

CHAPTER 1

“DANCIA!”

I pulled off my headphones and waited, hoping I was hearing the TV and not Grandma calling. I checked the clock: ten fifteen, which meant *The Price is Right* was on and Grandma should have been occupied.

It came again, this time from the hall outside my room. “Dancia, can you come out, please? There’s someone here to see you.”

Music blared through the headphones, and I leaned over to turn down my ancient silver CD player. Surely I had misheard Grandma. Someone to see *me*? Dancia Lewis, the incredible invisible girl? No way.

I threw open my bedroom door, expecting to see my four-foot-tall grandmother entertaining a neighbor’s cat in our living room. Instead, a pair of well-dressed strangers sitting on the couch turned toward me in unison, got to their feet, and smiled.

I restrained the urge to slam my door. On the right stood a teenage guy with thick chestnut hair, chocolaty brown eyes, and the kind of perfectly square jaw I thought only existed on models. He wore khaki pants and a white shirt—classic preppy gear, though on him it looked incredibly hot.

The man on the left had black hair with wings of pure white at the temples, and unbelievable blue eyes the color of the Caribbean Sea. Not that I've ever seen the Caribbean, but I swear you could have cut and pasted his eyes right into an ad for the Bahamas.

Meanwhile, I looked like I didn't know how to operate a washing machine. My gym shorts had a glob of strawberry jelly on them from breakfast, my wrinkled gray T-shirt looked like it had been slept in (which it had), and my Seattle Mariners baseball hat had a dark ring around the brim.

Grandma practically winced as her gaze traveled up and down my outfit. Her taste runs toward matching velour tracksuits, so I don't usually worry about her opinion much. Still, this time I think she was right.

She moved quickly, snatching the hat off my head, and I felt my curls spring instantly back into place. Without thinking, I tried to flatten them back down with my hands. I should have known it was a lost cause. I work pretty hard at being unremarkable, but there's nothing I can do about my hair. It's light blond and super curly. Very hard to miss. White-girl 'fro, if you know what I mean. I tried to dye it once, but you cannot imagine what happens to dry, frizzy hair when you dye it. It's not pretty.

Grandma dragged me the ten feet from my bedroom to the couch. "This is my granddaughter, Dancia Lewis," she said proudly.

"Miss Lewis, so nice to meet you. I'm Richard Judan, chief recruiter for Delcroix Academy." The older man stepped forward and shook my hand. His voice was deep and smooth, like a politician's or TV newscaster's.

"Delcroix?" I repeated, like some idiotic parrot.

Delcroix Academy is this ritzy private school on the

outskirts of Danville, where Grandma and I live. It's about eighty miles from Seattle; too far to commute for work, but I've heard some people buy houses between Seattle and Danville just so they can send their kids to Delcroix and keep jobs in Seattle. Because, really, who would live in Danville if they didn't have to?

The school sits on a hill overlooking our town. An iron fence surrounds endless lawns, which are green even in the middle of summer, when the rest of Danville's grass withers and dies. Enormous front gates open only for the buses that bring kids to and from school each day. People have to leave their cars in a special parking lot at the bottom of the hill and take the buses up, even the teachers. I guess it's a security thing. Half the kids are probably royalty from some foreign country. They definitely don't hang out in town. The kids at my school make fun of them the way you make fun of a movie star, or the president. Famous people you see from a distance, but never expect to meet.

"Yes, Delcroix." Caribbean Blue Eyes gave me a smile so white it gleamed, then gestured toward his sidekick. "This is Cameron Sanders. He'll be a junior at Delcroix this fall, and he's one of our student recruiters. He works with me over the summer to identify potential new freshman and tell them about the school."

"Call me Cam." The boy stuck out his hand for me to shake. He was tall, way taller than me, and I'm a good five foot nine. In middle school I really had to slouch to hide the fact that I was the tallest girl in my class. Naturally, Grandma is always on me to stand up straight.

"Hi, Cam." I tried to wipe my hand surreptitiously on my shorts, because it had suddenly become damp, and the last thing I wanted was for him to think I was one of those

people who always had sweaty palms. I couldn't avoid meeting his eyes, so I looked, and instantly I got this fluttery feeling in my chest. Even though I knew it was impossible for a guy that attractive to ever notice a girl like me, his gaze felt warm and inviting. He had an air of athletic outdoorsyness, like he could run a marathon or climb a mountain and look gorgeous doing it.

Reluctantly, I extended my hand.

"Great to finally meet you, Dancia." He closed his palm over mine, and I could barely keep from jumping when an electric shock rippled through my arm.

It sounds weird, but I seriously felt something, like when I was five and accidentally put my finger in a socket. Static electricity from the carpet, I guess, except it felt stronger than that. I knew I couldn't be imagining it, because it wasn't exactly a good feeling, and if I'd imagined touching Cam, it would have felt good.

Startled, I jerked my hand away and dropped my eyes, but not before I caught him smiling at me. It was a comforting smile, like he felt the shock too, and he wanted to tell me it was all right.

Mr. Judan smiled as well. But his smile wasn't comforting. It was triumphant. Like he'd won the lottery or something.

We all stood there for a minute, me shifting uneasily on my feet and absently rubbing my hands together before I realized everyone was waiting for me to sit down. I grabbed a wooden chair from the dining room table—we call it that even though we don't have a dining room, and the table sits in a space between the hall and the living room—and sat down beside Cam.

