

FORWARD ME BACK TO YOU

MITALI PERKINS

Farrar Straus Giroux • New York

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For Anuj and Tanuj

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As readers and writers, we bring our whole selves—past, present, and future—to a novel. We also come with a history of relationships, both sweet and painful. As I crafted the story you're about to read, some things were tough to imagine for my characters—especially exploitation, abandonment, and assault—even though they happened in the past before the book begins. Imagining somebody else's suffering can bring up memories of our own, or sadness over wounds experienced by those we love. My hope is that trauma never gets the last word. Healing requires tenderness, and sometimes even tears, as my main characters, Kat and Robin, both discover. I wrote this novel from my heart to yours, with the prayer that we all receive the grace we need to move forward.

PART ONE

BOSTON

KAT

INT. KING APARTMENT, EAST OAKLAND—NIGHT

Canine. Feline. Avian.

Zoologists use taxonomy to separate predators from prey. Backs to a wall, dogs bite. Felines scratch. Birds peck.

Katina King classifies herself as a mountain lion.

She might have become a tame cat in a safer world. But when she was eleven, her body changed so fast it turned her into prey. Nothing she could do to stop luring canine eyes, so she'd put on a feral mask since then to prowl the hills of Oakland.

Fangs, claws, snarl.

They should have kept wolves away, but they didn't.

Later, she realizes she should have called the cops. But she doesn't even tell her mother what happened until she's caught throwing up in the middle of the night. Kat's so tired from three nights of no sleeping that the truth comes hurtling out before she can stop it.

"He did *what*?" Kat's always seen her mother as a pigeon. But if someone comes after her daughter, look out for beak and talons. "I'm calling Sandra right now. Oh, honey!"

The two of them are on the sofa sitting so close it sounds like Mom's best friend is in Kat's ear. "Let me talk to her," Sandra says.

Mom hands over the phone. It's wet with tears. Disgusting Wolf. Kat hates him even more for making Mom cry. *Not me*, she thinks. *Never me*.

"When did it happen, Filhote?" Sandra asks. She's in Panther mode—even uses Kat's Brazilian jiu-jitsu nickname. Kat's been *Lion Cub* since she started training with "Pantera" at eleven; this is the same growl that's coached her to victory over other aggressive jiu-jitsu opponents.

"Three days ago. In the stairwell. At school."

"Security cameras?"

"Don't think so." *Probably why he picked the place.*

"Any bruising—apart from what you got at practice? Scratches on your skin?"

"Nothing new." Kat's scrubbed so hard in the shower it feels like she doesn't have much of her own DNA left on her skin.

"Still got the clothes you were wearing? Did you wash them?"

Kat hesitates. "No. I put them in the trash."

"When's garbage pickup?"

"Yesterday." *Stupid, stupid me. Should have known to keep the clothes.* But her mind's been a blur.

Sandra doesn't yell like she does when Kat makes a dumb jiu-jitsu move. "Be there in ten," she says instead.

Mom's crying hard now. Kat puts an arm around her shoulder and pulls her close. This is exactly why she didn't tell her mother right away. *Don't let him do this to you, Mom. Don't give that Wolf power over us.*

Sandra gets to their apartment so fast Kat wonders if

she used the siren on her patrol car. “You okay?” she asks, scanning Kat’s face.

Kat has her fiercest fighting expression locked into place. “I took care of him.”

Mom sits up. “How? Saundra, he tried to—”

“He didn’t, though.” Kat turns to Saundra. “I couldn’t think at first—it didn’t seem real—but then the instincts kicked in. Used a Kimura to break his hold.”

“Good job,” says Saundra. “Any injuries for him?”

“Broken pinkie, rotator cuff sprain.” Kat takes a breath. “He’s saying it happened during a pickup basketball game.”

“We’ll report him to the police,” Mom says. “It’s not too late, is it, Saundra?”

Saundra sighs. “No hard evidence, Mary. It would be her word against his. But I’ll drive you to the station if you want. Take a moment, Kat; think hard.”

That’s what she shouts when an opponent’s got Kat trapped on the mat. Take a moment, think about your next move; think hard. And so Kat does. Cops or no cops? What would she gain if she reported him? Nothing, really. Just more time on the mat with that Wolf. *I’m not wasting one more ounce of energy on him. I left him in pain. He tapped out. I’ll get over this; I know I will.*

It’s second semester of junior year. ACTs are coming up. She works twenty hours a week at the zoo. Jiu-jitsu practice and matches. Chores and paying bills. Honors classes. College applications staring her in the face.

“No cops,” she says.

“He assaulted you, Kat!” Mom says.

“I stopped him.”

“But—”

“Nothing happened!” Kat stands up. “I’m FINE. *He’s* the one who’s injured—not me!”

“Then why were *you* the one throwing up?” Mom asks. “We have to tell someone. The school, at least.”

Kat scowls. “Nobody’ll believe me.”

Why would they? He’s a basketball alpha. They rule the school. On top of that, he’s charming, handsome enough to be a local social media celebrity, high GPA. Grew up in the hills in one of those big houses with two lawyer parents who donate big bucks to Sanger Academy.

And Kat? She overheard a whispered conversation once in the bathroom.

“That King girl has a tiny white-trash mom.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. She’s ‘biracial,’ I guess, but just brown enough to win a scholarship.”

“Filhote, this isn’t just about you,” Saundra says, interrupting Kat’s thoughts, and her voice is gentler now. “What if the next girl can’t fight him off?”

Dang.

She hadn’t thought about him trying that stairwell stunt again.

Saundra’s right. Kat’s going to have to speak the truth at Sanger Academy.

ROBIN

INT. THORNTON HOUSE, OUTSKIRTS OF BOSTON—NIGHT

On Robin's eighteenth birthday, the Thorntons eat takeout Indian lamb biryani as usual. It's an annual tradition. Nobody is sure if March fourth is his actual birthday, but they've always celebrated it on this day.

"We know you were born sometime in early March," Mom says.

"Anyway, you 'march forth' into the future every year," Dad adds.

It's just the three of them this time. Robin's grandparents don't leave Florida much. And he didn't feel like inviting Brian, Ashley, Ms. Vee, PG, Martin, or even Gracie, even though some or all of them had been at his previous birthday celebrations. Gracie sent a card that said "Cristo es mi superhéroe." The rest of them texted, called, sent cards. Except Brian, who probably forgot.

"Glad we have privacy, actually," Dad says, handing Robin a square ivory envelope. "Here you go."

