ANAYA WOKE UP, BLIND.

With a sigh, she touched her fingertips to her eyelids. Glued shut. She sat up in bed and sneezed seven times in a row. The inside of her nose was granular with dried snot. She stood and expertly felt her way to the bathroom. She found the stack of washcloths by the sink, and turned on the hot water. The first few times she’d woken up like this, she’d freaked out. By now she was used to it, especially at the height of spring allergy season. Patiently she held the moist, warm cloth against each eyelid in turn, melting away the gunk. She slowly pried her eyes open and stared blearily into the mirror.

“Where have you been all my life, you thing of beauty?” she said to her reflection.

Her face was puffy around her eyes. Normally, she thought her eyes were one of her best features, but right now they looked piggy. The end of her nose was chafed and flaky from blowing it
Anaya pointed at her face. “If I walked into a hospital, they’d have me in the ICU in two seconds.”

Mom laughed softly, then came close and brushed Anaya’s long, wavy hair away from her face. “You’re lovely.”

“My skin’s volcanic!”

“They don’t see your acne, they see you.”

“Only if they have X-ray vision!”

Mom had no idea. She’d always been beautiful, and she was still the most glamorous mom Anaya had ever seen. Just look at her, tall, slim, raven hair spilling over the crisp collar of her white shirt with the epaulets: four stripes, the only female captain flying for Island Air. Lilah Dara—even her name was pretty. When she put on her sunglasses and bomber jacket, she made a pilot’s uniform look like Paris fashion.

Meanwhile, Anaya was shorter; she definitely had Dad’s sturdier body type. She didn’t mind that—what she minded was her acne, and not being able to make it through class without having an asthma attack, and feeling generally feeble.

“Are you using the acne cream?” Mom asked.

“At night.”

“You’re supposed to do it during the day, too.”

“It smells so bad!”

“The doctor said it was important.”

“So I can be hideous and gross-smelling!”

“You are neither,” her mom said, and gave her a hug.

“If I stay home, I can work more on my history project.”

all the time. To jazz things up just a little more, a new bouquet of pimples had blossomed across her skin.

The fading echo of a headache pulsed in her skull, and reminded her of last night’s dream. It was one she’d had many times. She’d been running really fast, and it was exhilarating, even if it did always seem to leave her with a headache.

She opened the crammed medicine cabinet. Special cleansers and ointments for her acne, extra puffers for asthma, plastic vials of monster pills for her allergies. She slugged back two. This was definitely a two-pill day.

Anaya started to wash her face, then stopped. What was she doing? She wanted to look as rough as possible. She should’ve left at least one eye glued shut.

She dragged herself down to the kitchen, trying to shamble like a hunchback. With her nose plugged up, it was pretty hard to smell anything—but she could definitely smell the toast. She imagined a piece of thin, crisp bread with just a swipe of butter, and some marmalade soaking into the glistening surface. She loved toast—before she became allergic to practically half the food on Earth.

Mom was already in her uniform, loading her breakfast things into the dishwasher.

“I can’t go to school,” Anaya said.

Her mom turned. “Sweetie . . .”

“Can you please just call the school?”

“We let you skip two days last week. Technically, you’re not even sick.”
“Your marks couldn’t get any higher, Anaya.”

Anaya gave a pitiful cough and wheeze. “There’s gym today,” she said, giving it one last kick at the can.

“For gym, I will write you a note,” Mom agreed.

Anaya sighed in defeat. Mom was not letting her off school today. Dad, on the other hand, might.

“I’ve got to go. There’s moong dal cheela, warm in the oven,” Mom said. “Tell Dad not to forget the chutney.”

“Thanks.”

Anaya knew that Mom herself preferred scrambled eggs and toast for breakfast, but for Anaya she often made the lentil pancakes, folded over with paneer inside. Lentils were safe. And even though she was lactose-intolerant, for some unknown reason paneer was one of the few cheeses she could handle. Also, the pancakes were delicious.

Mom adjusted the knot of her black tie. “I’ll be back for dinner.”

“Anywhere good today?”

Mom flew floatplanes, usually de Havilland Beavers, and most of the runs were between Victoria and Vancouver, but there were also plenty of charters between the Gulf Islands, and even farther north.

“I’m bringing back a group that was sport-fishing off Sonora. I’ll probably come home smelling like salmon.”

She hastily wrote a note on the pad by the phone and handed it to Anaya. “It gets better,” she said, kissing her on the forehead. “See you, sweetie.”

She wanted to believe her mother. She wanted to believe that, one day, she’d bloom. She imagined a dull flower suddenly opening its petals, and they were dazzling, and everyone would look up from their phones and whip out their earbuds and gasp and say, Where did that come from! and I’ve never seen anything so beautiful!

