

CHAPTER ONE

One moment the sky was clear, and I was exercising my horse on a lead line. The next moment, I made it hail. I didn't know I did it—not then. Razor reared in fear, his eyes bulging as chunks of ice fell out the clear July sky, and he yanked the rope out of my hands. More ice pelted down, and I threw my arms up to protect my head. Little white pellets stung against my skin. I twisted one way then the other, keeping an eye on the upset horse as he bolted for the other end of the corral.

The hail stopped. I caught my breath as I stood in a pile of ice heaped on the ground. Some of the stones were as big as golf balls. I didn't know if I was more freaked out by what happened or if Razor was. My mother sure was. She came charging out of the house like an angry bear. “Arden!”

“Over here,” I called back. She shifted direction from the barn toward the corral. The odd part was that she didn't seem to be focused on me at all. She kept looking up at the sky, then down the long driveway to the road as if she expected someone or something. Turned out, she was expecting an attack, but I didn't know that then.

When she realized no one else was around, she leaned against the fence, staring at me with this strange expression like she was proud and sad at the same time. I remember looking at her looking at me and thinking I was in trouble. I wasn't, though.

“Are you okay, Arden?” she asked.

I was standing in icy mud with a skittish horse surrounded by piles of hailstones. “Yeah. That was kinda weird, huh?”

Again she stared, then nodded. “The world’s a weird place, baby girl. I think you should come inside and help me with something.”

She hadn’t called me ‘baby girl’ in years. Curious, I tilted my head. “Is something wrong?”

She tucked a strand of hair over her ear, then flipped it out again, a nervous gesture of hers that meant she was holding something back. “No. No, I’m, just...Can you come inside?”

“Okay. I’ll be in as soon as I can stable Razor.”

My mother hesitated like she was going to object. “Okay. Don’t be long, please. And come right in.”

I picked up Razor’s lead line, glancing at my mother as she walked away. Something was up. She didn’t act that nervous even when I started driving. Granted, living on farm in the middle of nowhere wasn’t a dangerous place to drive, but most parents came unglued a little bit.

I trotted Razor in a circle until the wild look faded from his eyes. He was a good horse when he listened. When he was calm enough, I led him into barn for the night. The hailstones crunched underfoot, some of them already melting. My vision blurred as I checked out the sky, but cleared after I blinked a few times. I didn’t see a cloud anywhere.

My mother was on the phone when I went into the house. My brother, Peter, was at the dining room table messing around with his laptop, probably curing cancer or entering space launch codes. I didn't get half of what he talked about most days. My mother said he passed her knowledge two years ago. He was being tutored by some professor online. Pete was only ten months younger than I was. His brain might be in overdrive, but his hormones hadn't kicked yet, so he looked younger than he was. "What did you do?" he whispered.

I frowned. "Nothing. What did you do?"

He shot a glance toward our mother. "She ran out of the house and got right on the phone when she came back in. I think she's talking to Dad."

I shrugged. My parents were okay, but they were still parents. I didn't always get what they did or why sometimes. "I don't know. I was with Razor."

Peter pouted like he didn't believe me, then went back to his computer, his coppery hair dangling over his eyes. He looked a lot like our father when he was annoyed, the same firm line to his lips and his blue eyes seemed to darken to indigo. I looked like both my parents—my mom's rounder face and light brown hair, but my dad's straight nose and pale skin.

I heard my mother say goodbye. She stared out the window, holding her cell up like she was trying to decide whether to make another call. She closed the phone, slid it in her jeans and turned with a troubled smile. "Oh, hey. You stink of horse. I can smell you from here. Why don't you go shower up, then help me with dinner."

Up until that moment, I expected to be in trouble even if I couldn't figure out what I had done wrong. Of course, my mother might have figured out something I had done a while ago that I thought she missed. Pete and I didn't get in trouble often, mostly because we couldn't do much to get in trouble out in the middle of nowhere. Lately, I was slackening off on chores, but that was everyday stuff. My mother didn't say anything else as she opened the refrigerator, so I went upstairs.

After I showered and changed, everything seemed normal again. I helped make dinner like usual. Peter pretended he had homework to get out of helping. My father arrived home, and he made a point of saying he was on time, because he was usually much later. Normally we exchanged pecks on the cheek when he walked in the door, but this time he hugged me. What really threw me was the way he grinned down at me as if I had beaten him in a game of one-on-one.

