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ONDINE SHERMAN



PANTERA
PRESS

'All good things are wild and free.'

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Chapter 1

‘More tea, miss?’ the flight attendant asks.

I remove my earbuds as Lorde hits a high note and hold out my cup. The attendant balances the tray over Melody’s lap as she pours the boiling water.

‘Ma’am?’

‘I think she’s still asleep,’ I say. Melody took a herbal supplement a few hours ago when we left Los Angeles and is still snuggled under a blanket, red curls spilling like a dozen octopuses. The sight of Melody sleeping would usually fill me with affection, and when I was a kid I’d even rest my head against hers. But now?

I imagine knocking the tea over her knees.

Sipping the hot tea, I turn to a fresh page of my journal and contemplate all the crazy things that have happened to me over the last six months:

1. *My mum died and my world burst into flames.*

Another sip of tea washes down the lump in my throat.

2. *I moved to a small town in the middle of nowhere.*

~~3. My friend/most popular girl in class sent me on a one-way trip to social Siberia and~~

No, I cross it out. That should come after:

3. *I stole a baby chicken from*

I put down my pen. Can't concentrate. I check my watch, look out the small plastic aeroplane window, rub my neck and check my watch again. Two hours to go. I wonder what Oliver's doing right now as I fiddle with my necklace, the one with the crescent moon that my mum left me. I wore it to the end-of-year school gala only a few weeks ago—the night Oliver and I became boyfriend and girlfriend.

I imagine Oliver in his mum's store unpacking boxes, muscles flexing, and my skin tingles. Those biceps, yikes. The cheesy rom-com I just finished reminded me of the eighties films I used to watch with Mum, but also of how cute my boyfriend is, and our first kiss.

That kiss summed us up as one weird but perfect couple. With the moon hanging above us like a lantern, we had snuck into the backyard of my best friend Lucy's house. Lucy's family runs a bird rehabilitation centre where Chirp, my chicken—the one I 'rescued'—lives. That evening, I had cradled Chirp in my arms—she's such a snugglepot—and introduced her to Oliver. It's the opposite of romantic, I know, not like a rom-com in the slightest. But Oliver took it all in his stride and more. It was his first time meeting Chirp, although he'd helped me with the whole rescue saga, and the two of us sat together under the big bottlebrush tree by the back

fence. With Chirp sleeping between us, our lips met, under the moonlight.

I hadn't wanted to leave him this summer, our relationship still fresh and new. He's my first boyfriend and I'm his first girlfriend. Oliver's an all-round good guy, and if he has any faults, they're that he's too nice and likes to be liked. He encouraged me to come on this trip, and I appreciated his selflessness in letting me go do my thing. We'd hugged goodbye, promising to exchange video clips every day. With the seventeen-hour time difference, finding a chance to speak will be tricky.

After three trays of barely edible food, and two fleeting attempts at sleep, I've got one stiff neck. I drum my fingers on the window pane.

'Shhh!' someone says behind me. I put in my earbuds and try to calm down. Deep breaths.

Although I'm fifteen, it's my first time flying. Crazy. Taking off in the huge jumbo jet from Sydney Airport, I discovered the world turns miniature: toy cars and Lego houses. Up in the blue sky with the setting sun, the clouds are pink candy floss, sweet enough to eat. When the light streaks through, I see dreams and fairytales. I wouldn't be surprised if Pegasus flew by or even God, sitting on a sunbeam, the white-bearded superpower of Bible stories. *Sky, he'd say, I can't bring back your mum, but the worst is over. Now your life will be wonderful—fields of strawberries and bunny rabbits forever more.*

Yeah, right. I press my finger hard against the point of the crescent-moon pendant. I've been through enough to

know life isn't so dreamy. It's rough as dirt and there are no certainties.

Melody and I drove from my tiny town of West Creek to Sydney, flew fourteen hours across the Pacific Ocean and waited for several more in the airport terminal, only to jump on another flight, Alaska Airlines, and travel five more hours up the coast of the Unites States. Why? I'm meeting my father for the first time. He bought me two business-class tickets, so I can't complain about the leg room or library of films to choose from. Before the rom-com, I binged them all during the long-haul flight to the States and watched everything from stand-up comics, to the latest Marvel film, to a wildlife documentary series. The flight attendant even added a soft undersheet to my flat bed.

It's nearing the end of my summer holidays and I'm spending three whole weeks with my father in Alaska, which is pretty much the North Pole. It's literally going to be minus a billion degrees. Luckily, my aunt Paula bought me a thick coat, gloves and a scarf before I left.

I live with Paula and my uncle Dave in West Creek now; after Mum died, like heroes they welcomed me into their home, trying to make me feel safe, loved and secure, although it took me a long time to appreciate that.