She smiled at the fantasy, and grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl. Cutting it in half, she popped it into the microwave for forty-five seconds. If she ate it raw, she got bumps all over her lips, and a really itchy tongue.

Basically, she was allergic to everything. Gluten, eggs, milk. She was allergic to smoke and dust. There were entire months she was allergic to. April was tree pollen, and May, too. June was grass. July was still grass but also mold spores; and then August and September were ragweed.

It hadn’t always been like this, just the last couple of years. Now her picture was plastered all over the staff room like a wanted poster, alerting teachers to her food allergies, and telling them where her EpiPens were. Anaya carried one with her everywhere.

She spooned some honey into her mouth. Someone had told her that local raw honey was a good way of curing allergies because it exposed you slowly to all the pollens in your area. She put the kettle on for her green tea—because someone else had told her it was the healthiest thing in the world for you. When
you lived on Salt Spring Island, people were always telling you the best things to eat and drink. Things to make you wise and healthy and live forever.

Dad came into the kitchen, bringing with him the smell of soil. No matter how often he showered, he still smelled like leaf mold and pine needles, and had a line of dirt under his fingernails. He wore the same green merino wool sweater pretty much every day, even though it had frayed at the elbows. He mostly kept his beard tidy, but sometimes it started creeping out of control, like the unruly plants he studied.

Dad was a botanist with the Ministry of Agriculture, and worked at the island’s experimental farm. When she was younger, Anaya thought an experimental farm was a lot weirder and cooler than it turned out to be. She’d imagined giant cows, and chickens the size of velociraptors—but in reality it was a bunch of greenhouses and scraggly plots with boring-looking plants. His specialty was grasses—which her friends thought was hilarious. “Hey, Anaya, can your dad score us some grass? I hear he grows the best weed.” Really, his specialty was figuring out ways to stop things growing—like invasive species that shouldn’t have been here, but were, and were making life miserable for other plants.

“How’re you?” Dad asked.

“I was thinking maybe I should live in a bubble,” Anaya said.

“A bubble,” Dad said, opening the oven and peering in at the pancakes. “Are these all for me?”

“No, I’d like two! You know, like a giant hamster ball. They’re called Blorbs or something. Except mine would filter out allergens.”

Dad set the plate of moong dal cheela in the middle of the breakfast table and sat down. “So, you’d just roll around in it?”

“Pretty much,” Anaya said, helping herself to the lentil pancakes. “I could roll to school.”

“That hill might be tricky,” said Dad.

“I’d have to get up some speed. Anyway, they could clear a space at the back of the classroom, and I’d just kind of wobble around.”

“They could pass you Anaya-friendly snacks through the air lock.”

Anaya couldn’t help grinning. “And maybe one day I’d meet a boy just like me and we’d get a bigger bubble and raise a family of bubble babies.”

Dad nodded thoughtfully. “I think this is a very good idea.”

“Can you please call the school and tell them I’m sick?”

“No,” Dad said sympathetically. “But I’ll give you a lift.”

FOR THE PAST two weeks, Anaya had been eating lunch with Tereza in the small room off the library where they worked on the yearbook. It was due at the printer’s in ten days and they were rushing to finish layouts.

At the start of the year, a ton of people had volunteered for
“You’re kidding.”
“I know, it sounds crazy,” Tereza said. “But my aunt said it soothed her throat—maybe relaxed it or something.”
“It makes no sense.”
“Nope.”

Anaya had never smoked. Everyone said it was one of the worst things you could do to your body; she also hated the smell. But when Tereza raised her eyebrow in that way she had, Anaya took the cigarette.

She leaned far out the window, sneezed three times in a row, and looked around to make sure no one was watching. The sky was low with dark clouds. Definitely rain coming. Quickly she lifted the cigarette to her lips and took a long, hard suck . . .

And almost immediately was spluttering and hacking. Tereza took the cigarette from her hand and stubbed it out against the brick. Anaya sat back down, eyes streaming.

“Okay, I’m sorry, that was a stupid idea,” Tereza said.

Anaya dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. She took a deep breath through her mouth, exhaled.

The rain came suddenly, battering the glass, drumming against the school roof.

“Geez,” Tereza said, shutting the window.

Anaya was glad. The rain tamped down all the pollen and made her life easier. On the computer, she scrolled through the class photos to make sure they’d got everyone.
“I am so done with all this,” Tereza said.

This was a big word for Tereza. It didn’t just mean yearbook. It meant the entire school. It meant the whole island. Next fall she was headed to university in Toronto. Anaya wondered if Tereza would miss her as much as she was going to miss Tereza. She’d be making new friends and meeting interesting people from all over the world.

Tereza’s eyes flitted wearily over the class photos. “These boys, these boys. No. Just no.”

“What about Fleetwood?” Tereza was her only friend to have a boyfriend.

