



Cloud Nine

Luanne Rice

CLOUD NINE



A NOVEL

LUANNE RICE

Bantam Books

CONTENTS

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[*EPILOGUE*](#)

[*ABOUT THE AUTHOR*](#)

[*PREVIEW OF LAST KISS*](#)

[*PREVIEW OF THE LETTERS*](#)

[*ALSO BY LUANNE RICE*](#)

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To TIS:
Heather, Hannah, Nora, Carol,
Leslie, and Mia



CHAPTER

1

ANOTHER AUTUMN HAD come to Fort Cromwell, New York, and Sarah Talbot was there to see it. She sat on the front porch of her small white house, drinking apple cinnamon tea, wondering what to do next. The college kids next door were washing their car. Spray from the hose misted her face. Wrapped in a red plaid blanket, she tilted her face to the sun, and imagined the drops were saltwater and she was home on Elk Island.

A blue sedan drove slowly down the street. It looked municipal, as if it might belong to an undercover police officer or street inspector. FORT CROMWELL VNA was stenciled on the side, and when it parked in Sarah's driveway, a small, trim woman in a white coat climbed out.

Sarah smiled to see her.

"What are you doing here?" Sarah asked.

"That's a fine greeting," the visiting nurse said.

"I thought you were done with me," Sarah said. Holding her blanket with one hand, she used the other to unconsciously ruffle her closely shorn white hair.

"Done with you? My daughter would kill me. Besides, do you think that's how I treat my friends?"

"I'm your patient, Meg," Sarah said, smiling.

"*Were*, Sarah. *Were*. We're here to take you for a ride."

"A ride? Where—" Sarah began. Glancing at the car, she noticed Mimi in the backseat.

"Happy birthday, Sarah," Meg said, bending down to hug her.

Sarah reached up. She put her arms around the visiting nurse and smelled her citrus-scented shampoo. Meg's pockets jangled with keys, pens, and a stethoscope. A colorful plastic teddy bear was pinned to her lapel, just above her name tag. Sarah could feel by the new padding between her bones and Meg's skin that she was putting on weight. The hug felt good, and she bit her lip.

"How did you know?" Sarah asked when they pulled apart. Today was her thirty-seventh birthday. She was having a quiet day: no party, no cards or calls from home. In the car's back window Mimi was waving with one hand, trying to paste up a bright pink sign with the other. In silver glitter she had

“I read your chart,” Meg said, grinning. “Come on.”

WILL BURKE STOOD in the hangar, his head under the hood of the Piper Aztec. Fall was his biggest season. He needed all three of the planes he owned serviced and ready to fly. The lake region was a tourist destination, with all the cider mills and foliage trails. He operated fifteen-minute aerial tours, especially popular during the Fort Cromwell Fair. The end of October brought parents' weekends at the two area colleges, with scheduled flights back and forth to New York, shuttling parents to see the big games and visit their kids.

At the sound of tires crunching over the gravel outside, he wiped his socket wrench on a blue rag and placed it on his tall red toolbox. He checked his watch: four o'clock. A friend of his daughter had booked a quick birthday tour, up and down, a fifteen-minute scenic loop of the lake and mountains. An easy thirty dollars, and he'd be back to the tune-up in no time.

Tucking his work shirt into his jeans, Will walked outside to greet his customers. He didn't really feel like taking a break, but the afternoon was sunny, and the fresh air felt good, so he found himself smiling at the car anyway. He waved as they pulled up.

Meg and Mimi Ferguson got out. Meg was the town visiting nurse, and she yelled hello with cheerful efficiency, making Will smile a little wider. He hung back, wondering which one had the birthday. His daughter sometimes baby-sat for Mimi, and judging from what he remembered, Mimi must be about ten.

But then someone new got out of the car, a woman Will had never seen. She was small and thin, the size of an underfed teenager. Her skin was pale and translucent, like high cloud cover on a fall day, and her head was covered with blond peach fuzz. It was the way she looked at the sky that caught Will's attention: with total rapture, as if she hadn't ever seen it so blue before, or as if she couldn't believe she was about to go up in it.

“Ready to fly?” he asked.

“Which plane, Mr. Burke?” Mimi asked, excited.

“That one,” he said, pointing at the two-seater Piper Cub.

“We can't all fit?” Mimi asked, disappointed.

“Now, Mimi—” Meg began.

“Sorry, Mimi,” Will said. “The big plane's getting an oil change. If I'd known...”

“You know what, Mimi?” the woman said eagerly. “Why don’t you go up for me?”

“It’s your birthday flight,” Mimi said. “It was my idea, and we want *you* to go.”

“Happy birthday,” Will said to the woman.