I was totally confused. Mom seemed a little too sad, and Dad seemed a little too happy. I knew it wasn't my imagination because Peter threw me quizzical looks across the dinner table. Mom and Dad had their own game going, looking away from each whenever they made eye contact. When dinner was over and Peter and I were clearing the table, Mom announced a family meeting.

Family meetings sucked. Family meetings were never about vacation plans or allowance increases or celebrations. Family meetings were always, always, always about rules—either new ones Pete and I had to follow or old ones we broke too many times. My mother and father wanted us to believe that we were discussing things as a family and making a group decision. In

reality, they made a decision and pretended we had a say. Right after dinner, they closed themselves in my mother's study for an hour, which meant they were having a strategy session.

"You had to have done something," Pete said.

"Really, I didn't do anything," I said.

"When was the last time you cleaned your room?" he asked.

"When was the last time you took a shower?" I shot back. He threw an eraser at me, and I retaliated with a throw pillow from the couch. We were about to launch into a full-scale, soft-matter aerial war when the study door opened. We settled down, trying to appear nonchalant as my parents filed into the room and took seats opposite each other.

"This meeting is about us as a family," my mother said. "Right now, it's more about Arden, but it'll be about you, too, Peter, soon enough."

Both Peter and my dad looked at me, and I wanted to sink into the couch.

"You're not in trouble," my dad said.

I wished I believed it. In a way, I felt relieved, but we were still in a family meeting, and it was still apparently about me, neither of which were good signs. "So, what did I do?"

Dad nodded at mom. "We've been keeping a secret for a long time. We've been waiting for the right moment to tell you," she said.

I bit my lip. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out whatever could have been an ongoing family secret, like a real secret, that involved me. And then it hit me. "I'm adopted."

My dad started laughing, and Peter nervously joined in. My mom glared at them. “No, you’re not adopted. I wish this was that easy.”

Dad stifled his laugh. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see that coming. What your mother’s trying to say, Arden, is that we have certain Talents, your mother and I, and some of those Talents have been passed on to you.” He glanced at Peter. “Probably both of you.”

“Genetics,” Peter said. Brownie points for my little brother. I knew what genetics were. I just didn’t feel the need to impress my parents. Hell, my mother taught us biology, so they knew what we knew.

“Exactly. No one’s sure how it works because we haven’t been...studied. But, yeah, it’s probably genetics,” Dad said.

I took a deep breath. “You said talent. So, I don’t have a disease or something, right?”

Mom smiled. “No, it’s not a bad thing. It’s actually quite amazing. Tell us what happened today with Razor.”

Razor? This had something to do with my horse? It didn’t make sense. “He was in a mood and wouldn’t listen, so I lunged him.”

“And then what happened?” she asked.

“You mean the hail? What’s that got to do with my horse?” I asked.

“You were frustrated, right?” my mother asked.

I shrugged. “Sure. Razor knows better. “

“And he was still resisting and you got frustrated and it started to hail. I had similar experiences when I was your age,” mom said.

I groaned inside. I hated when either of my parents claimed to get what I was talking about because they were my age once. They might be true, but they weren't my age now and they sure as hell didn't seem to remember it very well. “You didn't have a horse,” I said.

My father laughed again. “Libby, we really have to show them.”

My mother sighed and stood. “I was hoping to avoid it, but you're right. It's sounds crazy otherwise. Okay, everybody, let's go outside.”

More confused than ever, Peter and I followed them into the backyard. Razor must have heard us because he stuck his head out his stall window. Next to the barn door sat an old clawfoot bathtub that we used as a watering trough. “Watch the tub,” my mother said.

I...felt something. This funny little zing fluttered up my spine. The air in front of me changed, like a ripple that sliced through the sky with a streak of pale blue. It happened in less than a second. I jumped as hailstones plunged out of nowhere and landed with a crash in the cast-iron tub.

My father stepped forward. The ground vibrated through the soles of my running shoes. The hailstones sloshed in the water in the tub. Razor backed out of the window, neighing as the vibrations increased. The ground swelled beneath the tub, tipping it sideways and spilling the water out.

Peter stood with his hands thrust down to either side as if trying to brace himself against the air. When I noticed his mouth opened in surprise, I realized I was doing the same thing.

“That was awesome!” Peter said when he recovered.

My father shrugged. “Meh. I’m not even warmed up.”

“Jake,” my mother said in the tone she used when she was a little annoyed with him.

My father grinned. “Welcome to the world of Talents, guys. I think it’s time for dessert.”

That was when I found out I was a Paragon. It was the beginning of the best family meeting ever.