Melody was my mother's best friend for fifteen years and lived with us in our Sydney apartment. She was my friend slash big sister. When I was a baby, she even bathed, fed and changed me when Mum was working. After kindergarten or school, we often sat in

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cafes together sharing dessert. She listened to my daily rants about the teachers I adored and despised, and told me her guy dramas, often with TMI—*way* too much information. On Sundays, we would lie on the couch together watching movies, laughing at the jokes and quoting lines, with my feet on her lap. When I was eight, she taught me how to plait my hair, and at fourteen—when I'd shot up, lost my puppy fat, grown lean and taller than average and looked like a grown-up woman but with barely any curves—she let me taste her wine at dinner. She saw me grow up.

Now she's my ex-friend and just the woman who betrayed my mum by sleeping with my father—something I only found out recently. My father's hardly off the hook for that one either.

Mum never knew about it and never will. Melody said it was a one-time thing and my mother wasn't officially dating him anyway so wouldn't have been bothered in the slightest. But if that were true, why wouldn't Melody tell her? The only reason can be that she doesn't care about anyone except herself.

Her self-centredness was proved again when she repeatedly flaked on her plans to visit me after Mum died, barely calling to see how I was, busy with herself on silent retreats and full-moon gatherings.

Melody is accompanying me to Alaska because Paula, last minute, said she couldn't fly. She's pregnant and needed to stay home on bed rest—doctor's orders. I didn't want Melody to come, but Paula was worried about me

changing planes in a huge airport like Los Angeles, and even though I could have travelled as an unaccompanied minor, we already had the extra ticket. Besides, the thought of travelling on my own scared me too.

I'm angry my father abandoned Mum and me, excited to see him and also terrified we won't like each other, or even feel like a father and daughter at all. I'm on an emotional roller-coaster way bumpier than any plane turbulence and there's no exit row, inflatable slide or oxygen mask.

I'm contemplating this when I hear a voice, and I pull out my earbuds.

Preparing to land in Anchorage, Alaska, the announcement says. Please fasten your seatbelts, restore your tray tables and return your seats to the upright position.

I stop biting my nails and tug the latch, making my seat lurch forward. I nudge Melody awake. She snorts and rubs her eyes. The TV screen shows our plane over Anchorage. My stomach groans again as I imagine my father waiting at the airport.

If only reality would match my fantasy—he'd be warm and loving, but in a sensitive way, and regretful for all the time he'd lost with me, and he'd have an unbelievably good explanation for why he'd never been part of my life. We'd have lots in common, talk easily—no awkwardness—and when I was in a quiet mood, I wouldn't need to speak, it'd be that natural. I'd feel with him, like ... like I was home.

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The plane lands with a thud and I press my nose to the window. The runway is painted white with snow. Another first to add to my list.

As we gather our bags and jackets from the overhead lockers, my fear is replaced with such intense excitement it makes me think of my dog, Bella, when she wags her tail so hard her whole body dances.

We follow the other passengers out of the plane. They're all American, and baseball caps must be the national uniform.

'How are you feeling, love? You must be scared,' Melody says as we walk through the terminal, following the exit signs.

I nod. Since we left, I've barely said a word to her.

'Stay in the moment,' she says. 'No past and no future. Mindfulness is crucial at a time like this.'

Whatever. She's hardly Dr Phil, let alone the Dalai Lama.

We get through customs in a minute—the terminal building's nice and modern, not like the isolated backwater I imagined. A handful of people mingle around the baggage claim, waiting. It's my first experience of America, of Americans and, of course, Alaskans. Is that a thing? Is there a name for the locals?

There are two Santa Claus look-alikes and a couple of hikers wearing fluorescent fleeces that scream, *I don't want to get lost in the woods!* I see people picking up bags of skis and snowboards, and a small group of retirees following a guide holding a sign saying: *Northern Lights*.

The room is an assortment of hoodies and woollen beanies of all shades and styles, beards and more beards.

Our bags arrive quickly and we walk towards our agreed meeting spot, the cruise-ship sign, up ahead.

My heart's beating so fast I can almost hear the ambulance sirens rushing me to the hospital. Where is he? I look around, frantic. Not here. Images flash through my head—Melody and I waiting for hours to no avail. Trying to call him, but he doesn't answer. With no address, how would I find him? Maybe he's changed his mind and Mum was right. I imagine Melody checking us into a crummy hotel to wait for the next flight. Returning home, devastated.

'Sky, over here!' My fears disappear as I see a man rushing down the hallway towards us.

He matches the pictures he emailed: trimmed beard and smiling eyes. His pressed blue shirt is buttoned nearly to the top and his jeans are worn around the knee, revealing thermals. I guess he's not bad looking. Mum obviously thought so, and Melody too. Gross.