"Now, what can we do for you?" Grandma asked the strangers. Her denture-bright smile flashed across the room,

and I knew these men had gotten the poor thing's hopes up. Recruiter . . . Delcroix . . . I could see her putting the pieces together. She was probably already having visions of me riding that bus up the road to the magic gates, which was insane because 1) we're not rich, 2) I'm not particularly smart, and 3) we're *so* not rich.

Grandma's been taking care of me since I was four, when my parents died, and we pretty much live on her social security. Grandma owns this house, which isn't too far from my school, and we've got enough to eat. I babysit some kids from church when I want to buy new music or a book the library doesn't have. I can't afford a cell phone, but it's not like I have friends to text, so it doesn't really matter.

Anyway, we definitely could not afford to pay private-school tuition.

"We're here to talk to you and Dancia about Delcroix, Mrs. Lewis."

"Why?" I asked, trying not to sound as suspicious as I felt. Despite my best efforts to keep my gaze planted on Mr. Judan, I kept stealing little glances at Cam from the corner of my eye. Even sitting down he was impressive. His hands, which were resting on his knees, looked strong and tanned. I tried to ignore it, but something about him radiated ultrasweet and encouraging signals, like he wouldn't be at all bothered if I jumped into his lap.

Mr. Judan spread his hands as he spoke. "Dancia, I'm sure this is unexpected, but the decision of the board of directors was unanimous. We'd like you to join the incoming freshman class at Delcroix." His voice practically purred with warmth.

Grandma sucked in her breath. "Really? But we can't . . . How could we . . ." She gestured around the room, and a

blush spread over her papery smooth cheeks.

That was when I started to get mad. Not at Grandma, of course, but at Mr. Judan. Because it was obvious we couldn't afford Delcroix, and it wasn't fair to make Grandma embarrassed like that. I mean, who were they kidding? The kids who went to Delcroix lived in mansions and had servants. They weren't like Grandma and me.

"Cost is not an issue, Mrs. Lewis. Many of the Delcroix students attend under a full scholarship. Cameron is one of our scholarship students, in fact. Dancia would have all her expenses paid in full."

"You'll even get to live on campus," Cam said to me. When Grandma's blush deepened, he turned to her and added, "Not that there's anything wrong with your house, of course. But on campus, Dancia can use the library or computer lab any time she wants."

Nice recovery, I thought. Truth is, our house isn't much to look at. Two tiny bedrooms, a little kitchen, bathroom, and living room. You can vacuum the entire house from the plug in the hall outside my door. I know because I do most of the cleaning around here. Grandma's got arthritis and can't push the vacuum, or scrub the counters, or clean out the fridge, or much of anything that requires physical exertion.

"I see." Grandma dabbed at her eyes and settled back in her chair as Cam spoke. Grandma has foggy blue eyes that water all the time, so she's constantly wiping their corners. Still, she's a stickler for appearances. Even when she's wearing her tracksuits—a pink one today, with purple trim—her hair is perfectly curled and she always wears makeup.

It's a little unnerving to know your grandma spends more time on her appearance than you do.

"What if I don't want to live there?" I asked. It wasn't as

though I could just ditch Grandma. She could barely carry grocery bags in from the car.

“We ask all students to live on campus during the week,” Mr. Judan replied. “It’s an important part of the Delcroix experience, and a time to bond with your schoolmates. But you’re free to go home over the weekend.”

“I was worried about it too, when I was a freshman,” Cam said. “But you’ll love it. You’ll get to know everyone really well because you spend so much time together. The food is great, and the library is perfect for studying. My dad lives in Seattle, and I didn’t even realize how loud our apartment was until I came to Delcroix. I go home for vacations and long weekends. It’s perfect, and my scholarship covers it all. Yours will too.”

I had to admit to being impressed by the offhanded way he conveyed this information, like he wasn’t the least bit embarrassed about being on scholarship at a rich kids’ school.

“Why me?”

“Delcroix is what we call an invitation-only program, Dancia,” Mr. Judan said, smoothing an invisible wrinkle in his pants. “We select each student individually because of the special gifts he or she will bring to our campus. We look for a very diverse student body. Some of our students are dancers, some are gifted mathematicians, others are poets. They all have different talents, but they have one thing in common: after they graduate, we expect them to do amazing things to better humanity, and they do. Our students go on to be senators, CEOs, principal ballerinas, and Nobel laureates. And we’d like you to be a part of our school.”

“We think you’re something special, Dancia,” Cam said, leaning forward as if he intended to use his entire body to convince me of his sincerity. “We wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

I snorted. Unattractive, sure, but I couldn't help myself. The whole thing was absurd.

"Special?" I said, keeping my voice calm. "I think perhaps you've mistaken me for someone else. I'm the one with the B average and mediocre ball-handling skills."

Grandma glared at me, but I held my ground and raised my eyebrows at Mr. Judan. No one was less exceptional than Dancia Lewis. I had made sure of that. Unless somehow they knew about . . .

Mr. Judan interrupted my thoughts with a voice that could have soothed an angry pit bull. "You *are* special, Dancia."

He was good. I found my shoulders relaxing even though I wanted to keep them tense.

"To be honest," he continued, "we might not have found out about you if the *Danville Chronicle* hadn't run a story about what happened at the hospital. Once we heard that, we started talking to your teachers at the middle school. It wasn't long before we knew that you would be perfect for Delcroix."

My heart started racing as I let myself complete the thought: unless somehow they knew about . . . my power.