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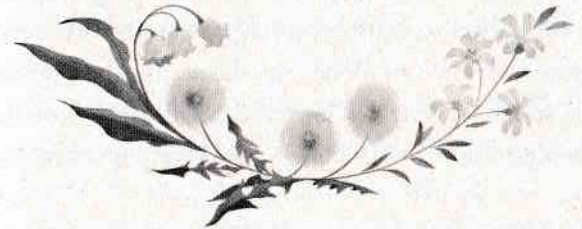
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WINGS
OF
STARLIGHT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ALLISON SAFT



PROLOGUE



There are things hidden from all except those who know exactly where to look. If you gaze out your window in the early twilight hours, when all the world is still asleep, you might notice an orb of light flitting through the late-summer leaves, each one blushing red in its wake. You might see faint ribbons of gold in the air, shimmering just above the hyacinths pushing through the newly thawed earth. Perhaps, if you are truly observant, you might appreciate the chisel marks scoring the crystal lacework of each snowflake. Alas, few are. And so, few will ever experience true wonder. Few will ever know that even the most mundane thing—the waning of the moon, the flow of the tide, the serendipitous reappearance of a lost trinket

beneath your kitchen table—is magical.

All of it, of course, is the work of Never Fairies.

They orchestrate the turn of the season in a single night, then return home. It is said that if you soar past the second star on the right and go straight on till morning, you will reach it, too: the Queendom of Pixie Hollow. Considered from above, Pixie Hollow is like a cake sliced into four generous pieces. At its heart is the Pixie Dust Tree, luminous and golden as a candle in the darkness. To the east is Spring Valley, where the flowers remain forever in bloom. To the south: the Summer Glade, where the days stretch long and languid as a drowsing cat. To the west: the Autumn Forest, cool and crisp and ablaze with color.

Then, to the north, there are the Winter Woods.

The denizens of the warm seasons do their best to keep the Winter Woods far out of their minds. But when they catch a glimpse of it beneath the vast shadow of the mountain, they cannot help thinking of its skeletal trees, or the icicles glittering like bared fangs in the moonlight, or those who dwell in such a gray and lifeless place. The winter fairies—so the warm fairies reason—are best left to their snowy solitude. They have managed their own affairs for centuries. Besides, the cold there is so bitter and cruel it will shatter a warm fairy's wings in an instant. No good would ever come of crossing its border.

Now, most of their fears are baseless superstition. But unbeknownst to the warm seasons, dark forces do dwell within the Winter Woods. There is a place where all the trees bend backward, flinching away from the frozen lake sprawled

beneath them. There, the very air sits as heavy and wrong as a feverish sweat. No one visits this place. No one sensible, anyway, save the young Warden of the Winter Woods.

But if you were brave enough or foolish enough, you could step out onto the ice. Beneath it, you would find not water but a deep, writhing darkness. Even if you could stomach the dread it inspires for more than a moment, you would not be able to make sense of it. The shadows only occasionally arrange themselves into a recognizable shape. Here, a tooth. There, an eye, a claw.

No, few would ever experience such terror. But if you *had* somehow wandered down to the lake on this cold, moonless night—as the Warden of the Winter Woods did—you might have seen what he did: the moment a single crack fissured the surface of the ice. You might have heard the splintering that shook the snowfall loose from the branches. You might have felt the very woods tremble with anticipation.

Then: something—barely a wisp of shadow—rose like smoke from the broken ice. It seethed, then coalesced into a form it remembered from the nightmare that birthed it. In the darkness, it was nearly impossible to see, but its footprints fell heavy against the earth. Then, compelled by some horrible, ancient instinct, it lumbered toward the warm seasons.



It was the kind of afternoon made for daydreams: the air golden with sunlight and pixie dust, the meadow humming with the low drone of bees. Clarion perched on the branch of an oak tree, surrounded by the sigh and rustle of leaves. How sweet to find herself alone and—at least, for fifteen glorious minutes—with nothing at all to do.

She almost regretted the thought, as lovely as it was. It was all too easy to imagine Queen Elvina's response, delivered like a royal decree: *The Queen of Pixie Hollow does not sit idle while*

there is work still to be done.