Robin doesn't open it right away. He already knows what's inside. The expensive envelope is embossed with raised letters: EDWARD THORNTON III. That's his name, too. He's been Edward Thornton V for fifteen years, but he never introduces his

brown, Indian self as “Edward.” That name belongs to his tall, blond father, who looks exactly like a younger version of Edward Thornton III.

The mirroring stopped there.

In the orphanage in India, he’d been “Ravi”—a name he secretly likes—but his parents nicknamed him “Robin” when he started school. And for some reason that stuck. He’s never told anyone how much he hates it. A sidekick’s name. Even his online gamer tag is a version of it: boy*wonder_7. He didn’t get to pick that, either. Brian—dark*knight_7, of course—chose it when they were seven. The only thing worse is “Little Guy,” which is what Brian calls him in real life.

“Aren’t you going to open it, Robin?” Mom asks.

Robin pulls out the matching stationery inside the envelope—it’s embossed with his official name, too—and silently reads Grandfather Thornton’s spidery handwriting.

Dear Robin,

Happiest of birthdays to our one and only grandchild. You’re turning eighteen this year, which means you now have access to your charity trust fund. We have been blessed with wealth in our family, but as you know, my dear Robin, the Bible tells us that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” One way to moderate the negatives of having money is by giving it away generously. I won’t tell you what to support, but here’s a bit of advice if you’ll bear with me: Find some cause or work that you care about, and be a thoughtful, informed donor. Give with passion and joy. “God loves a

cheerful giver," the Bible also says, and I trust (pun intended) you'll find that to be true.

*Sincerely,
Your loving grandfather*

Robin has known for years that a charity trust fund was coming his way. His parents have given through Dad's fund to many different causes. What he hasn't known, though, is the amount—now fully in his care—that Grandfather Thornton scribbled as a postscript.

"Wow," Robin says aloud, putting the letter back into the envelope. "That's . . . a lot."

"A big responsibility," Mom says.

Her words make Robin feel like he's wearing a heavy suit of armor engraved with the family crest. No wonder he's always wanted a sibling—to help shoulder the weight.

"Did your grandfather tell you his two requirements for giving?" Dad asks.

"Yep. Passion. And joy," Robin mutters. *Neither of which I have.*

There's a silence.

"The shelter could always use a donation," Dad says brightly. His "job" as president of the family's jewelry business is mostly a figurehead role, so he works for free at a nonprofit in Boston that serves the homeless.

Mom has a real job—public defender for the County—but she's also on the board of an organization that helps resettle refugee families. "Our fund-raising gala's coming up," she says. "You can consider that, too."

Geez. It's been three minutes since he opened the letter, and already they're making decisions about how to give away his money. "I'll think about it. I'm kind of tired. Got homework, too."

His parents exchange looks.

"What about your cake, honey?" Mom asks. "I picked up those big candles—a 'one' and an 'eight'—for you to blow out."

"You guys eat it. We aren't even sure it's my real birthday, anyway. Good night."

During cake time, he knows Mom will say a prayer of thanksgiving for Robin's "first mother, who gave him the gift of life." For some reason, this always makes Robin squirm. It feels like she's giving thanks for a bad accident or a big mistake. Or even a wrong decision.

He doesn't want to think about the past. Not when he's trying to survive the present, and everyone seems to be worrying about his future.

KAT

INT./EXT. OAKLAND—DAY

Turns out Sanger has a judicial process to handle this kind of “claim.” Each “party” gets to share their version of what happened, separately. While Mom cries quietly beside her, Kat recounts what happened to an ombudsman committee. *He pushed me against the wall, held me there by the throat, tore open my shirt, and tried to pull down his pants. I had to fight him off.* Her voice is flat and controlled. No tears. She answers follow-up questions the same way—no frills or emotion.

Afterward, she and Mom get a transcript of what he said. *SHE attacked ME*, he told them. *For no reason at all.* When someone asked if he did anything that might have provoked the “other party,” he said: *No. Nothing. Maybe she’s just a violent type. Grew up in an abusive home? Who knows?*

Kat’s fury swells as she reads this. *Come after me, Wolf. I’ll beat you again. But stay away from my mother.*

The committee’s verdict comes by email. No cameras in the stairwell, so Sandra was right: All they have is his word versus Kat’s. His doctor’s report: broken finger, sprained shoulder. Her? The school’s used to the ongoing jiu-jitsu bruises on her jawline, temple, arms, legs. They can’t be sure these are new marks from him. And nightmares don’t count as

evidence, it turns out. Final decision: counseling for both of them and an unofficial “restraining order” to stay away from each other.

Should have trusted my instincts, Kat thinks as Mom rants about the decision. *Shouldn't have said anything. What good did it do? Dragged us back into a fight, and now I'm the one losing. And so is Mom.*

After the restraining order, he doesn't come near Kat. But Kat keeps an eye on him from a distance. Sees him strutting down the halls of Sanger, day after day.

Brittany and Amber say they believe Kat, but she avoids them. *Don't need anyone on the mat with me.* She's Katina King, the reigning middleweight under-seventeen Northern California Brazilian jiu-jitsu grappling champion. *I've got this*, she tells herself, just like she does in the middle of a BJJ fight.

Problem is that this time, she doesn't.

Still can't sleep.

Nightmares bring back the memory of what happened, night after night.

Rumors spread through the school like a California wild-fire—

She wanted him since her first day at Sanger.

She's mad he didn't like her back.

She's jealous.

Lies, lies, all lies.

But that's not the worst of it. She vomits so often she starts dropping pounds. Loses a BJJ match. Loses another. During practice, she steps on the mat only if a female sparring partner is waiting there.

Checks five times to make sure a public bathroom stall is locked. Even then, pushes her heel against the door while she uses the toilet.

Lines up for female cashiers at the grocery store.

Asks Mom to switch to a dentist who's a woman.

Canine eyes checking her out—which she's always hated—now send her straight into panic mode. Their touch—?! No way.

No man is going to lay a finger on her again.

INT. KING APARTMENT—NIGHT

The school counselor calls while Kat's watching *Batman Returns* for maybe the tenth time. Dr. Mitchell's name pops up on Mom's phone in the middle of Michelle Pfeiffer's brilliant milk-drinking, costume-sewing scene.

Kat sighs. She knows what this is about. Earlier today, she skipped yet another "mandatory" session with the dude.

"Hello, Dr. Mitchell," Mom says, taking the phone into the kitchen.

The apartment's tiny; Kat presses PAUSE to overhear her mother's end of the conversation.

