



THE WINNOWING

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CHAPTER ONE

I'm flying.

At least that's what it feels like. What I'm really doing is running. But it's the smoothest, easiest action in the world, like I was born to do nothing but run. I barely feel the ground below me. I could burst into song and keep on running without breaking my stride.

But then things change.

First it gets hot. Stinging sweat drips into my eyes. I rub at them with the back of my knuckles, which only makes them sting more. When I blink the tears away I find myself lost in smoke so thick I can't see my own hands in front of me. Then I lose my footing. I fall on my knee, hard. I look down and it isn't grass and dirt below me but thick, black gunk, glowing red like embers in the belly of a campfire. It swirls around my feet and hands, lapping at my wrists and ankles.

I push myself up, palms stinging, and I keep running.

I run and run but I can't get ahead of the lava. It roils and burps, splashing my calves with burning drops. I hear

screaming and the stampeding of feet behind me but I don't dare slow down to see what's happening. I try to run faster but the lava swirls higher around my ankles. Something is burning and I know it must be my own flesh that's making that horrible smell, but I don't want to believe it. I can't. I'm screaming for help and then—

Ceiling, walls, a bed below me. The familiar shapes and shadows of my room came into focus as I sucked air into my lungs in hungry gasps. The air was fresh and cool against my skin but I could still feel the grit in my eyes. My legs ached. My calf muscles were tight and the soles of my feet burned as if I really had been running.

I unknotted the damp bedsheet from around my knees and was shocked to find my feet scratched and covered in open sores, dirt and grit ground into the broken skin. The pain was real. The running had been real. Only, the lava couldn't have been real, could it?

That's when I knew. It had started. I was going ACES. I sat back against my pillow, letting the moment wash over me. For years I had waited and wondered when it would finally happen. The Adolescent Chronosomniatic Episodes were all tied up with puberty. The same part of the brain that triggered boys' voices to change and girls' periods to start also triggered the vivid night terrors scientists called the ACES.

Yesterday, Saren went off to the Barton Center for Adolescent Health to be winnowed, putting an end to the ACES and the dangers of adolescence. Now it was my turn.

I heard the thin, reedy whistle of the kettle protesting in the kitchen. Gumps was awake. I pulled my softest pair of socks over my throbbing feet and hobbled to the kitchen.

I cleared my throat and said the words I'd been dying to say since I knew what they meant: "I've started. I'm going ACES."

Gumps kept his back to me as he prepared the tea. "Is that so?"

"Yes. Was I screaming?"

"I thought maybe you were dreaming about a bad date."

I took my usual seat at the table, rolling my eyes even though I knew he couldn't see me. I wished he would turn around. "Gumps, don't be funny, this is serious."

"There's nothing funny about a bad date, believe me. But you don't have to worry about that for another fifteen years."

"GUMPS!"

"Okay, ten."

Gumps was the funniest person I knew, but it made me crazy when I wanted him to be serious. "You should probably call Barton."

Gumps stopped joking. He turned, sat down at the table and blew the steam from his tea, somehow managing to fit his long fingers through the slender loop of the handle.

I wondered about that tea. Gumps preferred coffee. It was my grandmother who had been the tea drinker in our family. She was serious about her tea, warming the cup first and only drinking out of real teacups. If you served her tea in a mug, she would say, "Mugs are for coffee," dump it out and start again. She had a full bone china tea set from some other era, painted in delicate pink and orange roses and rimmed in gold. When I was little and something was bothering me, she used to brew

a pot and we'd sit at the kitchen table and figure out a plan. The tea, the teacups — who was Gumps trying to cheer up: me or himself?

“The Barton Guide says to call right away. The longer you wait the more dangerous it becomes,” I reminded him.

“I know what the guide says.” Gumps looked so sad I lost the will to continue badgering him. Gumps didn't like to talk about going ACES. It made him uncomfortable. But it had to be more than the ACES that was making him sad. My grandmother had been dead for a year; it was just the two of us now. Maybe the idea of being alone in the house was bringing him down. A splash of guilt curdled my excitement.

“When I heard the screen door slam I thought maybe you were stargazing. You were obsessed with comet-spotting, you and Saren, a few years ago.”

“I remember,” I said, trying to keep my impatience to myself. Now was not the time for a trip down memory lane. I didn't see what this had to do with me getting to Barton. Plus Saren was already there. I could be there by lunchtime if only Gumps would cooperate. “We used to bring the couch cushions out to the backyard to sleep on.”

Gumps smiled. “Your grandmother had a heck of a time getting the mildew and grass stains out of those cushions . . .” His smile faded. “But when I watched you run out into the desert like your life depended on it, I knew it wasn't about stargazing.”

My stomach dropped to my toes thinking about poor Gumps watching as I ran from him in the middle of the night — all in my sleep.

“I cut up my feet pretty badly,” I admitted.

“I imagine you did.”