Tereza gave a small, dismissive wave of her hand. “Oh. Fleetwood.”

“He seems pretty nice,” Anaya said, even though he came across as a bit dopey and was named after a band from the 1970s. “I mean, what’s it like to have someone just . . . look at you that way?”

Tereza sighed. “I know, I know, it’s terrible, so much neediness.”

There was a quick knock on the door before it opened and Fleetwood himself bounded in. With his shaggy hair and big hands and feet, he always reminded Anaya of an oversized puppy.

“You’ve got to see this,” he said.

“Fleetwood, no,” Tereza said. “Remember, we talked about this. This is yearbook time.”

“Can it be Fleetwood time for just a second?” He leaned between them with his phone so they could watch the video. “Kangaroo-fighting!”

“Oh, Fleetwood,” Tereza said sadly.

Anaya had to admit the kangaroos were impressive. Standing upright, they looked uncannily human. The slope of their shoulders, the muscles of their upper arms, their chests. It was actually a bit creepy. Then she noticed their feet. It looked like they only had three toes, and the middle one was much longer, with a wickedly pointed claw.

“Look at these guys!” said Fleetwood. “They’re totally pumped! Look at their biceps! Okay, wait for it . . . check it out!”

The bigger kangaroo jumped straight up, and seemed to balance in midair—was he actually balanced on the tip of his tail?—then kicked out with both feet and slammed the other kangaroo in the stomach. Anaya winced. At least, he hadn’t drawn blood.

“Can you believe that?” Fleetwood exclaimed.

“That was very nice,” said Tereza. “But Anaya and I have work to do. Go play now, Fleetwood. Go find that boy with the baseball cap you like.”

“See you!” Fleetwood said, and kissed her on the mouth.

After he left, Anaya turned back to the monitor. In one of the class-photo layouts was a blank rectangle.

Tereza tapped the screen. “We need a picture of that new boy. He missed photo day.”
Seth Robertson. He’d arrived just a couple of months ago. No one knew much about him, except he was very quiet and kind of odd-looking and always wore long-sleeved shirts and a hoodie, even in gym class. He was being fostered by Mr. and Mrs. Antos, who had an organic vegetable farm.

Tereza looked at Anaya. “Can you go and get a picture, please, of this boy?”

It was Anaya’s turn to sigh. She hated wading out into the hallways, especially when she looked like an extra from a horror movie.

“Please don’t make me go out there,” she said.

“I’m going to tell you something,” Tereza said. She looked right and left, as if she were going to impart a big secret. In a hushed voice, she said, “You are way cooler than you think.”

“No,” Anaya said, but she desperately wanted to believe it anyway. “Really?”

“Yes. Now get out there! You take better pictures than me.”

Anaya laughed, still glowing from Tereza’s praise. She stood and grabbed the camera.

Outside the library, shoulders hunched as if fighting a gale-force wind, Anaya charted a course through the crowded hallway. Todd Salter and some buddy of his were goofing around at the water fountain, splashing each other. She gave them a wide berth, but heard a small cry behind her. When she looked back, Petra Sumner was brushing some water droplets from her neck.

“Oh my gawwwwd!” said Rachel, Petra’s surgically attached friend. “Are you okay, Petra? Does anyone have a tissue? Petra needs a tissue!”

Already a little crowd of super-concerned kids was forming around Petra, offering tissues.

“Way to go, Todd!” said Rachel, who could make any name sound like the worst-smelling thing in the world. “You know she’s allergic, right?”

“Oh man,” Todd said. “Did I get her?”

Todd looked like a dog that had just been caught taking a poo on the coffee table.

“Guys, I’m fine,” Petra said, doing that pouty thing with her lips that guys liked.

She was very pretty, and wore her blond hair in a pixie cut. Anaya had read that you had to have a beautiful face to carry it off, and Petra Sumner definitely did.

Anaya now saw two small, angry red splotches on her neck. Petra truly was allergic to water. It was incredibly rare. It had some Latin name, and there were maybe a hundred people on the planet who had it.

Petra’s gaze drifted across the hallway and met Anaya’s. Quickly Anaya turned away and kept walking, knowing she probably looked heartless. But she’d seen all this before, so many times. People loved making a fuss over Petra.

Anaya had been there when her allergy started. When they were little, she and Petra were best friends. The two of them spent half the summer at the community pool. Then, one day,
made her feel less awkward, meeting him. Also, Tereza’s words still chimed pleasantly in her head: *cooler than you think.*

Seth had an almost-handsome head, but his body seemed out of proportion. Maybe it was just the hoodie and flannel shirt that made his chest seem so barrel-shaped while everything else was skinny. Skinny stooped neck, long skinny legs in jeans. Bony hands jutting from too-short sleeves.