"I'll talk to her. Yes, I'm going ahead with my plan."

Plan? What plan? Pfeiffer-as-Selina-Kyle is frozen on-screen with a crazed expression as she stitches up her mask. Kat presses PLAY again to pretend that she wasn't eavesdropping.

Mom comes back and powers off the television. "You stopped seeing the counselor?"

“I don’t need his help.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Kat. You do. It’s been two months, and it’s getting harder instead of easier. Dr. Mitchell thinks you might need a break from that environment.” She pauses and glances toward the living room window. Somewhere up the street, a car alarm has gone off. “He asked if you wanted to transfer to another school, just for the rest of this semester.”

No. Definitely not. Leaving Sanger means Kat loses. “The school in our neighborhood sucks,” she says. “No biology honors classes. No free ACT prep. I’m not letting this hurt my college chances.”

“That’s what I thought.” Mom moves closer, and Kat gets a whiff of that hospital antiseptic smell on her uniform. “We’ve been like sisters, right, Kat darling? Grew up together, you and me.”

Kat doesn’t say it out loud: *Except I take care of you*. Does the laundry, brews Mom’s tea, picks up around the house, keeps track of bills and the budget, and makes them both turn off the television when Mom has an early shift. Kat’s mother doesn’t even check to make sure the apartment’s locked at night. Kat does that.

Mom rests a hand on Kat’s short, curly hair and takes a big breath. “But I’m pulling rank this time. Saundra suggested spending some time with her great-aunt in Boston. You leave in a week. I booked your ticket.”

Kat jumps up. “BOSTON? No way, Mom! I’m not going to stay with some stranger! Besides, we can’t afford a plane ticket. Cancel it. Right now.”

Her mother stands up, too. Bends her skinny arms and plants her small fists on her hips. Tips her pigeon head back and stares right up into Kat's snarl. "I'm not changing my mind. Ticket's nonrefundable. You'll finish out the semester there."

Kat can't believe this. "What about school? I'm not letting him—what happened—wreck my life! I need a full ride to USC or Davis! What about my job? And I've got to win my next few BJJ matches—"

"Jiu-jitsu and the zoo aren't worth the pain of staying in that toxic environment. Ms. Jones is an excellent teacher; she'll homeschool you until the middle of June. I've already cleared it with Sanger. Your teachers agreed to send you assignments and keep track of your papers and tests online."

"WHAT? You didn't ask ME first? I'm SIXTEEN!"

"I know. That's how old I was when you were born. But you have a real mom; all I had were a bunch of foster parents. For once in my life, I'm going to be a controlling mother, whether you like it or not."

Mom's voice sounds fiercer than Sandra's. She and Kat glare at each other for a long moment.

Controlling mother, huh?

Cue bratty teenager, then.

Kat stomps off to her bedroom and slams the door.

ROBIN

INT. ROBIN'S BEDROOM—NIGHT

Robin stretches out on his bed and decides to watch *Batman Returns*, the 1992 flick with Michael Keaton as Batman. It's been a while since he's seen it. He forgot that it starts with the Cobblepots throwing Oswald—the baby who grows up to be the Penguin—into a sewer. Poor Oswald. No wonder he becomes a villain. Who wouldn't? Robin turns off the movie and switches to the soundtrack from *Guardians of the Galaxy*, which usually helps him unwind.

"I feel stuck, Ms. Vee," he told his friend at church just last Sunday. "I'm tired of people asking what I'm doing after graduation. 'Figure out your passions, Robin,' they tell me. 'Find your talents.' What if I don't have any? I'm a C student."

"Some people are better at studying faces than books," she said. "And you have a talent for loyalty. Those are gifts many never acquire."

Remembering her words cheers him up a little, but he figures she's biased. She, Gracie, PG, Mom, Dad, Martin, Ash—they love him too much to see him clearly.

Downstairs, his parents are arguing again. "I'm Not in Love" by 10cc is too soft a song to block them out. He hits PAUSE, takes off his headphones, and listens.

"He's sure to get into at least one or two schools he applied

to, Ed! Okay, so they're not the best colleges, but he *has* to get a degree, right?"

Same old, same old, Robin realizes. Mom should just pick a college. At this point, he'd go anywhere just to get her to stop worrying.

"A gap year might be better, Marjorie. If you ask me, he needs to see a counselor. It seems like he's been low for months."

The thought of talking to a counselor makes Robin even more tired.

"I don't think he wants counseling, Ed," Mom says.

"Who knows what the kid wants?" Dad answers. "Every now and then he tells us what he *doesn't* want, but that's not a good way to live. It feels like we're always making decisions for him."

"He likes working at Mike's," Mom says.

"*You* lined up that job for him, remember? He enjoys cars now, but he didn't want the job at first. He doesn't *want* anything, Marjorie."

There's a silence in the kitchen.

Dad's right, Robin thinks. Now that he's eighteen, "not wanting" is a habit. His father used to ask questions to help him figure out what he wanted: *What are you feeling?* When Robin couldn't answer, Dad would offer multiple-choice options: *Happy? Sad? Angry?* Even picking from a list was a challenge. *Think about it*, Dad would encourage the younger version of Robin. *Take time. Listen to your heart. And once you identify an emotion or a desire, act on it. Be thoughtful and careful, of course. But act on it, son.*

MITALI PERKINS

Easy to say, hard to do. When Robin tries to “listen to his heart,” all he hears is the static of numbness. That constant whirl of white noise accompanies him everywhere—home, school, church, small group, work. He’s used to the dampening.

He puts on his headphones again. A song by the Jackson 5 is next on the soundtrack. Robin knows the words by heart, but he doesn’t sing along.

*Oh baby, give me one more chance,
To show you that I love you.
Won't You. Please. Let. Me.
Back in your heart?*

KAT

INT./EXT. AIRPLANE—DAY—TRAVELING

Before Kat goes through security, Sandra kisses her cheek. “I know it’s your first time, Filhote, but you’re going to fly like a pro. Head straight to the gate and wait for them to announce your boarding group.”

Mom’s teary-eyed but manages a shaky smile. She won’t risk a hug—Kat’s still too furious. “You’ll be coming back in June, sweetheart. It’s just three months.” Sounds like she’s talking more to herself than to her daughter.

Kat keeps her scowl in place. She knows her mother’s eyes are following her, but she strides through security without looking back.

“Text when you land, Kat!” Mom’s voice calls out.