“Thank you.” Again, that expression of amazement, as if she had never been so happy. She stared at him directly, and he had that shock he felt when coming upon a person he knew from somewhere, hardly at all, but who has undergone a drastic change of appearance. A weight gain or loss, a different hairstyle, a drop in health. He had seen this woman around town looking quite different. Then, for some strange reason, he pointed at the sky.

“Ready?” he asked.

“I am,” she said.

“Let’s go,” he said. Then, speaking to Mimi in a voice he tried to keep from sounding overly hopeful, he said, “Hey, Susan’s in the office. She’d be glad to see you.”

SECRET’S DAD HAD brought her to the airport. Her allergies were out of control, and the school nurse had tried to call her mother, but of course she wasn’t home. So Secret had told her to call Burlington Aviation and ask for Will: Her father would definitely pick her up. And he had. She’d felt better almost immediately upon reaching the airport, but there was no point in going back to school: the day was almost over. She slouched at his desk, painting her nails. Craning her neck, she could just see the action outside, through the big window. Mimi and her mom and their friend were standing by the landing strip, talking to him.

Of all the kids Secret baby-sat for, Mimi was the best. She was a nice little kid. She listened to her parents, never tried to get Secret to pierce her ears in weird places, and wanted to be a veterinarian when she grew up. She had *Dreams* and *Goals*, she knew there was more to life than Emma Turnley, the only school in this one-horse town, just as Secret herself did.

“Hi, Susan,” Mimi said, bursting through the door.

“‘Susan’?” Secret said, barely looking up. “There’s no one named Susan here.”

“That’s right, I forgot,” Mimi said, grinning. “Secret. You changed your name. What’re you doing?”

“October is the month for witchy doings, and since you know I’m a witch, I’m painting my nails accordingly,” Secret said patiently, as if she were explaining something terribly obvious to a dim but cherished friend. She wiggled her fingers at Mimi, casting a spell.

“Wow,” Mimi said, admiring the artwork. Secret had used India ink and a crow-quill pen to paint delicate spiderwebs on her iridescent pale blue nails. Being right-handed, her left hand was more intricately done, with microscopic spiders clinging to the silken strands.

“You brought that lady here for her plane ride, I see,” Secret said, looking out the window again. The airport was tiny, and there wasn’t much activity. “Was she surprised?”

“Very surprised,” Mimi said. “I’m glad you suggested it.”

“Mmm,” Secret said, taking the compliment as her due. She was known for her great surprise and party ideas. Watching the woman walk toward the plane, she noticed a few things: She was too thin, her hair looked terrible, and she had the nicest face Secret had seen in a long time. “Is that lady really sick?” she asked.

“She *was*,” Mimi said. “But she’s getting better. My mom takes care of lots of people, and for a while she said Sarah was going to die. But now she says she’s probably not. I’m really glad, but I don’t get it.”

“You’re too young to get it,” Secret said benevolently, although Mimi was older than Secret had been when her brother died. Secret’s throat began tickling. Her chest got that heavy feeling, and she reached into her father’s top drawer for the inhaler they always kept there. She took a hit.

“Are you okay?” Mimi asked, always looking so worried when Secret had an attack. This was nothing. Secret had asthma and allergies, and she had first met Mimi because Meg Ferguson had been *her* nurse. After a really bad attack, when she had stopped breathing and started turning blue, Secret had needed inhalation therapy for a few days, and her mother had called the visiting nurse.

“I’m fine.”

“Good thing you have your inhaler.”

“I didn’t have it at school today, so I had to come home early.” As soon as she said it, Secret felt bad for lying—to Mimi *and* to the school nurse. She *had* had her inhaler; it was buried deep in her book bag, beneath her art supplies and *Franny and Zooey*. But she had been bored at school, feeling lonely, and when the opportunity had presented itself with a choking fit, she had asked them to call her father.

Lonely: Secret felt it all the time, down to her toes. She missed her brother. Living with her mother she missed her father. Right under the same roof, Secret missed her mother. Half the time she missed people when they were sitting right next to her. Walking through the mall with girls from her school she missed her friends and they were right there.

Like now: Sitting here with Mimi, gazing out at the airstrip, she watched the sick lady with the terrible hair get into the plane, with this beautiful radiant look in her eyes, and Secret missed *her*. Missed her so badly her chest began to hurt, even though Secret had never met her before and didn’t even know her name.

THEY FLEW NORTH. The pilot took her over the lake and western ridge, where the leaves blazed in the orange light. The craggy rocks glowed red, and the lake itself was deep blue-black. Sarah pressed her forehead against the cold window, looking out. She watched red-tailed hawks circling below the plane, their shadows dark and mysterious on the lake's smooth surface.

"Ever been up in a small plane before?" the pilot asked.

"Yes," Sarah said.

