy.

I also know enough about the world to not talk to Dr. S too much. I might say something I shouldn’t, or something she can use against me. But saying nothing at all would be worse, and make it seem like I’m trying to hide things. Talking to Dr. S is like walking on a tree branch.

I’m lucky, though; I have natural balancing skills.

“I read in a book that Amelia Earhart used to climb trees when she was younger,” I say.

“I didn’t know that.”

“That was one of my favorite things about her, so I remember it.”

“I’ve read she once built a roller coaster.” Dr. S has lots of certificates hanging on her wall to show how smart she

is, but she knows this about Amelia Earhart because she has to find things that I will connect with. I do listen better when she talks about things I like. “One book said that when she rode it, she felt like she was flying. Do you feel like you’re flying when you jump out of trees?”

“No, because I don’t fly. I fall, like anyone else would.”

“Would you like to fly?”

“In an airplane? Someday.”

“Where would you go?”

I’d go to a place where it’d be hard to find me.
“Antarctica.”

“Why Antarctica?” We’re back to a “why” question.

“It’s the coldest continent on earth. Not a lot of people have visited there, but mostly I’d like to see a place not a whole lot of animals and plants call home.”

“Interesting,” Dr. S says. “I don’t know if I’d want to visit Antarctica. I like being warm too much, and six months out of the year, the sun doesn’t shine.”

“So you visit the six months the sun does shine.”

Dr. S nods. “True. Let’s get back to jumping out of trees.”

“I didn’t jump. I slipped.” I’m sticking to my story.

“Okay, let’s say there’s a person, a friend, who likes to jump out of trees. If he, or she, jumps out of them enough, do you think there’s a possibility the friend will get hurt?”

This is a trick question because the answer is obvious, but Dr. S wants to test how I view real life. “Yes, there’s definitely a chance of that happening.”

Dr. S is quiet. She leans forward, her elbows perched on her knees like a bird inspecting prey. She’s thinking hard about what to ask next, mapping questions that lead to what she wants to know from me before our time is up. If I had to guess, she’s probably going to start asking about friends now. My having friends, or in my case, no friends, has been a concern of hers.

“If you could create a friend, how would that friend act?”

I was right. “Well, I guess they’d be a little like me,” I say. “You know, Dr. S, you don’t have to worry about me and the friend thing. The main reason I don’t have any is because I don’t stay in one place long enough.”

Plus, if I’m going to fly away someday, what’s the point of having friends?

Dr. S makes a bridge in front of her with her hands. This means she’ll wait forever to hear the answer to whatever question she’s going to ask. “Okay, let’s talk about home. If you could live in any kind, what would it look like? Can you describe how it would feel?”

My house would be soft, and warm. It would be made out of plant fibers, mosses, and spiderwebs, just like a

hummingbird's nest. At night, there would be someone there to tuck me under feathers, and I'd fall asleep, and that person would still be there in the morning.

"That person" won't be my mom, though. I used to live with her, and there was a time she took care of me. Her name was Samantha Lee Morgan. The only photograph I have of her is her kindergarten picture. She looks like a boy. Her hair's slicked back with too much gel and her front teeth are gone, but she smiles anyway. She's leaning forward, turning her face to the side, just a little, like she wants to run away.

She wears a muscle shirt, and on her shoulder is a tattoo of a black bird. I'd like to believe that even when she was five years old my destiny was written on her skin, like maybe my mom was born with the tattoo. Or that when she was a baby in the hospital, a bird flew into the nursery, its claws covered with ink. But the tattoo was temporary. Maybe she got it from one of those red toy dispensers that are by the door when you leave the grocery store. She'd probably been wanting to get something from one of the dispensers, and her mom promised to give her fifty cents if she was good.

I look a lot like my mom.

"A good foster home would . . .," I start to say.

"It doesn't have to be a 'foster home.' It's your dream

home.” Dr. S holds her arms out to the sides, like she would if she were trying to show me the wingspan of an albatross. “Think big.”

Thinking big is imagining living someplace where I feel I belong. “I guess my ‘think big’ home would be somewhere I could stay for a long time. No one would yell. They’d treat me nice, and they wouldn’t make a big deal about what I like to eat. And, no one would end up leaving me behind.”

Dr. S puts her pen down, which means our time is up. “That’s not too much to ask, is it?”

So far, life has taught me that it is, but I say “No” anyway because Dr. S is right, it doesn’t seem like it would be too much to ask.

“One last thing.” Dr. S hands me a bag of sunflower seeds. “For you.”

I hold the bag against my stomach.

Dr. S closes our session with the same question as always. “Would you like to share anything from your book today?”

“Sure.” My backpack is on the floor. I unzip it and slide my hand inside. I don’t want to accidentally pull out *Bird Girl*. Even though it’s wrapped in a sweatshirt, it could still fall out, and Dr. S would see it.

I can never share *Bird Girl* with her. I can never share it with anyone. They might use it against me, as proof that

I should be locked away somewhere. Then, I would never get to fly.

But I am willing to share *The Complete Guide to Birds: Volume One*. It was a present from my mom. Inside the cover is an inscription that says, “*To December, Happy Birthday! Love, Mom.*” And then underneath, “*P.S. In flight is where you’ll find me.*”

I push the guidebook across Dr. S’s desk, and she opens it to a random page. “Three hundred sixty-four,” she says.

I’ve memorized pretty much all the information in the book. If I had volume two, I’d memorize that, too. “The potoo. Potoos are also known as ghost birds. They’re nocturnal. They feed on insects and small animals like bats and small birds. During the day the potoo stays motionless and can make itself look like a tree branch. It has feathers the same color as tree bark, and it has slits in its eyelids that allow it to be aware of movement even when its eyes are closed.”

