



# 1

## First day



Wonder Quinn sat on the roof of Direleaf Hall. There was a flickering in her belly. A tickling. Like moths, beating their wings at her insides.

Hollowbeak noticed, of course. Hollowbeak noticed everything about Wonder, even a flickering deep inside her. He shook his small, dark head and sighed.

*Every year.*

Down below them, girls tumbled through the high iron gates that separated

the school from all of the world. The gates were as old and life-worn as the hall itself, but the children were new and clean and shining.

From where Wonder and Hollowbeak sat, it was tricky to see who was who. The students dressed in identical uniforms: navy pinafores that fell down to their calves, paler blue cardigans on top of those and blue socks held up by garters.

Some of the girls grumbled about the uniforms. They called them old-fashioned and dowdy. Wonder didn't see it like that. She liked her uniform. It made her feel like she belonged. She belonged to this old, dusty school, and she belonged to the girls, even if they might not know it.

She searched the bobbing heads and shiny faces. That one – was that Amelia?

And was that one Eloise? And that one ...

She knew that head – that snow-white hair. She knew that upturned nose and those cheekbones, sharp as arrowheads.

*Georgiana Kinch.*

She tamped down a shudder so Hollowbeak would not see, looked away from the pale-haired girl and recommenced her game of memory.

She knew Alice from her pale pink bow and Jemima from her tight black ringlets.

But, of course, some of them she wouldn't know. There would be newlings, naturally, in first form.

And there might – the flickering thing in Wonder's belly began to quicken – there might even be a new girl in her class. Someone from across the seas, perhaps? Someone who had seen things.

Someone who knew things. Someone who had walked off the edge of one map and on to another.

Wonder had always wanted to travel through the skies and over the wide, wild lands and across the seas. She had dreamed of bathing in waterfalls and running with untamed horses and eating a ripe pink mango.

But she was stuck here at Direleaf Hall and so ... a friend from far-off lands might be the next best thing.

But, of course, it didn't matter – not really, not at all – where the new girl might be from. As long as she liked Wonder. As long as she *saw* her.

A friend.

Now, that would be a thing.

A friend who saw her heart and loved it and knew it was good.

It was a thing that Wonder had hoped for, each of these years at Direleafe. It hadn't happened yet. But this year – Wonder grasped onto the charcoal shingles even more tightly – this year it just might.

Last night, like every year on the night before first day, Wonder could not find sleep. She'd tossed and turned in her little nook, which was at the back of the school archives in the attic.

The archive room was newer than all the other rooms of Direleafe Hall, but it was still old. And nobody visited it any more because it contained only the most ancient of cabinets, which held only the dustiest of files and the oldest of stories.

The newer cabinets and the newer files lived down in Ms Gallow's office. But the old attic archives that Wonder

called home was a place for only dead, dust-covered things. Yet it was Wonder's, and she loved it and, usually, she found solace and comfort there, and a place to rest her weary head and dream all the happy things.

But not on the last night of holidays. Not ever on the last night before first day. On those nights – those edge-of-cliff eves – Wonder's eyes seemed glued open. She felt like a doll with no eyelids or a waxwork imitation of a human that would never sleep, never dream.

She might have believed it to be true – that she was wax only and not real at all – if her brain hadn't been so filled with things. Surely waxworks and dolls didn't buzz with thrumming thrills at the prospect of new years, new girls, new maybes and perchances.

Wonder had tried, last night, to think of pretty things, like peacocks and golden-mote faeries dancing in sunbeams. She'd tried to read. She'd even tried singing to herself. She sang herself a lullaby, from when she was small. One her mother used to sing her. It always (usually) put her right to sleep.

*My small, precious hatchling,*

*In your nest, tucked in tight,*

*Flutter down your eyelids*

*And bid the stars goodnight ...*

The trouble was, *always* and *usually* didn't apply on first-day eve and, instead, she found herself only missing her mother. But only for a little while. Before the thrumming thrill came back.

A new year! New students.

Maybe a friend.

Now, that would be a thing.



*A friend who saw her heart. A friend who saw her. A friend to wind up the clockwork key and begin her again. Make her new.*

How could a child sleep when the possibility of something new was waiting just around the corner?

Now, on the roof, Wonder rubbed at her eyes and yawned. Her whole body felt worn and weary. But her mind was bubbling like ginger beer. She shuffled a little down the charcoal shingles. A tiny bit closer, so she might see the girls a tiny bit more clearly.

She could see more faces now – Genevieve, Evangeline, Lily – all of the girls who had stared blankly through her every previous year, as if she were part of the furniture. But she didn't feel badly towards them. They simply

weren't *meant* to be her friends.

One day, one year, she would find her perfect person. The one whose soul was the perfect mirror of hers. The one who knew her, who she was, entirely, and saw that she was good. The one who saw that she was golden inside.

Not grey.

And then, when she found her person, none of it would matter. Not losing her mother. Not living in the back of the school archives, invisible and alone. Not even having, for her only companion, a temperamental crow called Hollowbeak.

He shook his feathers and looked up at her with those black-button eyes that seemed to see every inch of Wonder's soul. *You're thinking it again, aren't you?* he said. *You're thinking that this will*

be *'the year'*. He gave a little noise that sounded like a snort.

'Don't hex me, Hollowbeak,' Wonder growled. 'You just want me all to yourself.'

*Now, why would I want that? You can't even fly. I don't need you. A crow needs only himself, entirely. But you need me.*

'Why, exactly?' Wonder asked, but she knew in her deepest self that it was true. Hollowbeak had been there ever since her mother died. He looked after her. He provided for her. He was the best friend she'd ever had. Even as he professed to need only himself, he was at her side the moment she called. Just as her mother had always been. And just like her mother, he told her how to live, how to *exist*. He gave her form and shape and he helped her to survive

in this strange, confusing motherless world.

But he was wrong about one thing – he wasn't *all* she needed.

When her mother was here with her, curled around her, dancing her through life, she never felt lonely. But now she felt an aching within her. A hole that Hollowbeak could not fill.

She leaned her chin on her palm and watched as the last of the girls trickled inside Direleaf Hall. Their feet left furrows on the dew-wet grass and black daubs on the grey stone steps. They moved in through the arched wooden doors, the hinges browned and groaning with age. And then they were swallowed up by the door, by the grey brick walls, by the stones. They were a school of blue-and-grey-scaled fish, made shining

by the sea, swimming into the mouth of a whale.

All except for one of them.

That last one.

*That last one* – a straggler – was new.

She was tiny, thin, with a blaze of red hair. She carried an enormous backpack that threatened to tip her over. She huffed and puffed to keep up with the other girls.

Then, she stopped, panting with exertion.

And she looked up to the sky.

Right at Wonder.