"Don't know why, I thought it was your first time," he said. "The way Mimi and her mom were so excited about arranging it for you."

"I think maybe I mentioned to Meg that I love flying," Sarah said. "Although I don't do it as much now as I used to. Lots of weekends, I'd be on a plane just slightly bigger than this, flying home from Maine from Boston."

"I'm from New England too," he nodded. "That lake's pretty, but it's not—"

"The Atlantic," she said, grinning.

He laughed too, the response of a man who had saltwater in his veins, who for some reason, like Sarah, had found himself living in upstate New York after a lifetime by the sea.

"I'm Will Burke," he said, taking his hand off the controls to shake her hand.

"Sarah Talbot."

"Hi, Sarah."

"Who was that I saw in the window back at the airport?" Sarah asked. "That young girl looking out?"

"My daughter, Susan," Will said.

"A teenager?"

"Fifteen," he said. "Going on thirty."

"I know the syndrome," Sarah said, glancing east, as if she could see across four states to a tiny island off the coast of Maine.

They kept heading north, even though they had reached the midway point, been in the air for seven and a half minutes, and should have turned for home. Down below was an endless pine forest. It covered the hills in all directions, an unfathomable expanse of green, and the dying sun threw glints

gold in the tall treetops. Sarah felt her eyes fill with tears.

Will glanced over.

“I didn’t think I’d be here,” Sarah said. “For another birthday.”

“But you are,” Will said.

He pulled back on the controls, and the plane began to climb. They left the earth behind, flying straight into the sky. Sarah felt the exhilaration of adventure, something new, of being alive. Her heart was in her throat, gravity pulling her shoulder blades against the leather seat. Will glanced quickly over.

The plane dove down. Holding tight, Sarah felt the plane do one loop-de-loop, then another. Will’s hand was so close, she wanted to grab for it. It was a sudden, mad impulse, and it passed. The plane steadied off. Sarah’s fifteen minutes were up, but they kept flying north for a while longer before they turned for home.

CHAPTER

2

“DID SHE LIKE her ride?”

Sitting at the kitchen table, reading the paper, Will didn't quite hear the question. He had been up since five, servicing the planes and flying a mapmaker around the state. Updating his topographic maps, measuring elevations and plotting railroad lines, he had spent the morning directing Will to fly low and come around again for a better look; he'd be back again before dawn tomorrow.

“Sorry, Susan,” he said, yawning. “Did you ask me something?”

“‘Susan’?” she asked, frowning as she sprinkled croutons into their salad.

“I mean...honey,” he said, trying to remember the name she had decided to go by. “September?” he asked.

“Dad, I haven't been September for weeks. I can't believe you don't even know your own daughter's name. Try ‘Secret.’”

“That's right,” Will said, folding his paper so he wouldn't be tempted to read it anymore. He didn't understand this name-changing business, and he didn't like it, but his daughter had been traumatized by losing Fred, then the divorce, so he tended to give in on points that didn't seem that important. “Okay, Secret. What was the question?”

“Did she like her ride? That lady.”

“Sarah?” Will asked, remembering her shining eyes. “I think so.”

“You seemed to be gone a long time.”

“Really? Didn't seem that long to me.”

“Well, it was. I was timing you. Thirty-five minutes. It was only supposed to be fifteen.”

“My watch must've stopped,” Will said, trying not to smile. His daughter was so transparent. Anytime she sensed even a glimmer of interest on his part in a woman, she turned ultra-vigilant. She was probably afraid he'd do what her mother had done with Julian: go off skiing for a weekend and come back married.

“Your watch never stops, Dad. You are Mr. Time Man. Zero one hundred hours and counting. You’ve even got me trained.” She glanced at the wall clock, which read six-thirty. “Like now, it’s eighteen-thirty. From our years in the Navy, right?”

“Right, honey.”

“So I don’t believe your *watch* stopped.”

“Well, we flew over the lake, and the leaves were so bright and pretty, we just kept going. I guess I just lost track of the time.”

“You never lose track of the time, Dad. I know that. I just think—” She paused, trouble in her eyes. She had made a big salad for their dinner, and she carried it to the table. It was in the big wooden bowl his brother had given him and Alice for a wedding present, that Alice had let him keep when she moved in with Julian. Secret had filled it with lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, croutons, and white grapes, and she presented it with shy expectation in her wide blue eyes.

“Wow,” he said. “That looks great.”

“Thank you. Most people wouldn’t think of including grapes, but I think they add a lot. Do you?”

“Yes, definitely,” he said, taking a large helping, knowing he would stop by McDonald’s for a double cheeseburger when he drove her home.

“Well, just don’t get too attached to her.”

“Who?” he asked, knowing.