Anaya caught a glimpse of a small scar on the underside of each wrist. She wondered if he cut himself sometimes, but the round shiny patches looked more like cigarette burns. Had someone done that to him, or had he done it himself? Either way, it made her feel heavy and sad.

He still hadn’t looked up from his sketchbook. Anaya couldn’t see much of the page, but she got a glimpse of a wing, and the way he’d drawn it made it look like it had just caught the wind. There was a sense of incredible speed. How had he done that with so few lines?

“Wow, that’s really good,” she said.

Now he looked up, startled. He closed the book in his lap and leaned forward, as if protecting it. Swiftly he pulled his sleeves down over his wrists. It looked like a move he did a lot. Anaya found his gaze unsettling. It was the gaze of a startled animal waiting to see what you were going to do next.

“I’m Anaya Riggs,” she said. “I think we’re in the same—”

“Math class, yeah.”

after they got out of the water, Petra had broken out all over in a scary rash, and her voice got hoarse, and they’d rushed her to the hospital.

It wasn’t long afterward that Anaya’s own allergies started up, like some weird curse. The difference was that Petra was still beautiful, but Anaya wasn’t, not when she was wheezy and snotty and had acne spread across her face. Petra had dumped her pretty fast.

Whenever Petra got a splotch, everyone was all over her, asking if she was okay. Anaya could probably swell up to the size of a giant cinnamon bun and people would just go *eww* and step around her.

Petra’s allergy was adorable and heartbreaking; Anaya’s was just gross.

**ANAYA FOUND SETH** Robertson sitting hunched at the bottom of the north stairs, nibbling a sandwich and drawing on a sketch pad.

It was funny to find him here, because she sometimes sat here herself, despite the crumpled yellow tissue that had been on the floor for almost two years. There it was, lurking in its shadowy corner. This was as deserted as the school got, right here. She liked it that Seth was someone who hid himself away, too. It made her feel less awkward, meeting him. Also, Tereza’s words still chimed pleasantly in her head: *cooler than you think.*
She was surprised, and pleased, that he’d noticed. She felt a sneeze coming on but managed to stop herself. “Do you draw a lot?”

He shrugged. “It’s nothing much. Just sketches.”

“Well, I’m working on the yearbook and we could use some good artwork.”

He looked at her, unblinking. It made her nervous when people looked at her too intently; she always wondered what exactly they saw, and whether they thought she was hideous.

“It makes the layout a lot more interesting.” She sneezed and had to pause to blow her nose. “I mean, we’ve got a lot of Melanie Drake’s stuff, but there’s only so many unicorns you can take, you know what I mean? But your stuff looks a little edgier.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said, and Anaya knew that was a no.

“Anyway, like I said, I’m working on the yearbook and we need a photo of you.”

He looked at the camera around her neck. “Do you have to?”

Anaya laughed in surprise; she’d never had that reply before. “No, we don’t have to . . .”

“What happens if you don’t?”

He tilted his head to one side, like this was a very serious question, and she couldn’t help smiling at his oddness. She found him just the tiniest bit adorable.

“Well, nothing. You just get a blank box with your name underneath. And you look like a crazy loner.”

That got a small smile out of him. “Okay, let’s do the picture.”

“Can you come out where there’s a bit more light?”

He got up and shambled closer. She caught a whiff of him. Not unpleasant, exactly. Like warm celery.

“Do I have to smile?” he asked.

“Just do your thing,” she said, looking through the viewfinder.

He looked at her straight on. He didn’t smile. His eyes were slightly too close together, but it didn’t make him look goofy. It made him look incredibly focused, like a bird of prey.

It was still raining hard as Anaya walked home from school. She took a deep breath. The air smelled wonderful. When she inhaled, her whole chest felt like it was filling—which was rare. She’d hardly sneezed at all.

She turned up their driveway. Having a botanist father did not mean their front yard was a wonderland of sculpted bushes, exotic flowers, and ornamental trees. Quite the opposite. Dad never paid the yard one bit of attention. He was, after all, more of a weed man. Their yard was definitely one of the weediest going.

Scraggly cedar shrubs lined the driveway, except for the gap where nothing grew. The dead patch was a bit of a family legend. Every so often, Mom tried to plant something there and it would die within weeks. Another cedar, a fern, a hydrangea, native drought-resistant ground cover—it all croaked. Dad said they should just plonk down a garden gnome and call it quits.
As Anaya walked past the dead patch, she stopped.
Rain *drip-dripped* from the edges of her umbrella.

Her first thought was that someone had jammed a stake into the dead patch. She went closer. From the muddy earth, a black shoot jutted a full foot high.

It was sturdy, its sheath bristling with a spiral of tiny hairs. The very tip of the plant was pointy.

This thing hadn’t been here this morning. She would’ve noticed it.

Which meant that it had grown a full foot in a matter of hours.

In the dead patch, where nothing grew.