Kat waits by the gate, like Sandra told her to, keeping her distance from canines. Blue, brown, hazel, behind glasses, peering over a laptop, it doesn’t matter—they all look the same when they’re hunting.

When it’s time to board, Kat chooses the window seat, lifts up the armrest, and spreads out her long limbs. The plane’s not full so nobody else sits in her row. One good thing on this otherwise lousy day. The day Katina King’s tapping out and letting the world know that her opponent won.

“Our estimated flight time to Boston will be five hours and

fifty-seven minutes,” the pilot announces over the intercom. “Sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight.”

Kat figures out how to buckle her seat belt just as they take off. The plane climbs high, leaving behind the sparkling blue bay and green hills. By the time she gets back, the grass will be brown again. Somewhere down there, nestled in the Oakland hills, school’s in session. The place where he’s alpha-wolfing through the halls, as if what happened didn’t cost him at all—beyond injuries to that finger and shoulder, which healed quickly. He’s back to being a basketball star, winning games for Sanger.

Kat pictures him cornering Brittany and Amber: *See? Your crazy friend WAS guilty. That’s why she left. Hope you believe me now.*

The airplane climbs above the clouds and she can’t see anything but sky above and white billows below. Kat closes the window shade, puts on her headphones, and turns on the screen embedded in the seat back in front of her. The Celtics game comes on. They’re winning; people scattered around the plane are cheering. She switches the channel to women’s tennis.

Why does everything have to remind her of him? Smack in the middle of concentrating on a biology test, taking train tickets at the zoo, or grappling with an opponent on the mat, she’ll flash back to memories of that stairwell.

Tongue jamming into her mouth.

Fingers tearing buttons.

The zipper of his jeans slicing down.

Kat's stomach lurches like it always does when she remembers.

"Want something to drink, honey?" The flight attendant is leaning across the empty seats with a smile.

"Ginger ale, please. No ice."

Sipping the fizzy drink, Kat manages not to throw up this time. As they leave California behind, she finds the free movie channel. *Oh, thank God. Wonder Woman. If she can't get me through this flight without puking, nobody can.*

It does the trick. And so does Black Widow in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, which comes on next.

The plane lands at Logan. Kat doesn't text her mother. Instead, she leaves her phone on airplane mode, gathers her things, and follows the signs to baggage claim.

As suitcases start hurtling out of the chute, a stately, silver-haired, sun-weathered woman pushes her walker over. Her skin is as black as an ibis beak. She's wearing an ankle-length, flowery dress and embroidered slippers that match her embroidered head scarf.

"You must be Katina." Her voice reminds Kat of Wakanda. "I am Viola Jones. Welcome to Boston."

ROBIN

INT. METROWEST HIGH SCHOOL CAFETERIA—DAY

Robin is waiting in the line for sandwiches and wraps. All around him are people he's known for years, people who never seem to see him unless he greets them first.

The line inches forward. Finally, it's his turn to choose his food. Picking up a tuna wrap as usual, he slouches over to the cashier. This line, too, is long and slow. *This cafeteria is what hell might be like*, Robin thinks, surveying the familiar scene.

Metrowest High students of different races don't break bread together. Apart from Martin's table of musicians and actors, the large, sunny room is filled with tables of only white kids and tables of only Asian kids. Black students eat lunch outside on the stairs, and Hispanic kids gather in the gym. Robin's history teacher once asked her class to discuss whether this self-selected, divided eating arrangement was a legacy from Boston's racist past. They'd had a fiery debate, with Robin silently agreeing each time one of his classmates used a swear word to put down the cafeteria.

Someone brushes by him. It's Sona Patel, a transfer from another school. Bangles clink on her wrists as she cuts right in front of Robin. He steps back, but not too far. Her waist-length black hair is silky and smells like coconuts.

"That kid behind you was next," the cashier tells Sona.

“Sorry,” Sona says, turning and spotting Robin. “I didn’t see you.”

Of course she didn’t. He shifts back again to give her more room. “It’s okay,” he says.

Lots of interested eyes have been checking out Sona’s curvy figure and nose-ringed, friendly face ever since she arrived last year. But to Robin, a girl like this is as far out of his league as Gamora is from Quill at the start of *Guardians of the Galaxy*. Okay, so in the sequel they get together, but that’s fantasy, not real life.

Sona pays for her lunch, and Robin watches her hair shimmer as she carries her tray to the desi table by the windows. That one’s reserved for the dozen or so Indian kids at Metro-west, but Robin’s never felt desi enough to join them. Case in point: When he first heard the word, he had to search online to learn that it meant “people of Indian descent who live outside of India.”

Technically, this is true for Robin, but nobody else at that table has two white parents. Desis grow up learning Tamil or Hindi or some other Indian language, taking Indian dance classes, worshipping in a temple or a mosque, visiting India to see relatives. Robin speaks only English, dances in church when Ms. Vee grabs his hand and swings him out to the aisle, and hasn’t been back to India in fifteen years, even though his parents ask regularly if he wants to go. They’ve suggested Bangla lessons, attending Bengali Association events, or joining one of the Indian adoptee organizations in the Boston area, but Robin always says no.

Trying to be a Thornton is tough enough.

Trying to be a Bengali Thornton feels like an impossible mission.

“Got your card, kid?” the cashier growls.

He hands her the payment card that Mom loads for him at the start of every semester. Scooping up his tuna wrap, he trudges across the room to sit with Brian. Robin’s eaten lunch for the last three and a half years at this table of white jocks. Another mind-numbing habit from childhood—sticking close to Brian’s side.

He slides into an empty chair.

“Hey,” Brian says.

“Hey.”

A couple of other guys at the table greet him, but sitting here makes him feel more invisible than ever. *Like Shorty in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, he thinks. A small, Asian foil, only in the scene to prove that the main character’s a decent guy.

He remembers overhearing a new football player asking—okay, in a lowered voice, but still—why the Indian kid was sitting at their table.

“We’ve been friends for fifteen years, jerk,” Brian answered loudly. “We go to the same church. So shut the hell up.”

As he peels the plastic from the tuna wrap, Robin wonders who’s going to take his role when Brian’s at college. Meanwhile, what’s an abandoned sidekick supposed to do on his own? There’s not enough material for a full-length feature, that’s for sure.

KAT

INT./EXT. LOGAN AIRPORT,
BOSTON—NIGHT—TRAVELING

Sacred Ibis, Kat thinks as she extends her hand to Sandra's great-aunt. The Ibis's ancient body is slim, elegant, and strong. She's tall, too. Almost as tall as Kat. She grips her walker with one hand and shakes Kat's hand firmly with the other. "Is that your only coat, Miss King?"

