

CHAPTER 1

Wings

I opened my arms, leaned into the wind and fell up.

I wasn't surprised. I've had tons of flying dreams.

Usually I just flapped my arms really hard to lift off. Or ran with giant steps until they grew into man-on-the-moon bounces and finally I was floating above the houses. I'd dive forward with my shoulders and swoop up, each time getting higher and higher, using my hands out flat to steer left and right.

But this time my fingers were feathers. I had wings.

They were black. Not big and broad like crows' wings or narrow and pointed like seagulls'. They were short and rounded, like on those little brown birds you see everywhere.

I rose over the red rooftops (strange, I'd never noticed they were red), up over Main Street, the cathedral's twin spires, the flapping red maple leaf on the highest building on the highest hill. All of Antigonish spread out under me.

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I sailed in a huge circle. I could see where the three rivers met the salt water, the big bump of forest that people called a mountain, the hospital, the golf course, the Trans-Canada Highway, the malls, and back around to the ocean.

Suddenly huge black clouds appeared out of nowhere. A nasty wind tried to rip my feathers off. Two crows blasted past, cawing loudly. They tucked into black arrowheads and dove for the safety of the trees. I tried to follow, but the wind knocked me upside down. I twisted hard right, straining every puny muscle in my thirteen-year-old body. Beneath me the university's red bricks flashed by, way too fast. Another hard twist. The fairground's red-roofed barn rushed toward me like a gigantic stop sign. I was going to crash!

Then I saw the riding ring. Soft sand. Yes! At the last second I saw the horse — a black horse with a rider dressed all in red.

“Look out!” I screamed. The black horse bolted sideways. The red rider fell. Down. Down. Head first. Thud. I screamed again — an empty, useless dream scream.



My yelp woke me up. Sunlight toasted the foot of my bed.

Something is wrong, said a little voice from a distant corner of my brain.

“Yeah. Flying dreams are supposed to be *fun*.”

When I was little I thought flying dreams meant I

had some extra special talent, a future in the cockpit of a jet fighter or the space shuttle ... until I told my parents.

Dad said how much he had loved his flying dreams. Mom said that a lot of people with flying dreams had ESP, like Nanna. Dad told me to enjoy flying while I could because the dreams would stop when I grew up — when age became gravity and held me down. Then he said at least one in three people had flying dreams. I was perfectly normal.

Normal.

That was the last time I told them about any of my dreams.

Normal.

That was the problem.

Normal, normal, normal.

That was me — Ace of Average, King of Common, Master of Middle. I was so normal it made me sick. Just one of the herd, shorter than most of the girls in my grade, with feet two sizes too big and muscles four sizes too small. And my face — nose too wide, jaw too narrow — not ugly, but no girl ever looked my way.

Normal equals invisible. You'd think with a name like Frankie Uccello, genetics could have at least given me my father's dark Italian eyes and black curly hair. Girls loved black curly hair. But no-o-o, *my* hair was the same limp brown as all my mom's Scottish ancestors and my eyes were a boring grayish-brownish green.

Normal equals boring. I never made the best mark in any subject, never got a lead in a school play, never scored when the game needed it.

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It wasn't like I didn't try. Dad signed me up for every sport and team activity designed to torture hopeless normals. But my total lack of success must have worn him down because last year, when I decided I wanted to skateboard, he never lectured me on how dangerous skateboarding was — he actually helped me buy a board! (As long as I promised I'd always wear a helmet, which reduced the chance of brain injury by eighty-five percent.)

Boarding was hard, *really* hard! Once I'd learned to stay upright most of the time, I liked it a lot. On a good day it was relaxing. Push, push, glide. Push, push, glide. Carving from side to side down a long slow hill. On a bad day it was stressful — when tricks I knew I knew, simple ollies and grinds, went bizarrely wrong and every window in every house watched me fail.

But I kept on practicing. The good days were so worth it. Even if it took me a month to learn what some guys could learn in a day, landing a trick was so cool. And fast downhill runs were really rippin'. Not that I did anything too crazy, like flinging myself off a flight of stairs. I knew my limits. I just wanted to have fun — and be able to do it again the next day.

After a year, I mastered the kickturn frontside and backside, could hold a manual for more than ten feet, ollie pretty darn high, grind curbs and do a passable kickflip. I learned the hard way *not* to get my board wet and let it stay wet. Rusty bearings lock. Board stops. Rider *doesn't*. I also learned how to fall without using my hands, get up and walk it off. And how the four kinds of

bandages stocked in my backpack could be applied with just my teeth.

I often hung out with the other skaters when they practiced on curbs, steps or the convent's curved retaining wall with the sweet spot at one end. *They* never thought about getting hurt; they just rode. And offered tips to newbies like me, and never minded that I was totally normal with no real talent for skateboarding.

I had no real talent for anything. Normal also equals talentless. More than once I'd wondered if I was adopted — some leftover, bottom-of-the-barrel baby taken home out of pity — since the rest of my family is so crammed full of talent.

Mom can cook and sew and paint and fix the plumbing. Dad can take a car apart and put it back together on a weekend *and* build anything out of wood before you get out of bed on Monday morning.

And they both have the worst jobs parents could have. Did they plan it that way? Did my mom say, "Before our baby boy is old enough to be embarrassed by feet that are too big, a voice that cracks and squeaks, pimples, hair in new places and *everything* about girls, let's make sure he really understands embarrassed. Let's get jobs that'll make him an expert on embarrassed. Bob, you be a nurse, so when people ask, 'What does your father do?' they will forever correct him and say, 'Not your mother, dear. Your father.' And I'll be a teacher, *his* teacher — *three* different years! That ought to do it!"

It did. Then Mom got a provincial Teacher of the Year award and Dad got a Nova Scotia Excellence in Nursing

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award. People kept saying, “You must be so proud of your parents.”

And if they weren’t saying that, they’d be saying, “You must be so proud of your sister.”

Bernie. Bernadette. Sixteen, tall, dark, curly-haired, beautiful, star basketball player, provincial prize winner in both chemistry and math, plays three musical instruments, speaks fluent French, and has boys calling her cell phone nonstop. It was like Bernie sucked up all the talent genes and left me with the broken mutant bits, not one talent, one special ability, one extraordinary thing to make me unique.

Until the night I dreamed I had wings.