“That lady. Sarah.”

“Honey, I just took her up for a birthday ride. That’s all.”

“She’s sick, Dad. It was like one of those trips to summer camp for dying kids. She’s all alone at Fort Cromwell, and the Fergusons wanted to make sure her last birthday was happy.”

“It wasn’t her last birthday,” Will said, surprised by how much the idea of that upset him.

“If it was mine, I’d want to know. I’d want to plan my last birthday and have a great old time. We’d go back to Rhode Island, for one thing. I’d take everyone on the Edaville Railroad. There’d be more cake than you could handle, and I’d give out presents. We’d just keep going round the track till I said everything I wanted to say. And I’d have my favorite music playing. I’d want to hear all the songs I like, my own top one hundred countdown.”

“That won’t happen for a long time,” Will said, knowing he was in dangerous territory.

“What won’t?”

“You dying.”

“It did for Fred.”

“Fred...” Will said, taking the chance to say his name.

“His last birthday passed, and he didn’t know. When his last day came, he didn’t even know *that*. How can it happen, Dad? That you wake up happy and fine one morning, and by fourteen hundred hours you’re drowned?”

Will looked across the untouched salad plates. Secret was staring straight at him, no blame in her expression. Just the wide-open gaze of a child who still trusted her father, after everything he had failed to do, to give her a straight answer.

“I don’t know, sweetheart,” he said, because honesty was the best he could offer her now.

“Mom’s over it,” she said bitterly.

“She’ll never get over it. You don’t ‘get over’ losing one of your kids, honey.”

“She never talks about him. Whenever I mention him, she tells me to shush, it upsets *Julian*. And he’s just a rich bastard who spends all his time *car* racing and going to lectures. Is that where they are tonight?”

“Don’t say ‘bastard,’ Susan. A play, I think she said.” His ex-wife’s life was a mad smorgasbord of cultural events at the local colleges.

“Jerk, then. Idiot. Numskull. Dickhead. Drip. Flaming creep. Full-dress weenie. Turdman. Shitbreath.”

“Susan. Secret,” Will said wearily. “Stop, okay?”

“Sorry, Dad,” she said, drizzling plain vinegar onto her salad. She had taken only lettuce leaves, a pile of medium-sized shreds. Assuming she had left all the good stuff for him, Will took an extra helping to make her happy.

“The grapes were a good call,” he said, taking a bite.

“Thank you,” she said. “She looked nice.”

“Who, honey?”

“That lady, Sarah.”

“She was,” Will said.

“I hope she’s okay,” she said. “Because death sucks.”

SARAH HAD BEGUN to open the shop for a few hours every day, usually from ten until two. She loved how the morning sun streamed through the tall windows, throwing light and shadows on the pale yellow walls. Today she felt a little tired. She imagined curling up for a nap in the middle of the things she sold: quilts and pillows, some filled with white down from the geese on her father's saltwater farm in Maine.

The bell above the door tinkled. She glanced up from an inventory list she was perusing, and smiled at the two college students who walked in. They stared at Sarah for a second. She felt she still looked weird, with her tufty white hair, and she grinned to put them at ease.

"Hi," she said. "Let me know if I can help."

"We will. Thanks," the taller girl replied, smiling as her friend lay flat on the sample bed, prettily made up with a fluffy quilt in an ecru damask cover. Feather throw pillows covered with narrow lumber stripes or golden swirls and hand-printed oak leaves were strewn around the headboard.

"I want this exact bed," the second girl sighed, sprawled amid the pillows.

"You do?" Sarah asked.

"The linen service at school doesn't exactly provide sumptuous bedding," the tall girl explained. "We're fantasizing."

"Be my guest," Sarah said. "Everyone deserves sweet dreams."

"I don't have a credit card," the other girl said. "But if I call my parents and they give you the account number, can I charge every single thing in your store and take it back to campus?"

"That can be arranged," Sarah said. "I'll deliver it myself in a silver sleigh."

The girl giggled and sighed again, the sounds muffled by all the padding around her.

Sarah remembered her own college days. Too-thin sheets and scratchy old blankets had been her inspiration for starting her own business, Cloud Nine. She had dropped out of Wellesley after her freshman year. Opening her first store in Boston, she had stocked it primarily with down products made by her father, back on the farm.

The farm had been on the verge of failing. Her mother had died when she was fourteen. Sarah and her father never talked about it, but she knew she had saved him. She had gotten her own financing, come up with all the ideas, expanded into mail order, taken on lines from France and Italy to supplement the stuff from Elk Island. The original store remained in Boston, but after eight years and the last in a series of ridiculous love affairs, Sarah had expanded to this college-rich valley in upstate New York. She had been here for ten years now, and her father had all the work he could handle.

