



Chapter 1

My mom says I walk on the outside of my feet like my dad. In examining my shoes for proof I now know she is right. The outside of the sole is considerably worn down in comparison to the inside. I believe her, not because she is the source of this information, but because there is proof. Proof is everything. When I can touch something I know it is real. The soles of my shoes are the only thing that I can touch and know he existed at all.

Mom tossed the pictures, his extra pair of glasses, the vintage records he collected, even the comforter on the bed they once shared. She burned it all: her sadness was the kindling, her broken heart the match, and me, in a crib at the foot of the bed, the ashes. The life she had painted, his promises her paint, went up in smoke with the slamming of the door, the start of a car engine, and a goodbye note consisting of four words:

I love you both.

She told all this to me so that I would understand, so that I would know where I came from and where I was going. I tried to alter my step, to walk pigeon-toed to compensate, all in vain. I am who I am. I am what I am, and that will have to be good enough.

I wish I could say I live by the sea, that I grew up running through the sand, splashing in the waves, spitting the salt water out of my mouth and collecting shells. The truth is I have never even seen the coast. Where I live it is dry, rocky, parched. Some find the Arizona desert beautiful but I just find it empty. My mother burned it too, the land and the sky. Any water that was once in Gisela evaporated into nothingness.

Has anyone ever seen nothingness, touched it, tasted it with the tip of

her tongue? I have. Nothingness is not merely the absence of something else, whether it be good, or light, or love. It is a thing in and of itself. I know this because I have touched it and it has touched me. Nothingness is a void, a black hole, a vacuum sucking all the light of the universe into its greedy depths. Born of a star's death, nothingness comes to life. But I will not be its champion or companion or friend. I want more, so much more; and so I too will go, not in his footsteps nor with his words. My note will only have three: I love you.

The County Fair occurs once a year. The weekend of July 4th is something the entire town looks forward to. My mom strings the Stars and Stripes up in our front yard and there is a lemonade stand on every other corner, run by kids trying to make a buck to score extra rides on the Ferris wheel. I scoured the neighborhood for coins with the metal detector I had rescued on my way home one day from a heap of trash headed for the dump truck. One person's trash is another's treasure.

After dinner, I wiped the beads of sweat off my forehead and excused myself from the table.

"That's all you're going to eat?"

"Mom, I have to get going. It's getting dark and I have to make it to the fairgrounds before sunset. Are you coming?"

A familiar and lingering silence was my only answer as the sink filled with lukewarm soapy water. Her back looked more familiar to me than her smile.

"Bye," I muttered as the screen door slammed shut behind me, its aged springs squeaking from the rust built up over the years.

I grabbed my bike and took off down the gravel path that led from my front door to the street. I pedaled frantically, chasing the blues and the pinks streaking their light across the horizon.

When I arrived at the fairgrounds I hopped off my bike before it stopped and quickly locked it up, as the times demanded. I started out at a jog and was soon running

full-out, because this was something I was not going to miss. I paid for 20 tickets and I was going to use each and every one.

I stopped just inside the entrance at the cotton candy machine. They had added a few flavors this year, which only made my decision more frustrating. Finally, I decided upon the blue and pink combination. As I turned to make my way to the Ferris wheel in the center of the grounds, I heard a roar. Turning just in time, I saw a man shoot fire into the biggest balloon I had ever seen in my life. I expected the heat to burn right through the fabric and held my breath, but it didn't burn through, it became airborne. The man controlling the contraption cocked the basket to one side so the crowd could see exactly what he was doing as several people began to climb aboard. The flame continued to breathe life into the balloon and its rainbow fabric exterior gathered bulk, expanding in both height and girth, until it looked as if it would burst. When it appeared to have reached its maximum capacity, the operator jumped aboard as one of his assistants began loosening the ropes that anchored it to the ground. When the kid helping let the last one loose he jumped into the basket and they were off. The balloon's colors faded into the twilight and they became one.

I turned in circles, looking around, desperately trying to find some hint at what I had just witnessed- a sign, a brochure, *anything*.

A nearby woman with a frazzled expression, carrying a baby and clutching the hand of a toddler, said, "What's the matter? Never seen a hot air balloon?" Before I could speak, the baby started screaming and the toddler wiped his nose on his mother's long skirt. She ran off, looking frantically for a bathroom, but had had enough time to give me what I was looking for: an answer.

Hot air balloon! The words rolled around my head, spinning and shaking, as I decided what to do with them. In that moment my plan was conceived, my escape crafted.

The beginning of the beginning had begun.

I tossed and turned in bed that night. Plans needed to be made, an escape crafted, and a hot air balloon built. Inevitably the dreams came though: dreams of fire-breathing machines, rainbow-colored balloons, wicker baskets and the world awaiting me.

The early morning light crept through my blinds as I lay awake, waiting for its cue to seize the day. I slipped out of bed, careful to avoid the floorboards that creaked under the weight of my steps between my room and my mom's. Her door was cracked but her breathing was heavy. The bathroom tile was freezing beneath my feet despite the warm summer morning. *When I have a house of my own every room will be carpeted*, I promised myself.

I took a moment to stare at the face gazing back at me in the mirror. She nodded, answering the question burning a hole in my head: *Did last night really happen?* The hot air balloon was as real as my longing to leave.

When I finished getting ready, I quietly went back to my room, grabbed my backpack, and climbed out the window.

The grass at the fairground was still slick with dew. I laid my bike down on the gravel road so as not to leave tracks on the newly grown grass. The spot must have been carefully prepared for the launching the previous night. I stood right where it happened, trying to visualize the immensity of it all.

"Can I help you, child?" asked a soft-spoken, slightly accented voice.

I turned, trying to act casual, not wanting to make anyone suspicious, and was met with a kind gaze. The man was short and slight, dressed in an old linen suit. The shirt's collar was stiff, as though it had been freshly starched and ironed that morning. His shoes were shined and laces tied; and when he reached his hand out to shake mine, I admired his fingernails: not a speck of dirt underneath any of them.

"My name is Shedan, my dear. And what is yours?"

I took his hand, surprised by my own lack of inhibition. "My name is Annie."

He smiled as though pleased by my words. "Well, the pleasure is all mine, Annie. Now what can I do for you so very early this morning?"

"I was here last night," I blurted out. I held his gaze and stood my ground, in case he tried to send me away.

"Ah, of course," he said. "You have come back for the balloon. Am I right?"

I stared at him suspiciously, my eyes two narrow slits. His simple black hat reminded me of a shrunken version of the top hats circus ringmasters used to wear. Wisps of greying black hair had slipped from beneath the brim, and he gently tucked

them away as if to maintain his immaculate appearance. His glasses were thin strips of glass held by golden frames through which he studied me, perhaps amused by how long it took me to answer.

“Yes,” I said, “the hot air balloon.”

The sides of his mouth twitched, the right and left points of his moustache lifting to reveal a patient smile. He seemed to understand and even appreciate my curiosity, if not my desperation.

“Whose balloon is it?” I asked. If he was not the person I should have been talking to, I was wasting my time.

“The balloon is mine,” he said.

“I need it!” I pleaded, and then wished I could stuff the words back into my mouth as quickly as they had come out, but it was too late; the damage had been done; and he knew why I was there.

“For what, my dear?” He hadn’t flinched throughout the entire conversation, despite the increasing volume of my voice. It had been so long since I had trusted someone, let alone an adult. Something in me ached to confide in him.

“My escape.”

I waited for him to laugh, to seize me and demand to know where my parents were, something that an adult would do in this situation. But he did none of those things. Instead he smiled again and simply replied, “Let us begin.”