I put my hand on the arm of his lumpy old brown cardigan. “Gumps, don’t look so sad. It’s just the ACES. It happens to everyone. I’ll go to Barton and everything will be fine. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Gumps sighed, then drained the dregs of his cup, grimacing. “I don’t know how you can stand this poison,” he said. “I’ll make a call. You get ready for school.”

“But—”

“But nothing. I have deliveries to make and you won’t be any worse off this evening than you are right now.”

*

Walking to school without my best friend felt like strutting through town with no clothes on — just plain wrong. When I passed Saren’s house, it was shut up tight like a store gone out of business. I wondered what her mother was up to now that Saren was at Barton. Mrs. Silver had been fun until her son — Saren’s brother — Lex died from complications during the winnowing last year. After that she was never the same, understandably. But then her sadness turned into something else, something erratic and scary, and she went a little bonkers.

At first she wouldn’t let Saren out of the house except for school. Before she died, Grandma would go and sit with Mrs. Silver, making tea and letting her talk about Lex, so Saren and I could go off on our own to the park or the corner store. When Saren started to sprout in the way that all girls do, Mrs. Silver talked about taking her away, someplace where they didn’t winnow children.

“Now I know she’s really crazy,” Saren had said. “Where in the world *don’t* they winnow children?” But Mrs. Silver talked about her plan the way some people talk about winning the lottery.

When Saren got her period, Mrs. Silver locked her in the bathroom. Saren banged on the door until her knuckles ripped, and then escaped out the window and ran all the way to my house. She spent the night, and the two of us stayed up watching movies, playing Scrabble, doing anything we could to keep her from falling asleep and going ACES. The next morning, Gumps called Mrs. Silver and convinced her to take Saren to Barton. All the while I was in class, trying to stay awake, worrying about Saren. That was only yesterday.

Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised that Saren would go ACES first. A little part of me was jealous. Of the two of us, Saren usually did things first. She was the first to get her ears pierced, the first to shoot up two whole inches, and she was always, always the first to think of the perfect comeback. Her smart mouth was the reason we became friends in the first place. Back in year one, Kamal Beck shouted across the lunchroom, “How come Marivic Stone hasn’t got any parents?” and Saren shouted back, “How come Kamal Beck doesn’t have any manners?” And just like that, she and I were friends.

A door slammed. I looked up to see Suki Ray coming out of her house in a skirt that was short enough to raise a few eyebrows and a paint-spattered denim jacket. She was a year ahead of me. We weren’t friends, but I knew her the way you know everyone in a small school. Her glossy black hair was long on one side, tucked behind

her ear in a shiny black wave. The other side was short, still growing in from where it had been shaved during the winnowing. Most kids just had their whole head buzzed and let it grow back. But not Suki. She always did things a bit differently. On anyone else that hairstyle would look weird, but on her it looked cool.

Saren thought Suki was amazing. When Suki had showed up at school wearing two wildly different earrings, Saren was impressed. “It’s like she doesn’t care what anybody thinks,” she said. Saren could pull off a hairstyle like Suki’s no problem. In fact, I bet Saren was making sure the doctors at Barton knew to shave only one side of her head. Thinking of Saren alone at Barton gave my heart a tweak and emboldened me to catch up to Suki.

“Hey, Suki!”

Suki turned. “Yeah?”

I blushed. Now that I had her attention I wasn’t sure what to say. “Um, I’m Marivic. You don’t know me. I’m in year six.”

“I’ve seen you around. What’s up?”

The idea that Suki Ray had registered my existence made me ridiculously happy. “Can I walk with you?”

Suki shrugged. “I’m not going to stop you.”

I fell into step beside her, trying to find something to say. “Your hair looks great.”

Suki ran her hand through the short prickles on one side, her knuckles decked out in big metal rings. “I’m thinking of bleaching this side and then dying it something bold, maybe green.”

I nodded. “Cool.”

“Did you call my name just to tell me how cool my hair looks?”

I flushed, ashamed at being caught out. “N-no. I had a question. You don’t have to answer it, if you don’t want to.”

“I know I don’t. So what is it?”

“Saren, my friend, went to Barton yesterday and I just started going ACES last night, and I guess what I want to know, I mean, what I’m thinking is, what’s it like? The winnowing?”

What a mess of a sentence. I tried to get my breathing back to normal, Suki walking along in silence beside me. Her face was tough, inscrutable. As each second passed I regretted opening my mouth at all.

“It’s like a dream,” she said.

“A good dream?”

“No, I mean an actual dream. I know I was there — obviously, look at my hair — but it doesn’t feel real. All I have is an impression of Barton . . . the doctors, a cafeteria, this buzzing noise I still hear in my sleep sometimes . . . but all the details are fuzzy. Weird, right?”

I tried not to shiver. “Yeah.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it, though. Even if it’s terrible, it’s not like you’re going to remember it.”

“I guess.”

We arrived at the school.

“Well, this is where we split. Good luck at Barton, M.”

She was already walking away by the time I managed to mutter thanks.