The telephone rang, and Sarah answered it.

“Hello, Cloud Nine,” Sarah said.

“Happy birthday,” the deep voice said.

“Thank you,” she said. Her heart contracted. She couldn’t talk. She had the feeling if she breathed or sneezed, the line would go dead.

“I’m a day late. Sorry.”

“That’s okay, I didn’t even notice,” she lied.

“What’d you do? Go out for dinner or something?”

“I took a plane ride,” she said. “To see the leaves. They looked beautiful, all red and orange and yellow, like a big bowl of Trix. I couldn’t stop smiling, it made me think of you, and I knew it would make you laugh. I mean, flying over this beautiful fall landscape and thinking of Trix. Remember when that was your favorite cereal?”

“Huh. Not really.”

“How are you?” she asked. She could picture him, standing in the big basement kitchen, with a fire burning in the old stone hearth. Closing her eyes, she was back on Elk Island, could see the dark barn, the prim white house, the fields full of white geese. She could hear the waves, smell the thick pines.

“Fine.”

“Really? Do you still like living there? Are you honestly enjoying the work? Because—”

“What about you?” he asked, sounding sullen and accusatory. “How are you?”

“I’m great,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” She turned her back, so the college girls wouldn’t hear. “I finished chemo last month, and my X rays look good. There’s no sign of any tumor. I had an MRI, and the doctor says I’m all clear. Good to go.”

“You’re cured?”

“Yes,” Sarah said, biting her lip. She was the most optimistic person she knew—ferociously hopeful—and had often been accused by the very party on the other end of being annoyingly cheerful. She couldn’t stop herself. She knew about statistics, five-year survival rates, worst-case scenarios. Here she was, saying she was cured, when she didn’t even know if there was any such thing.

“Good,” he said. A long silence passed, and then he cleared his throat. “That’s good,” he said.

“Is your grandfather there?” she asked.

“He’s out in the barn. I just came in to get some lunch.” He cleared his throat again. “Just though I’d call to say happy birthday.”

“I’m glad you did, Mike. I miss you.”

“Huh.”

“A lot. I wish you were here. I wish you’d decide to...”

“When’re you coming to Maine? I mean, Grandpa was wondering. He told me to ask. And to say happy birthday. I almost forgot.”

“Was it his idea for you to call?” Sarah asked suspiciously, feeling upset. She had been thinking it was Mike’s idea.

“No. It was mine.”

“Hmm,” she said, smiling.

“So, when’re you going to come?”

“I don’t know,” she said. The idea of going to the island filled her with more anxiety than she knew was good for her. Her doctor had told her to avoid stress, that a centered spirit was her best defense. Just thinking about seeing Mike in the barn with her bitter old father, knowing that Mike had put himself under his tutelage, sent Sarah’s spirit careening.

“Thanksgiving would be good,” Mike said.

“We’ll see.”

“Are you too sick to come?”

“No. I’m fine. I told you, I—”

“Then why not?”

“I said I’ll see, Mike.”

An uneasy silence developed between them. Sarah’s mind raced with questions, accusations, and declarations of love. How could her son have left her to go *there*? From the day of her mother’s death, Sarah couldn’t wait to leave the island. She had let her father down, and even in his bitter silence he refused to let her forget. But Mike had gone to live with him while searching for connections to Zelma Loring, the father who had died before he was even born.

“Excuse me,” called the girl who had been lying on the bed. “I think I do want to buy some things. Can we call my mother to get her Amex number? I know she’ll say yes.”

“Oh. Someone’s there,” Mike said abruptly, hearing the background voices. “I guess I’d better go.”

Grandpa's waiting for lunch."

"Honey, I'm glad you called. You can't imagine how happy you made me," Sarah said. "It's ten times better than any present I've ever gotten, even my favorite dollhouse when I was four, and I'm not kidding you, I loved that dollhouse, I played with it constantly, just ask my father...."

"Bye, Mom," Mike said.

"Bye, honey," Sarah said.

When she turned back to the girls, she was smiling. Her face was calm, her mouth steady. She nodded yes, the girl could call her mother. Handing her the telephone, she told her to dial direct, no bother charging the call. She was going through the motions of selling a quilt, cultivating the business of the girls at Marcellus College, the students who were her bread and butter.

But her heart was far away with her son, Mike Talbot, her seventeen-year-old dropout, the person Sarah loved more than her own life, the boy who was single-handedly planning to carry on the family traditions of quilt making and farm saving under the wing of her father, the wrathful George Talbot, of Elk Island, Maine.

It was at moments such as this that Sarah, writing a sales ticket for a three-hundred-dollar quilt, wished that she had just let the old farm die.