'Hi—' I'm not sure what to call him; Dad is out of the question. Father? Too Jane Austen. Adam? Using his name may sound cold.

'You made it,' he says before I can decide. I'm surprised to hear his accent, straight out of Hollywood. I should have expected it—he's American after all.

He manoeuvres around my wheelie bag and then trips awkwardly on my puffy coat draped over the handle and trailing on the floor. He regains his balance and

envelops me in a hug. At first I feel stiff, but then relax. A gazillion things go through my head.

I'm in my father's arms, finally, in the dream I dreamed as a little girl, my dad and me, father-daughter, as it's meant to be. When Mum and I fought, I'd squeeze my eyes tight, trying to send him a message wherever he was. I only knew he was a fisherman, so my mind of course went to a boat to whisk me away. I'd imagine us together, our hair in the wind, faces glowing in the sun like a slow-mo TV ad for Father's Day.

'I'm very happy to see you.' He squeezes me harder. 'And, again, I'm so sorry about Eli.'

I didn't know he referred to Mum by the nickname Melody uses, Eli for Eleanor. It feels more intimate. I hear people moving around us, but I don't budge. He smells a little of apple. A touch of smoke too? Not cigarette, but more the log-fire type.

What happens after this hug ends? I'm scared to talk to him, too many questions, and afraid his answers will bring back my anger. He could have come to see me a billion times, on any of the nearly 5835 days of my life. This shouldn't be the first time a girl hugs her father; it isn't right. He obviously never cared enough to visit me. And then there's the embarrassment of Father's Days at school, with dads flipping burgers at the barbecue, and cheering at sports carnivals. And all the other things I missed out on: riding on my dad's shoulders, learning to ride a bike at the park. Not to forget, he cheated on my mum with Melody.

I also think about Mum. In all my most important moments, until six months ago, she was with me, or at least I knew I could tell her what happened soon after. But just like during all my other recent life-changing events, she's not here now. I wish she was, but that's crazy; she didn't even want me to meet him. Am I betraying her? Or should I be angry she told me nothing and kept me from him?

I didn't even know his last name was Black until a couple of months ago. I've tried to be understanding about how she refused to mention his name, but deep down I know it's not fair for a kid not to know their father. If she were alive now, I'd tell her that, and more. My father sent me a letter soon after I was born along with a huge cheque, enough to take a lot of stress off Mum's shoulders. My aunt Paula showed it to me, still uncashed fifteen years later, after we found it in the special suitcase Mum left me. The letter didn't tell me much more about him—just that he hadn't been ready to be a parent. Coward.

So maybe Mum had good reason to keep us apart. I mean, the fact that he cheated with Melody—beyond gross—would be a good enough reason for Mum to cut him off, but that doesn't explain it because she didn't know. There must be something else wrong with him, a major glitch in his personality.

I rest my cheek on his shoulder, not caring who is watching or how long we've been standing. For now, I don't want this moment to end and my fantasy to be destroyed.

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At last he releases me. ‘Look at your eyes—you have Eleanor’s green one and my brown one.’

I look at his irises—my left eye matches his chocolate-brown eyes perfectly. I search for other similarities. My skin is pale and freckly while his is lightly tanned without a blemish. My hair is long, straight-ish, boring brown and drives me crazy with frizziness at my hairline just above my ears. I automatically put my hand to the offending spot to smooth it out but surprisingly it’s sitting where it’s supposed to. The dry air on the plane must have fixed that, at least for now. His hair is a shade darker, but straighter than Mum’s brown, wavy locks. Looks like I got a hair mixture of the two of them.

Mostly, I’m impressed he remembers my mum’s eyes.

He suddenly notices Melody standing beside me. ‘Melody, how are you? It’s been a long time.’

Awkward. I watch her carefully.

She embraces him quickly. ‘Adam, mate, good to see you. Sixteen years later and you still look the same. Besides the facial hair.’

No drama so far.

‘Come on, let’s get out of here. Follow me.’ My father walks towards the exit sign, and when the sliding doors open I’m hit with icy-cold air. ‘Freezing’ doesn’t even describe it. Painful. Unbearable. The sunlight is dim and even though it’s early afternoon it feels like twilight. I have to return inside to put on my beanie and bundle on all my clothes. Melody wraps a pink scarf around her neck as she waits for me.

I take out my phone and write a quick text to Paula and my best friend Lucy, saying that we've arrived safely. Then I send a short clip of the landscape out the window to Oliver, before putting on my gloves and stepping outside.

The car park is covered with snow, and I can feel the cold chilling my nostrils and seeping through the soles of my shoes. I puff out a few misty rings then kneel down and slip off my glove—my first time touching the white powder. It feels like a slushy. I shiver.