“So many amazing birds in the world.” Dr. S pushes her chair away from her desk.

And I’ll be the most amazing of all.



3

Adrian, my social worker, talks to Dr. S. If his voice were a color, it would be green. It's soft, and when he talks to me, I have to listen really hard. But I like his voice; it's what trees would sound like if they could talk.

I sit on the couch in the waiting room, open *The Complete Guide to Birds: Volume One*, then open *Bird Girl*, setting my biography inside the guidebook so that it's hidden from Adrian and Dr. S. I look over the part that reminds me of what I have to do to get back to my true nature.

ELEMENTS OF FLIGHT

Weight — December is naturally petite, and compact. Her bones are more birdlike than human. She has a nose instead of a beak, and, of course, she has teeth. Both will increase the force of weight.

Thrust – Birds have big sternums (bone in center of chest) where flight muscles are attached. In order for December to produce enough thrust to create forward motion, she'll have to become stronger.

Drag – December's wings, when they unfold, will naturally be smooth and lightweight. She'll have to worry about tucking her legs up against her body. However, she can learn to streamline. The more streamlined, the less drag.

Lift – December's wings will be big. Large birds, like the female Andean condor, can weigh up to twenty-four pounds and have a wingspan of ten feet. December's wings will be much bigger than that. She'll have to calculate what's called "wing loading" (weight divided by the upper surface of the wings) so she'll know how fast she has to fly to stay in the air.

*Extra note (made by December herself):

Right now, I weigh sixty pounds and have a wing/arm span of fifty-two inches. I can do forty push-ups without stopping. I can do

twelve pull-ups without stopping and can hang from the bar for another two minutes before having to let go. I am strong, but need to get stronger.

A lot stronger.

After we leave, Adrian drives to Baskin-Robbins, which is where we go when he wants to have a serious talk. His reason for going to an ice cream shop: “The sweet balances the serious.”

I don’t hold anything back and order a triple-scoop banana split with Rocky Road, bubble gum, and chocolate ice cream, strawberry and hot fudge syrup, and extra whipped cream, with almonds on top. Almonds are the closest thing they have to seeds. Adrian doesn’t think I can eat it all. I’m going to prove him wrong.

I dig my spoon into the almonds and whipped cream and push all the way down till I hit bottom, then open my mouth as wide as I can and shove everything in.

“I found a placement for you,” he says. “There’s always a chance it can become permanent.” Adrian likes to believe he’s giving me hope when he uses words like *permanent*.

But, synonyms for *permanent* are *eternal*, *lifelong*,

enduring. The word and all its synonyms are tricks. There is nothing that is permanent.

What he really means by *permanent* is being adopted, but even if that's what happens to me, getting adopted, it won't matter. Once my wings unfold, I'm flying away.

Adrian orders a single scoop of vanilla with no toppings. "I won't give up until we find a good home for you. You're not alone, December."

It's part of his job to convince me things aren't as bad as I think they are, or that everything's going to be okay. He's good at it. No matter how many foster homes I've been in, he tries to make me believe that the next one will be better.

The next one being better is not always true. I'd be hard to convince anyway. But I do believe in the possibility that each house will be my last, that my wings will finally unfold, and I won't need Adrian to find me a "good home" anymore.

Adrian hasn't taken one bite of his ice cream. He stares at it, and with his thumb and pointy finger squeezes the end of the pink spoon. "December, what do you think your life will be like ten years from now?"

What I want to say: *Well, my wings should be really strong, and I'll spend my days flying around the world, seeing every place there is to see. The end.*

Instead, I don't answer his question at all. "Did you know emperor penguins have the highest feather density of any bird? One hundred feathers for every square inch." I try to get Adrian's mind on something else. "It's to keep them warm. You going to eat your ice cream?"

But my subject change doesn't work. "I think you'd make a good scientist." He points the pink spoon at me. "Seven or eight years from now you could be in college, and be studying . . . What do you call the study of birds?"

"Ornithology."

"Yes!" Adrian lifts the spoon in the air like he's won something. He smiles in victory. "Wouldn't that be great? You would travel all over the world, studying different birds. Wouldn't that be an amazing life?"

"It would be amazing." I eat the last spoonful of whipped cream. Part of me thinks it really would be a good life, but the other part believes that this is what's even more amazing:

After I jumped from the tree in front of Karen's house, one of the EMTs checked to make sure I didn't have any sprains or broken bones. She said, "You have a little blood on the back of your shirt. Can you hold it up so I can take a look?"

There's always a quiet, a pause when people see the scar on my back. The EMT was no different. "You got

scratched a little,” she said, her voice whispering from the shock of seeing the twisted skin that covers the space between my shoulder blades. I know if I examine my scar closely, I will be able to see an outline of wings.

“It’s just under your scar,” the EMT said. I’d felt where the scratch was. A tree branch didn’t cause it, though. It was caused by wings, beginning to break through my skin.

Here’s another thing that’s amazing: when I leaped from the tree, I was flying for six seconds. I counted, from the second my feet left the tree, to the second I started falling. “One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand, four one thousand, five one thousand, six one thousand.”

I take the last bite of my sundae. I’m better at talking in half-truths than Adrian. “It would be amazing to study birds for the rest of my life,” I say to him. But it would be more amazing to find my wings and fly.

Sometimes not telling the whole truth is the safest place to be. Plus, the thought of me going to college and having a normal life gives Adrian hope. Giving him hope makes him stop worrying about me, and he finally takes a bite of his ice cream.