IN THE AIR with the mapmaker for the second day, Will crisscrossed Algonquin County eleven times. They plotted the Setauket River, the Robertson wilderness, Lake Cromwell, Eagle Peak, and the foothills of the Arrowhead Mountains. Will flew him over small towns and Wilsonia, the county seat. They counted windmills and silos, surveyed the patchwork of farms, fields dotted orange with pumpkins. He had climbed to six thousand feet, but on their way back to the airport, he flew one loop circle over Fort Cromwell.

It looked like a toy town, like the miniature buildings that had come with Fred's model railroad. Will almost never thought of Fred's train, but with the mapmaker paying such close attention to track beds and crossing signals, he couldn't get it out of his mind. Fred's set-up had looked just like Fort Cromwell: pristine town green, redbrick buildings, railroad tracks winding through the low hills. Will had been stationed in Newport then, and Navy housing didn't leave much room for toys. Fred's railroad was super deluxe, from F.A.O. Schwarz in New York, the kind of railroad Will had wanted when he was a boy. It had taken up the entire dining alcove.

Alice had been a sport. Her mother had given them a nice cherry table, and he remembered how they had just pushed it off to one side. Susan's playhouse and Fred's railroad had been the main deal back then, and that was just fine. With Will out at sea so much, he didn't suppose Alice had much use for a fine dining table anyway.

But she used that table now. Will saw Julian's estate nestled in the trees on the top of Windemere Hill. Stone mansion, clay tennis court, circular drive, security gates worthy of a movie star or corporate mogul. That's where they live, Will thought. While the mapmaker updated his notes, Will banked left. His port wing pointed straight down at the stone house, like a finger of God. Blessing his daughter, Will thought, but also cursing Julian. For being in the right place at the right time, for stealing Will's family when they were all weakened—broken really—after losing Fred.

Catching sight of his daughter parking her bike against the fieldstone garage was too much for him. Feeling like he'd swallowed a fishhook, he gunned the engine and wheeled through the sky. The mapmaker gave him a terrified look.

"Sorry," Will said.

"Is the plane okay?"

"Fine, sir. Just a little turbulence."

"Ah," the mapmaker said, a deep line across his brow.

Flying home, Will wondered why his heart was pumping so hard. He could feel it pounding in his chest, as if he had just swum a hundred yards in a Force 10 sea. That had been his first job in the Navy: rescue swimmer aboard the *L. P. James*. He could slice through twenty-foot waves, weigh down with a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound man, and barely notice his breathing change.

Maybe it's all this freshwater, he thought, surveying the lakes, the river. Made him feel nervous like something was missing. No ocean, no coastline in sight. Just like Sarah Talbot had said yesterday. It's not the Atlantic.

Then something strange happened. Thinking of Sarah Talbot, the whole thing went away. The speeding heart, the saltwater anxiety. Memories of life as a rescue swimmer, all the good and terrible reasons for leaving the ocean he loved so much. Will started to breathe easier. He pictured Sarah, kind and wise as a beautiful owl with her wide-open eyes and feathery hair, her way of staring at the sky with unblinking gratitude, and Will Burke felt calm. Like he could breathe again without cracking his chest wide open.

CHAPTER

3

SECRET RODE HER bike through town. The air was freezing cold and her fingers felt stiff in her new blue gloves. Sticking out her tongue, she caught the first snowflakes of the year. Her nose and cheeks stung. Halloween had barely passed, and clear ice had already started to form on the lake. Nowhere on earth was colder than Fort Cromwell. Newport had been tropical by comparison.

All the shops looked cozy. It got dark around five these days, practically before she got out of school, so everywhere glowed with that orange warmth she associated with England. She didn't know why; she had never been to England, but she had an extremely good imagination. When she was very small, her mother had read her books by Rumer Godden. Secret had loved the sound of scones and tea and she wished she had some that very minute.

She had baby-sat for the Neumanns after school. On her way home now, she was in no particular hurry; her mother and Julian were having cocktails at Dean Sherry's house. Pedaling slower, she looked into the shops. A few still had jack-o'-lanterns in the window. Others had jumped the gun, entwined white lights with evergreen roping, getting ready for Christmas. The down shop looked especially inviting, with no holiday decorations whatsoever. The sign was enough: a magical cloud and a golden "9." Brass lamps glowed, the quilts appeared thick and enveloping. Wanting to warm up, Secret parked her bike and walked in.

"Hi," the lady called from the back.

"Hi," Secret said. Trying to look real, like a genuine shopper who might actually be in the market for pillows, Secret frowned and began looking at price tags.

"Just let me know if you need any help."