We stop at my father's truck. It's huge and black, with spotlights attached to the roof; they must be for driving in the dark. A black car in West Creek would literally fry an egg in the summer, but here ...

'You can sit up front and talk to your dad,' Melody says.

'Call me "Dad" only if you want to,' he says, pulling keys from his pocket. 'I'd be happy if you did, but if you prefer, for now, you can call me Adam.'

I'm glad he said that. I'll go with Adam until I know more how I feel. It took me forever to call Paula's husband, my uncle David, 'Dave', like all his mates and family do. I just needed time to get comfortable. Hopefully, this will be the same.

He opens the truck's right-side door and looks at me expectantly.

'I don't have my licence, yet,' I say, wrapping my arms around myself. The air is penetrating through all my clothes; I feel like I have nothing on.

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He laughs. ‘This is the passenger side.’

I peek in and see the steering wheel on the other side. Embarrassing.

‘How was your flight?’ my father says as he jumps in and switches on the heating.

‘It was my first time on a jumbo and first time overseas,’ I say.

‘Wow, that’s special.’ He glances at my clothes. ‘We’ll need to get you geared up or you’ll turn into an icicle in a minute flat. I’ll take you down to the camping store later for some serious weather protection. Winter in Alaska is deadly but also stunning. Barely a tourist in sight.’

‘Oh, okay.’ He has a point. ‘There’s lots of wildlife in Alaska, right? But are there still animals around even in winter? I love animals.’

‘Sure, the wildlife here is—’

‘Have you heard of Jane Goodall?’ I interrupt, suddenly feeling full of words, things I want to tell him.

He raises his eyebrows, smiling as the wipers clear the snow off the front and back windscreens.

‘She’s my idol.’

‘Really?’ He releases the handbrake and starts to reverse.

‘She’s so amazing. Did you know she discovered animals could make and use tools?’

‘Yes, I did know that. Chimpanzees in Africa.’

‘Tanzania.’ This makes me happy. He may be a fisherman but he’s into animals just like me. ‘Will I see

a deer?’ I ask, full of anticipation. Deer are my second favourite animal after pandas, and the documentary on the plane made me love them even more—I learnt they are smart, gentle, sensitive, stubborn ... the best qualities, really, for human or animal. Bambi was also my favourite movie as a kid. I forced Mum to watch it with me many times, cuddled up on the couch. I loved it so much she found me the Disney pyjamas. They had Bambi on them, gazing at a butterfly on his tail, and his friends—the bunny, Thumper, and skunk, Flower—by his side. I slept in them until I was so tall the top was cropped and the pants became shorts.

‘We have black-tailed deer and even reindeer.’ He pulls out of the car park and veers onto a large four-lane road.

‘Reindeer? Really, like Rudolph?’

He laughs. ‘Fun fact: Santa’s reindeer should all be girls. Because the male’s antlers drop in the winter, after mating it would have been impossible for them to look like that at Christmas.’

‘Ha!’ I like that he’s quick to laugh. I wasn’t expecting such an apparently relaxed, chilled, happy guy.

‘Caribou and reindeer are actually the same species; the only thing that separates them is a fence.’

‘A fence?’

‘I mean, the difference is reindeer are domesticated, and caribou are wild. Caribou hooves are built for snow; they’re pliable and they spread out, allowing them to walk easily. Alaska’s also full of bears, brown and black, although they’re hibernating now. Moose, lynx, deer,

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Dall sheep, caribou, wolves ... they're all out and about. There are five hundred moose who live in Anchorage, actually. They like the city in winter because there's less snow and—'

'Why is there less snow?' I look around. All I see is snow; it's piled on cars, heaped onto sides of driveways, and sitting like hats on lampposts.

'The snow gets ploughed, so it's easier for them to walk around. Hope to show you a few. There are even polar bears in the far north, but that's a million miles away.'

'Really, can we? I've never seen any of those animals before. The last year has been full of firsts for me.' Then I add, 'Mostly terrible, though.'

'Well, I want to hear all about it. I can't wait for us to get to know each other.' He smiles.

I smile back. This is going so well.

'How about you, Melody?' he asks.

She starts talking and doesn't stop. Soon, the car's overflowing with her words and there's no room for me. Typical selfish Melody.

I know the story she's telling, all about her mind-bending experience with a quartz crystal at a silent meditation retreat and her earth-shattering realisation that all life forms—animate and inanimate—are, in fact, one vibrational energy. She already told me the whole thing on the plane, so I know it's going to be long. I suspect she'll go into her theory on the chakras of the Earth next.

We merge onto the highway. My heart jumps and I brace myself before realising that we're actually driving on the correct side of the road.

'Nearly home,' my father says.

Home. I repeat the word to myself, wondering, once again, what it means now Mum's gone.