Kat looks down at her leather jacket. Big, black, and loose, like her T-shirt and jeans, to camouflage her figure. Along with her don't-mess-with-this scowl, black clothes are her armor to keep canines at bay.

"Early March might signal spring in California, but not here," says the Ibis. "Don't worry. I have an extra down jacket and gloves and a hat."

There's a traffic jam exiting the airport, and although Sandra's great-aunt argues with the cab driver over the best route, they both end up laughing. She tells him to call her "Ms. Vee" ten minutes into the ride. When they finally emerge from a long tunnel, Kat gazes at the city lights on the horizon. The Boston skyline seems compact compared to her sprawling City by the Bay.

They stay on the highway for a bit, with the Ibis and the driver—Abdul, from Nigeria—swapping stories about their villages "back home." Even though she's lived in Boston for

years, Sandra's great-aunt is originally from Sierra Leone. The cab pulls off an exit to wind through a dark, quiet suburb. By now, the driver's turned off the meter.

"This is it," the Ibis says, gesturing at an older building with two front doors. "It's a two-family. A medical resident lives next door. I water her plants; she keeps an eye on me. Fine arrangement for both of us."

Kat climbs out of the car. Moonlight is shining on the snow-covered patch of lawn. The old avian is trying to make the driver accept a twenty, but he's refusing to take it. Kat shivers on the icy sidewalk. Early March in Boston is definitely not springtime.

The driver wins the tussle over the cash and hauls Kat's suitcases up the stairs to one of the doors.

"You stop by for lunch anytime, young man," the Ibis tells him. "I make the best jollof rice this side of Freetown. And if you're in a hurry I can send you off with takeout."

Kat's stomach clenches. *What is she doing? This dude's a total stranger, and she's inviting him over? Maybe she's changed since Sandra's last visit. Gotten dementia or something.*

The driver grins and runs down the stairs to his cab. Meanwhile, the Ibis is fumbling through keys to unlock the door. After a few minutes, it swings open. "Be it ever so humble. Come in, Miss King. Have a look around. It's not big, but it's home."

Kat waits until the deadbolt turns and the door chain is secured. Then she drags her suitcases into the small entry, takes off her jacket, and hangs it in the front closet. The half a building is small and old-fashioned. The kitchen adjoins the

living room, and the appliances look like they're from the 1980s. Red flowers in clay pots bloom on every windowsill.

"Admiring my begonias? They're worth the cost of the heat they need to thrive. Speaking of that—we start school as soon as you settle in a bit. Will this machine help us stay in touch with your teachers in California?"

Kat takes the slim, silvery laptop from her and looks it over. It's not new but it's a much faster model than the one she's brought from home. She hopes it costs less than two hundred bucks because that's all the spending money she has. Even that was a parting gift from Saundra; Mom's more broke than usual after that last-minute plane ticket.

MY last two zoo paychecks were in our account, Kat remembers, getting angry all over again. "It's a good one," she says out loud. "How much do I owe you?"

"Not a penny. The last time I taught, my students didn't use computers. When my friend Marjorie heard that I'm planning to teach again, she insisted on giving us this one. Now come along; you can unpack and settle in while I heat up our dinner."

Kat pulls her suitcases into a small guest room off the kitchen—bed, chest of drawers, wooden floors with fluffy white rug by the bed, nightstand with a vase of fragrant white roses. White sheets, white towels, white blanket, white soap. Everything in the tidy little room is white. Everything except Kat, her clothes, and her new teacher, whose eyes take in all the black stuff Kat starts arranging in the empty drawers.

"I'll give you a shout when dinner's on the table," she says, and leaves Kat to it.

Kat finishes unpacking before she turns on her phone. Immediately, texts swoop in from Mom.

Did you make it, darling?

Kat?

Did you land?

Text when you get this.

How's Ms. Jones?

Come on, Kat. Are you going to stay mad the whole time you're gone?

And from Sandra: *Text your mom, Filhote. Cut her some slack.*

Kat sighs and answers both of them at once: *Made it. Tired. Good night.* She puts her phone back on airplane mode before they can answer.

Nothing from Brittany or Amber, but they're not daily-contact friends. They text only when there's a biology assignment due or an ACT prep session to attend. Kat's never visited their homes and they certainly haven't come to her apartment. She's not sure they know she's in Boston, or whether she'll even tell them. By now, Sanger students have probably heard something from a teacher or a staff member like "Katina King will be taking a break until the end of the semester." She can imagine Dr. Mitchell telling everyone to "give her space and honor her privacy."

Vomit. Puke. The entire school is lifting that Wolf's fist high in the air. *And the winner is—*

"Katina! Dinner!"

The table is set with two bowls of piping-hot stew. Tender, sautéed greens and black-eyed beans. Steaming rice. Chocolate cake, too, from scratch, with WELCOME, KATINA in icing swirls across the top.

“Can you call me Kat? That’s what Mom calls me. Katina’s what they call me at school.”

The Ibis scrapes the INA off the cake with a spoon and pops it into her mouth. A smile scratches dozens of new crinkles into her old-lady skin. Kat can’t help smiling back.

“I hear it’s been a fiery season for you, Kat.”

Kat shrugs. Doesn’t want to talk about it. Not here. Not with that know-it-all-will-fix-you counselor with a beard. Not with anybody. Not ever.

The Ibis reaches over and pats Kat’s hand. “Do you think you can call me Grandma Vee? I’ve never had a grandchild; Sandra’s my only living relative, so you’re the closest thing to a granddaughter I have.”

There’s only one answer to give a woman who’s agreed to feed, shelter, *and* teach her for three months. “Sure. Definitely.”

Kat, too, has only one blood relative of her own. Her mother. No aunts or uncles. No grandparents; they died. Her “father” didn’t want to stick around to raise her. All she knows about her paternal side is this: When she came out of her petite, white mom, she was a long, strong baby with brown skin and black hair.

Now she’s grown into a tall, strong woman with brown skin and black hair.

A bit like the person smiling at her across the table.

Sandra said this place was rented with pension checks. She asked Kat to help out—grocery shop, shovel the walk, change light bulbs. Whatever. Kat’s ready. She knows what room and board costs. And besides, “Grandma Vee” must be in her eighties.

“I want to do some chores for you while I’m here,” she says after they finish eating. “I do everything for Mom at home—cook, clean, shop, do laundry. Just tell me what you need.”