"I will," Secret said, flattening her voice and earnestly rifling through a bin of small silk-velvet pillows. She had accompanied her mother and Julian to the Antiques Corner, so she knew how people who spent money looked. Spiced cider was brewing somewhere in back. What she wanted was to sink into this soft pile of velvet-covered down. She found herself relaxing, forgetting to concentrate, leisurely browsing through the beautiful things.

"Would you like some hot cider?" the voice asked.

"Well, I shouldn't," Secret said, feeling guilty for defrauding the lady. She had absolutely no intention of buying a single thing.

“Are you sure? It’s pretty cold out there.”

“You can say that again,” Secret said.

“Are you sure? It’s pretty cold out there.”

Secret chuckled. She glanced up, and for the first time she actually saw the shop owner. It was Sarah Talbot, the sick lady, Mimi Ferguson’s friend.

“Oh, hi,” Secret said.

“Hi,” Sarah said. “I know you. You were in the airport office the day I took my birthday flight.”

“Yes. My father’s the pilot.”

“An excellent pilot,” Sarah said. “I’ve had some terrible ones, believe me.”

“You have?”

“Absolutely. Small-plane pilots are the worst. I’ve had guys who taxi down the runway like bucking broncos. I know one pilot who flies under bridges, just for fun. When I was younger, I lived on an island, and some of them would fly when the fog was thicker than these quilts. Those pilots were the cowboys of the air.”

“Half of them probably can’t get jobs at major airlines,” Secret said confidentially. She leaned against the bed in the middle of the store.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Sarah said. “Sure you wouldn’t like a little cider?”

“Maybe a little,” Secret said. She waited while Sarah filled two brown mugs. “The airlines would hire my dad though. He had offers from TWA, Delta. He could fly anywhere, but he likes being his own boss.”

“He certainly seems capable to me,” Sarah said, handing her a mug. Secret accepted it, smelling the spicy steam.

“The Navy trained him,” Secret said. “But he was a pilot even before that. He learned to fly when I was just a little older than me. He was so valuable to the Navy, he could do everything. Fly, swim in times of disaster. Lead his men. He always kept his head in times of maneuvers.”

“Maneuvers?”

“Yes, such as the Persian Gulf. He was there.”

“You sound like a proud daughter.”

“I am.”

“Upstate New York is pretty far inland for a Navy family,” Sarah said.

“Yes,” Secret said, sipping her cider. She felt her asthma just waiting for the next questions: Who are you here? Do you have any brothers or sisters? But the questions never came. Instead, Sarah stuck out her hand.

“We haven’t officially met. I’m Sarah Talbot.”

“I’m Secret Burke.”

“What a beautiful name!” Sarah said.

Secret glanced over to see if she was being fake. Certain older people tended to patronize her when they heard her name, but she could see that Sarah was being sincere. Sarah’s eyes were full of admiration. She had a wonderful smile, with a slightly crooked front tooth.

“Thank you,” Secret said. “I’m actually getting ready to change it.”

“Really? To what?”

“I was thinking of Snow.”

Sarah nodded, blowing on her cider. “Perfect for winter,” she said.

“Is Sarah your real name?”

“Yes, it is,” Sarah said. “I’ve lugged it around my whole life. For a while in seventh grade I tried to go out as Sadie, but it wasn’t me.”

“No,” Secret agreed. “You are definitely a Sarah.”

For the first time since coming in, Secret focused on Sarah’s hair. It had grown out about half an inch, and the color was somewhere between yellow and gray. She knew people having cancer treatments lost their hair. Beauty tips were one of Secret’s best talents, and she eyed Sarah appraisingly.

“What?” Sarah said. The way she blushed, touching her hair with a stricken look in her eyes, made Secret feel so bad, she almost spilled her cider. Sarah was self-conscious! Secret had seen that same expression in the eyes of her friend Margie Drake when two of the cool girls, whispering and pointing, had made fun of her new perm.

“Well...” Secret said, trying to decide. She could lie, say nothing, pretend she had just been about to burp. Or she could tell the truth, offer to help. “I was just noticing your hair,” she said bravely.

“My poor hair,” Sarah said, still pink. “Yep, I lost it. It used to be dark brown, and now look. It came in such a funny color. Somewhere between old socks and dirty dishwater.”

“You could bleach it,” Secret suggested. “The way it’s growing in, it’s so cute and punky. You

could get it pure white and look so great!”

“Like Annie Lennox,” Sarah said, smiling.

“Who?” Secret asked.

Just then the bells above the door sounded. A cluster of tiny silver bells, just like you might find in England. A group of college girls walked in, hugging themselves to get warm. Sarah called hello to them, and they called back. She offered them cider.

Secret nestled into her spot on the edge of the bed. The bed took up most of the store. But it was a bed no one would ever sleep in. Like a toy bed in the bedroom of a beautiful dollhouse. Like her playhouse in the middle of their apartment in Newport. All they needed was Fred’s toy train chugging around the room, sounding its happy whistle.

