

Graceful

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Chapter One

GRACE

“Admit it, if you suddenly had magical powers, you would have turned that leftover meat loaf into pizza, too.”

Bailey shakes her head as we pedal down the uneven cobblestones of the hidden alley. “As much as I’m against your mom’s meat loaf for many reasons,” she says, “the first thing I would do if I had your powers is get straight A’s on every report card.”

“You already get straight A’s,” I point out.

She shakes her head. “Remember, I got that A-minus in gym last year for refusing to play dodgeball? Such a barbaric sport.”

I pull to a stop in front of the last store on the right and swing down my kickstand. “Let me guess, *barbaric* was on your Word of the Day app today?”

“Yesterday,” she says. “I’ve been waiting for an occasion to use it.” She hops off her bike and lets it fall right over onto the street as she’s done every time since we were six and learned to ride without training wheels. As the bike leaves her hands, I see it fall in slow motion, taking much longer to hit the ground than logic says it should. Time acting wonky is one of the weirdnesses that I’ve had to get used to ever since the vortex on the edge of town decided to pick *me* to share its power with when I turned ten. I hadn’t asked for this gift, hadn’t even known such a thing existed, but it’s my destiny and I’m learning to live with it. The only people who know are my parents; my older brother, Connor; and a group of his friends who basically saved my life when they realized what was happening to me. They have now become my friends, too, which is very cool, because they are three years older and still want to hang out with me. They even call themselves Team Grace. I have a team!

I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone else about the whole magical vortex thing, but Bailey’s been my best friend ever since I started a petition in first grade to ban soda in the cafeteria, and she was the only person to sign it. She’s crazy smart, and I know I can trust her.

“Ready?” Bailey asks as we approach the door of Angelina’s Sweet Repeats and Collectibles. She pulls out

the silk pouch where we keep the key to the store. It was Bailey's idea that such a special object shouldn't get shoved in a pocket or tossed in my bike basket. We made the pouch on my mom's sewing machine from the pants Connor wore the Halloween he was a pirate. Then we added glitter and sparkles because everything looks better with glitter and sparkles.

She hands me the key and steps back.

Breathe in, breathe out. Repeat. A few stray pieces of glitter waft down from my hand as I lift the key to the lock. I slip it in and take one more deep breath. Then I try to turn it to the right. It doesn't budge. To the left. Nothing. I lean my forehead against the cool glass door and my breath forms circles of fog.

It's been six weeks since my birthday. Every day I come here and try to get inside. Sometimes with Bailey, often with Connor and Team Grace. Once even with my parents, which was awkward, because they're still really freaked out by everything. Mom has already texted me nine times since Bailey and I left an hour ago.

But it doesn't matter what time of day or night it is, or who I'm with. The key never turns. The door never opens. All I can do is stare at all the clothes and toys and books and random *stuff* from the other side of a thick pane of glass. I wish I could use my power to open the door without

the key, but I've tried and it doesn't work. I can only do small magical things, like changing that meat loaf into pizza, or making my parents lose track of time at the beach so we can stay longer.

Almost as soon as my powers came, they were gone. For a few days I could sense people's thoughts, and even make things move with a wave of my hand. That was fun. Made cleaning my room go a lot quicker! But now most of those things are gone. Angelina D'Angelo had the power of the vortex for a hundred years. I only had it for a week.

At first I'd tried to explain to the others how it felt to be able to see what I'd never imagined existed, like the way every person seemed connected to everyone else. Seeing the history of our town unfold in front of my eyes, it was like living a hundred years in seven days. I'm sure I didn't explain it well, though, and now it's slipping away from me, like a dream once you're fully awake.

But really, I shouldn't complain. I knew what would happen when Angelina and I combined our powers so we could cure Connor's best friend David's dad. Angelina had been trying to save him for decades from a really horrible disease, and she couldn't. But once I got my powers and added them to hers, we were strong enough. Doing it took all of Angelina's powers, and drained most of mine, too. She told me it will take mine two years to fully return.

Hers are gone for good. Secretly I worry that the most I'll ever be able to do is make pizzas. And I could have done that *without* magical powers!

I hand the key back to Bailey, who slips it into the pouch without a word.

"Maybe Angelina was just kidding when she gave me the key to her store before she left town," I say, sitting down on the hard cobblestones. I lean against the wall and cross my arms. "I mean, who leaves a whole store — probably full of magical stuff — to some fifth-grade kid?"

"You're not just *some* kid," Bailey says, sitting down beside me.

"Maybe I'm not the *right* kid, though. Maybe the vortex was supposed to choose someone else born in Willow Falls on the same day as me."

"Interesting," Bailey says. "I hadn't thought of that. *Was* anyone else born on the same day?"

I sigh. "No."

"Pretty sure it's you, then," she says. "You'll get more powerful soon."

"I don't know," I admit. "Angelina said she would help me build them back up, but I haven't heard a word since she left on the train. I know it's not her fault — she was stuck in Willow Falls for a hundred years. I mean, I love our town and all, but that would make anyone want to

leave. Maybe there's something in the store that's supposed to help me."

"Can you track her down and tell her the key isn't working?"

I shake my head. "She could be on the other side of the world for all I know. Now school starts in a few days, and I'll have to pretend to be a normal person again while all this is going on in my head."

Bailey pats my leg. "You were never normal, if that makes you feel any better."

"Not really."

"What are you girls doing here?" a deep voice asks. "This is private property, you know." We look up in surprise, but the glare from the sun hides the man's face. We scramble to our feet. I haven't seen a single other person come down this alley all summer. Maybe we're not supposed to be here!

"Ray!" Bailey says, recognizing him first. She punches him on the arm. "We thought we were in trouble!"

Ray grins. "Couldn't resist," he says, returning to his usual Australian accent. "Your mugs just looked so serious."

Ray is on Team Grace, but mostly he just drives us places and does stuff we need a grown-up to do. Bailey and

I totally had crushes on him when he directed the play we were in last month. Once Jake Harrison showed up, though, we quickly forgot about Ray. Ray's old, anyway! Like, at least twenty-four! Jake's only fourteen and is *soooooo* talented and cute and is super nice for a big-time movie star. But he only has eyes for Connor's friend Rory, and since Rory is totes awesomesauce, we need to find new crushes.

"Pretty brave of you to try to scare us," I say, climbing onto my bike. "I could have turned you into a turtle. Angelina did that once to her brother who was being annoying. Then you would have had to go home to Australia for Christmas and explain to your family why you're moving so slowly."

He laughs. "Yikes. I thought all you could do was change things into pizzas."

I squint up at him. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Your bro Connor may have let it slip when he came to work at the house last week."

"Is Connor making actual money working for Tara's uncle?" Bailey asks.

"No," Ray says. "He's getting paid in magic beans. Of course he's getting real money!"

"I wouldn't mind some of those magic beans," I mutter.

“Patience, little one,” he says, patting me on the head. “I’m betting in no time at all you’ll be making pizzas left and right.”

I swat at him.

“Crikey! Almost forgot the reason I’m here.” He reaches into his back pocket. “Connor asked me to give you this. It came to your house in the mail this mornin’.”

He places a postcard in my hand. It’s a picture of a circle of giant stones standing up in a field. The words *Greetings from . . . Stonehenge!* are splashed across the front. I flip it over. “It’s from Angelina!” I announce. “She really *is* on the other side of the world!”

Bailey leans over my shoulder. “She finally gets in touch with you, and the only thing she writes on the postcard is your address? That’s annoying.”

I look up at her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, it’s blank,” Bailey says.

“No, it’s not,” I reply.