“You can do the dishes starting tomorrow. But you must be tired tonight. Why don’t you head to bed?”

In the small, spotless guest room, before Kat lets herself shower or brush her teeth, she hits the floor for her usual series of planks, crunches, push-ups, and squats, pushing herself to do a couple more with each set. No training while she’s in Boston—she’d need sparring partners and a professor to replace Sandra—but she’s not about to lose her strength.

After she showers, she slips into the flannel pajamas that were Mom’s going-away present. The mattress is soft. White sheets smell like lavender. Pillow fits Kat’s head like it was sewn for her skull. Three thousand miles from home, Kat sleeps fourteen hours straight.

ROBIN

INT. METROWEST HIGH SCHOOL CAFETERIA—DAY

As he chews and swallows another bite of the tuna wrap, a message makes Robin's phone buzz. *Meet me in the library in five minutes.* It's from Martin, Robin's only other church friend at Metrowest High. They've scheduled a review session for Robin's chemistry test.

Robin's eyes go to the theater table. Unlike Robin, Martin knows exactly what he's doing after graduation. He's already accepted early admission to Brown in the fall. Wants to be a teacher. And he'll be a good one, too. He's helped Robin all the way through high school, quizzing him about Shakespeare's plays, unlocking the mysteries of geometry, marking up his draft essays with a red pen like a professional editor.

Martin grins and waves, and Robin stands up.

"Done with your lunch, Little Guy?" Brian asks.

That nickname. It's as old as their friendship. And maybe as stale.

Robin grits his teeth and slides the rest of his tuna wrap to Brian without a word.

"Thanks," Brian says, smiling. "You'll drive me home after small group, right?"

Robin's been planning to skip small group this week. All he wants to do is crash in his room and watch *Finding Nemo* or

some other movie he's seen so many times he knows the lines by heart. "Sure, I'll drive you home," he tells Brian.

He heads for the library, where Martin will probably scold him again for sitting with Brian. *You could come join us instead, he'll say, or find some of your Greased Lightning buddies from auto shop. I have no idea why you endure that agony. Every. Single. Day.*

But Robin knows exactly why. It's because of a memory. One of his rare memories from childhood. Fifteen years ago, during a Sunday school class, a big, blond toddler grabbed a terrified newcomer by the hand and pulled him into a game of ring-around-the-rosy. Robin can remember every detail, even though he and Brian had only been three years old.

Maybe losing your earliest, most important memories makes you hold on to other ones longer than you should.

KAT

INT. GRANDMA VEE'S APARTMENT—DAY

After her first long sleep in weeks, Kat wakes up feeling rested but anxious. Will she be able to keep her GPA high enough to win a scholarship? How are admissions committees going to understand her so-called decision to leave Sanger mid-semester? Brittany and Amber can afford after-school tutors and hire private college counselors, but not Kat. She's on her own. Mom never went to college—she'll try to help, but she doesn't know much about navigating the applications and financial-aid maze.

Saundra promised that her great-aunt's a terrific teacher. Kat hopes that's true. No way she's adding "academic scholarship" to the list of things that wolf is making her lose.

"I'm looking forward to seeing what they teach eleventh graders in California," Grandma Vee says after breakfast. "What's your area of interest, Kat?"

"Biology's my favorite. I work at the zoo part-time at home."

"Don't worry—you'll stay on target," Grandma Vee says. "I see the brains in your eyes. Let's take a field trip this morning, shall we? It's your first day in Boston so you should see some sights."

A field trip already? Kat thinks. I missed a day of school yesterday for travel. I don't want to fall behind from the start.

“We’re going to the Franklin Park Zoo,” Grandma Vee announces, smiling as if she’s sure Kat will be delighted. “It only takes two buses to get there. Your task is to find three animals that you don’t have in the Oakland Zoo and tell me all about them.”

It sounds more like a fifth-grade homework assignment than honors biology, but Kat can’t bring herself to dim that bright smile. “Okay. But I’ll have to get started on my school assignments when we get back.”

INT./EXT. FRANKLIN PARK ZOO, BOSTON—DAY

Kat looks out the bus window at the unfamiliar scenery. Boston is full of skeleton trees with bare branches, formless bodies bundled in down coats, meandering, narrow streets, rotaries instead of stoplights, and signs at borders announcing a town’s long New England history: BROOKLINE. ESTABLISHED IN 1638.

Meanwhile, her companion launches into a conversation with yet another stranger. Kat tunes them out. *Does she have to talk to everybody?* She looks down at her borrowed outerwear—long brown coat, men’s so it fits, topped with a red-and-green-striped hat, gloves, and scarf. She feels like a Christmas tree.

At the zoo, the wind is cold and there’s ice in some habitats, but the smell of dung and the caws, hoots, roars, and trumpeting are familiar to Kat. Grandma Vee sends her off and waits at a warm table inside the cafeteria. As she walks

through the exhibits, Kat identifies animals she already knows and takes photos of three that she doesn't—a pair of tawny frogmouths and an Indian blue peafowl in the bird building, and a red panda in the children's zoo.

She returns to find her new-but-old teacher surrounded by a pod of five kids and five nannies. All eleven of them are eating cotton candy.

Grandma Vee hands Kat a big bag of soft blue sugar and moves over to make room at the table. "Meet my granddaughter," she says.

Kat lets the sweetness of the candy melt into her mouth as she listens to Grandma Vee trying to learn how to say *granddaughter* in the five different languages spoken by the nannies—Spanish, Khmer, Portuguese, Arabic, and Sinhalese.

A light snow starts to fall, and Grandma Vee gets up to go. Kat waits while *Grandmother* in five languages receives multiple goodbye hugs from nannies and kids.

Once they're outside, Kat lifts her face, and snow lands on her cheeks and tongue. It's the first time she's seen snow in real life. She catches flakes on her borrowed gloves and watches them melt.

"Bostonians stop liking snow around January," says Grandma Vee. "But go ahead—marvel. I remember the first time I saw snowflakes. Made by angel's hands, I thought."

Kat slows her pace to match the old woman's. To outsiders, they must look like a tall brown grandmother and a tall brown granddaughter. Even canine passersby don't leer the way they do when Kat's on her own or with her mother, who draws her fair share of unwanted attention. A few jerks still check Kat

out, of course, but their leers don't linger—not with those ibis eyes staring them down. It's like Grandma Vee has an invisible shield that protects them both.