Sarah served the college girls cider, but when she was done she came back to sit beside Secret. Their mugs were cool enough to really drink now. Side by side they sipped their drinks, while outside the air grew colder. The girls’ voices were cheerful and excited. Their parents had sent them money, and they were all buying new quilts for the winter. They were the paying customers, but Sarah was sitting with Secret. As if she were her friend. As if she were hers alone.

LATER THAT NIGHT, Sarah stood in front of her bathroom mirror. The lights were bright, and she thought she looked like a startled cat. Her ugly yellow-gray hair stuck straight up, like the soft bristles of a baby brush. Ever since closing the shop, she had found herself thinking about what Secret had said. She could bleach her hair.

Thinking about it felt radical. Sarah had never dyed her hair before, never even considered it. Growing up, she hadn’t fooled around with her appearance much. She had never been much for makeup, especially lipstick. It always felt so heavy on her mouth, and she was always licking her lips to see if it was still on. It made her feel too obvious, as if she was drawing too much attention to herself. Beauty products were for other, more glamorous girls.

But now, ruffling her hair, she wanted to do *something*. She hated the way she looked. Ever since the chemo, she could hardly recognize herself. She looked either very old or very young, anything but her real age. Her hair had come in colorless, and she had lots of new lines around her eyes and mouth that put her close to forty, but she had an alarmed, perpetually surprised look at all times that made her look like an overgrown infant.

No one ever mentioned it, how weird she looked. Not even her friends—not even her wonderful nurse, Meg Ferguson. At the hospital, someone had come around with wigs to try on, but Sarah had said no to those. Wearing a wig would feel like having pantyhose on her head, sweaty and claustrophobic. The scalp equivalent to lipstick. Sarah had gone the distance for her brain tumor, trying every revolutionary treatment known to doctors anywhere, but when it came to her appearance

she wouldn't try the simplest things.

Sighing, she walked into her bedroom. Annie Lennox played on the CD player; Sarah had put her on for moral support. Annie and Sarah. And Secret. She wondered if Secret Burke knew what a big favor she had done her, breaking the ice about something that had been driving her crazy with stupid worry.

Thanksgiving. What if she went? Aside from all the old sorrow with her father, their history of letdown and resentment, Sarah had an even bigger fear about the possibility of going home to Elk Island in less than three weeks. She was afraid to have Mike see her this way. She didn't want him to feel scared, or disgusted, by his own mother. She would have to hire extra help or close her shop for the long weekend.

She remembered naming her first shop. She was nineteen years old, a college student in Boston. Nineteen! Hardly older than Mike! Where had she gotten the confidence, the ambition? The shop was tiny, one single room with a brick wall and parquet floors. Sarah had walked through the door and filled the place with all her dreams. She would stock the shelves with Aunt Bess's quilts, become a successful businesswoman. Envisioning additional stores, catalogue sales, a chance to save the farm, a way to make her father happy on earth and her mother proud in heaven, Sarah had named her store Cloud Nine.

Cloud Nine. Leaning against her bureau, Sarah remembered designing her logo: a golden "9" on a white cloud superimposed on a blue oval, tiny white down feathers drifting down like snowflakes. She had commissioned David Walker, a woodcarver on Elk Island, to make the sign. Naming the store had given her so much pleasure, such a sense of dreams coming true, of knowing exactly who she was. She hadn't felt anything like it before and never would again until Mike was born.

Michael Ezekiel Loring Talbot.

Thinking her son's name filled Sarah with so much emotion she had to grip the bureau top. She had always loved the name Michael. It was strong, and it had belonged to an archangel, and it sounded poetic. She had given her son the name of a leader and an athlete, someone who had fun and took risks.

Sarah had wanted to name Michael for his father, but she had been free to give him "Loring" only as a middle name. Michael, like Sarah, was a Talbot. Perhaps that was why he was clinging so tenaciously to the island and his grandfather, to the old farm and the refuge it provided.

Her eyes brimmed with tears, and she blinked them away. No use crying about things she couldn't change. Mike had made his decision. She couldn't even say he had run away from home, because he hadn't even hidden his plans. And his destination wasn't New York or Los Angeles or even Albany: it was the family farm. Still, he was only seventeen, now living on Elk Island with the original recluse. In search of the truth about his own dead father. Mike would kill her if he knew she still thought of him as her baby, but she did.

Sitting on her window seat, Sarah took a sip of herbal tea. She ate only healthful things now. She walked a little every day, as much as she felt able to. Some days she felt strong enough to run on the

sample content of Cloud Nine

- [The Prince of Dreams \(Seven Brothers, Book 2\) here](#)
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