INT. GRANDMA VEE'S APARTMENT—NIGHT

After a homemade supper of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, Kat notices the slumped shoulders of her companion. That was a big outing on a chilly March day—especially for an old woman who agreed to take Kat in only one week earlier, thanks to Mom's last-minute planning.

Kat jumps up to start the dishes. "I'd really like to help you out. I can do more than just wash dishes."

"No dishwashing machine in this place, you know. So it might be more work than you're used to."

"The dishwasher in our apartment's been broken for months," Kat says, leaning in to give the saucepan a good scrub. "I'm used to washing dishes by hand. But what else can I do to help you?"

"There is one thing," Grandma Vee says.

Kat stops scrubbing to listen.

"Won't you visit the small group for youth at my church tomorrow? It's right down the street from us, so you can walk. I want you to meet my friend Robin. Something's been troubling that dear child lately. I have a feeling you might be good for each other."

Kat stacks the plates in the drying rack, back to back, making perfect parallels. *A small group meeting? At church? And some*

needy girl to take care of? This isn't part of the deal. Besides, friends don't come easy for her. Amber and Brittany are the only two she made at Sanger. And Kat isn't even sure she can call them "friends."

"Will you go, Kat?"

Kat looks over at Grandma Vee painstakingly rolling down her compression socks, one leg at a time. "I guess I can give it a try."

"Wonderful. Pastor Greg leads the group. He's a good man. I'll let him know you're coming. I could tell him a bit more if you'd like—"

"No. That's my business. No thanks, I mean." Kat pauses. "Now go rest. I'll get started on my assignments."

"Oh my. I like the sound of that, Kat. I'll review your work in the morning. Don't worry, students don't fall behind in Ms. Viola Jones's classroom."

Later, Kat powers up the new-used laptop. Its default name is "Robin Thornton," so Kat's pretty sure it used to belong to the friend Grandma Vee wants her to meet. The memory's been wiped clean of any past history.

ROBIN

INT./EXT. METROWEST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH YOUTH ROOM—NIGHT

Robin is parking the Corvette in the church lot when a text makes his phone shriek like a siren. Brian's sound effect. What now? *Don't need a ride home, Little Guy. I'm letting the Porsche pick me up for once. Mom's idea.*

Another last-minute cancellation. After Robin's driven over here only because he promised to drive Brian home. Well, maybe it isn't too late to skip out on small group. His parents won't be expecting him home for an hour or so. He can take a long drive instead.

He's about to send a text to PG when he notices a voice call has come in from Ms. Vee. She only calls when she really needs something.

He listens to her message. "I have a house guest visiting from California," her lilting, low-pitched voice informs him. "I'm sending her to your small group, Robin. She needs a friend. Could you make her feel welcome?"

They haven't had a visitor since PG organized the group six years ago. A new person turning up at small group? Robin replays it to make sure he's heard it right. There it is again—she has a house guest she's sending over. Now he *has* to go inside.

Robin sighs and climbs out of his car. He'll do anything for Ms. Vee; it's a good thing she asks for so little. He zips up his

coat, shuts the door, and rests his forehead for a second on the roof of the Corvette, as if the leftover energy generated by the vehicle's peppy engine can fuel him.

As he enters the high-steeped brick building, he catches sight of a figure walking carefully across the snowy lawn and then faster across the plowed parking lot.

It's a girl. Light is pouring out of the double glass doors, and Robin can see her stomping her feet on the front step to shake the snow off. Is this Ms. Vee's guest?

He opens the front door just as she spots him. Frown lines deepen as she stalks past him, and she turns sideways so they don't make any contact. She takes off her coat to hang it on the coatrack, revealing a long, black blouse that drapes loosely around her body. It almost, but not quite, disguises the curves. Long legs and neck, head held high, black jeans tucked into spike-heeled boots. Short, curly hair pulled back with a wide band. Smooth, satiny skin, almost the same shade as his. She reminds Robin of a young Halle Berry, one of his on-screen crushes. Even more out of his league than Sona Patel.

Crap. She's caught him watching her. Now she's lifting a corner of her lip and planting her fists on her hips.

"You stalking me?" she asks.

Robin takes a step back. "No, no," he says. "I was just—"

"Then why are you lurking around? Do you belong in this building or should I call 9-1-1?"

That sure escalated fast, Robin thinks. "No, it's okay. I—I worship here. I've been coming to this church since I was three."

"Great. A religious stalker. The worst kind."

“Wait, are you—?”

But she’s striding away, as if she doesn’t want to waste one more second talking to him.

Robin sighs again. This isn’t worth it, not even for Halle fantasies. But if she’s looking for high school small group, she’ll never find the basement on her own. The twists and turns in this Gothic building are impossible for newcomers to navigate. How much does he love Ms. Vee? Must be a lot. He hangs up his coat and walks down the hall. Ms. Vee’s guest—or at least that’s who Robin thinks she is—moves fast, taking long steps, each foot landing firmly as if those spiked heels do know where they’re going.

Nefertiti, Robin thinks, remembering a poem his mother used to read aloud. *Spin a coin, spin a coin / All fall down / Queen Nefertiti / Stalks through town.*

She’s passing the toddler room now, and she pauses by the open top half of the door to glance at the cluster of kids playing inside. Robin takes the chance to study her again. Long purple earrings. Strong nose, diamond chin. Angled eyes. Long, muscular arms that he can tell are toned, even under the loose black fabric of her blouse. A leading lady for sure. Maybe even an antihero, like young Halle’s version of Cat-woman. He’s never understood why people pan that film; he’s watched it at least a dozen times.

Inside the toddler room, the ring-around-the-rosy circle must have tumbled to the ground because Robin can hear everybody inside cracking up. Even he can’t help smiling at the sound.

Then, to Robin’s amazement, *Nefertiti* chuckles, too.

The fierce, tight angles of her face melt into curves.

A dimple makes a sudden appearance.

Robin can't believe the power of that dent in her cheek. At least over his own mind. It displaces adjectives like *fierce* and *sexy* and replaces them instead with *shy* and *scared*. He leans forward to see her whole face. He's a pro when it comes to reading nonverbals and facial expressions, especially of people he cares about. He's been doing it with all his might since he was three years old. Yes, now he can see what's there—worry, vulnerability, a hint of sadness?

But once again, she's caught his gaze.

The dimple disappears.

She narrows weapon-eyes and shoots amber missiles of hate in his direction before turning her back. Then, spike by spike, she strides on.

Over the pavements / Her feet go clack, / Her legs are as tall / As a chimney stack.

But Robin isn't fooled.

KAT

This isn't the first time Kat's been inside a church building. She and Mom join Sandra in her big church near Lake Merritt every Christmas and Easter. Kat usually tunes out during the service; she's never had much faith in God. So many bad things happen on earth that if a divine being does exist, she's pretty sure he's a canine.

And even before the stairwell incident, she hated all that hand-shaking and hugging that went on, especially between men and women.

Too.

Much.

Touching.

No dude better try to hug me at this "small group," she thinks. If only I can lose this weirdo. Good thing he's so small—I'll have him on his back in ten seconds flat if he tries anything.

ROBIN

“Excuse me! Are you staying with someone named Ms. Viola Jones?”

She stops. Turns to face Robin. “You know Grandma Vee?”

How can Ms. Vee be her grandmother? Robin’s met Ms. Vee’s only niece, Saundra, about thirty years old, a deputy sheriff somewhere out in California. Not married. No kids. So who is this fake extra relative? “She told me you were coming. I can show you where we meet. It’s in the basement.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Okay, then. Lead the way, Church Man.”

He opens a small wooden door in the wall that’s so easy for newcomers to miss, and they climb down narrow, winding stairs. He listens to her heels clicking and clacking behind him. It feels like she’s herding instead of following him. *Say something*, he tells himself as they walk along the dark, musty hallway. *Make her feel welcome*, Ms. Vee said. But he can’t think of anything.

The door is open. His friends are sitting in their usual circle of two squashy floral sofas, two armchairs, and one love-seat. Standing at the threshold of this room where he’s spent so many Thursday evenings, Robin takes stock of the scene with outsider eyes.

Pudgy, balding PG, their youth pastor, is arguing about an Oscar-winning film with redheaded, gangly Martin. Tattooed, purple-haired Ash is strumming on her guitar. The tune's in a minor key; it sounds sad.

Brian's feet are splayed across the spot where Robin usually sits. White T-shirt. Jeans. Six foot three. As usual, immersed in his phone.

And then there's dark-haired, doll-like Gracie. Robin feels himself relax at the sight of her kind face.

Nefertiti clears her throat. To remind him that she's there, maybe?

"Hey, guys," Robin says feebly. "We have a visitor. This is Ms. Vee's . . . granddaughter."

The conversation inside stops like someone presses a mute button. PG, though, doesn't look surprised. He stands up with his signature kind smile. "Welcome, welcome," he says, striding over and reaching out a hand.

Nefertiti doesn't take it. The hand plummets after an awkward pause in midair.

"Er . . . I'm Pastor Greg. Everybody calls me PG, though. Ms. Vee told me you might be coming. You're from California, right?"

"The Bay Area."

Gracie jumps up. "My abuelita lives in San Diego. I've never been to San Francisco, though. Do they speak a lot of Spanish there?"

"Maybe," answers Nefertiti. "But I don't."

"Well, welcome anyway! I'm Graciela Maria Rivera, but

everyone calls me Gracie.” She skips past Robin and throws her arms around their visitor.

Robin braces himself for his best friend to be flung aside like a tissue, but it doesn’t happen. Nefertiti keeps her arms crossed but allows herself to be hugged.

Eventually, Gracie lets go. Even a master embracer knows you can’t sustain a one-way hug for long. “What’s your name?” she asks.

“Kat.”

Robin can’t believe the coincidence. Who’s writing this script, anyway?

“Oh, Robin,” Gracie says, turning to him with arms open. “I was so happy to see Kat that I forgot to welcome *you!*”

She gives Robin the same hug she gave him during her first visit to small group. Gracie was in sixth grade; Robin in seventh. He was startled by her affection that day, but now it feels totally normal. He pulls her close and leans his cheek on her hair. Hugging Gracie is one of the only times his body feels big; she’s barely five feet tall to his five foot seven.

Meanwhile, Kat’s turned to face them, her eyes wide. “*You’re Robin?*” she asks, once he’s let go of Gracie.

“Yep,” he says.

As Gracie heads back to the loveseat, Martin waggles his fingers at Kat from his armchair. “I’m Martin. Can you sing like your grandmother? She holds the high notes like a diva.”

“Don’t sing,” answers Kat.

Another silence. Robin stays beside Kat, even though she’s

still outside the door. *She hasn't made up her mind about us yet*, he thinks.

And then Brian flashes one of his social media smiles. "How ya doin'?" That's the way we say hello in Boston, in case you hadn't figured it out yet. I'm Brian Cleery."

Robin watches Kat closely. When Brian turns on the charm, some girls respond by sucking in a stomach, planting a fist on a hip, fingering hair, lowering eyelids and raising them again. But Kat's body language doesn't change. She isn't even looking Brian's way.

"Won't you come in and sit down, Kat?" PG pats the space beside him on his sofa, which usually stays empty.

With another flash of insight, Robin knows that not a single cell in Nefertiti's body wants to accept the invitation. *Come in*, he urges the girl with the dimple. The one hiding behind the scowl. *You're safe here*.

As if she can read his mind, Kat draws a deep breath. Uncrosses her arms. Slowly, one heel at a time, her boots carry her across the threshold and into the room.

KAT

Youth group turns out to have three people Kat classifies as avian, two as feline, and one, most definitely, as canine.

The hugging girl is a Paloma. Kat actually does know a couple of words in Spanish. Mostly animal ones. She has to, for her job, to point people in the right direction for exhibits. Anyway, this girl's arms feel like dove feathers encircling her. It's been a while since Kat's been hugged by a stranger her age.

Their leader's a Goose. Not much of a fighter when it comes to canines, but won't do any harm himself. PG, they call him. Guess Kat can, too.

The guitar-strumming girl's a Cheetah. Kat gets her, feline to feline. The redhead's a Tabby, Kat's favorite kind of house cat. If their landlord let her have a pet, that's exactly what she'd get.

And then there's the German Shepherd. The Brits call them Alsatians. Domesticated but still dominated by wolf-like tendencies. Kat spots the alpha in his eyes the moment he lays them on her.

Last, Grandma Vee's friend. Kat was surprised when Robin turned out to be a guy, but he's an avian, of course. Bird Boy. What else could he be with a name like "Robin"?

MITALI PERKINS

And Kat can't help seeing that Grandma Vee was right; there's something sort of . . . wistful about this kid.

I want you to meet my friend Robin, she'd said.

It's Grandma Vee's request that makes Kat stay.

Ignoring PG's pat, she makes her way to the other sofa. Cheetah puts down her guitar and shifts to make room, and Kat takes a seat.