But Clarion was not the Queen of Pixie Hollow—not yet, anyway—and her weekly appointment with the Minister of Summer had ended unexpectedly early. She did not intend to let this rare glimmer of freedom go to waste.

With her coronation looming, her every waking moment was regimented with lessons, rehearsals, fittings, and more meetings than she'd ever thought possible. All essential, she supposed, when she had only one month left to absorb Elvina's hundreds of years of wisdom. And yet, Pixie Hollow was vast and wondrous, and Clarion sometimes suspected she knew nothing about it at all. How could she, when she'd spent almost all her life observing it from afar?

Clarion gazed out at Sunflower Meadow with something dangerously close to yearning. As the golden hour drew nearer, the light-talent fairies emerged, aglow with excitement and eager to face the controlled chaos of their busiest time of day. Through the canopy, she watched them weave through the pollen-thick air, leaving trails of pixie dust in their wake. Some worked in teams to angle the sun's rays ever closer to the horizon line, shouting things like "A little to the left!" and "No, your other left!" Others dipped their hands into beams of sunlight and scooped them into their baskets, as easy as collecting water from a well. It never failed to astound Clarion how many tiny details went into the everyday magic of a sunset. It seemed impossible that soon, on the night of the summer solstice, she would be responsible for all of them.

The prospect terrified her more than she cared to admit.

A high-pitched buzz sliced through her thoughts. Then, something hurtled past her: a streak of black against the brightening sky. Clarion stumbled backward, nearly losing her balance before steadying herself on a branch.

What in the stars was *that*?

With a hand resting against her pounding heart, she peered down through the curtain of leaves. A bee, faltering in her flight, landed heavily on the ground and went terribly still. After a moment, her wings fluttered, and Clarion let out a sigh of relief. *Not injured, then*, she thought. The poor thing must have exhausted herself. Bees were an industrious bunch and tended to overestimate their limits, especially here in the perpetual heat of midsummer. Luckily, it was nothing a spoonful of sugar wouldn't fix—and there was sugar aplenty in Pixie Hollow. The kitchens, no doubt bursting with all manner of sweets at this hour, were back at the palace. Better yet, the hive—and all its honey—was just across the meadow.

A simple problem with a simple solution.

And yet, Clarion hesitated.

Any trouble in the queendom made her itch with the desire to fix it. Once, she'd believed that tendency was a spark of her latent governing-talent magic—one small piece of the whole that finally made sense to her. But now, she understood that her instincts—her compassion—could not be trusted.

The Queen of Pixie Hollow does not belong among her subjects.

Ever since her Arrival—the night she emerged from a fallen star, as all the Queens of Pixie Hollow before her had—Elvina had impressed upon her that she was different. That *they* were

different, marked indelibly with stardust. Besides Elvina, Clarion was the only governing-talent in all of Pixie Hollow.

Clarion glanced at the meadow, where teams of animal-talents and garden-talents shepherded their flock of bees. Would they notice one missing? Even if they did, a search would take them all night. Perhaps something as menial as saving a bee was beneath her notice, but she could not stomach the thought of leaving now. What kind of queen would she be if she turned away from the suffering of even the smallest of her subjects?

Now, there was just the matter of getting down from this tree.

A heavy cloak hung around her shoulders, trapping her wings beneath its weight. All fairies emitted a faint aura—one that flared and dimmed with their moods—but thanks to her wings, her glow had always verged on irrepressible. Although the light-talent fairies here in Summer shared her penchant for gold, the resemblance wasn't striking enough to allow hiding in plain sight. Letting anyone see her wings was as good as shouting *Here comes the future Queen of Pixie Hollow*.

If anyone told Elvina she had been here, unattended . . . No, it did not bear thinking about. She would have to climb down. Inconvenient, yes. Dangerous, almost certainly. But she preferred by far the risk of falling to enduring another of Elvina's lectures.

Steeling herself, Clarion lowered herself branch by branch. Her muscles burned and the bark scraped her hands raw, but by some miracle, she managed not to roll her ankle as she landed

in the sea of sunflowers. They towered above her, swaying gently in the breeze and casting dappled shadows across the grass. And there, just a few yards ahead of her, the bee lay in a pool of yellow sunlight.

Warily, she approached the bee and knelt beside her. "Are you all right?"

The bee's antennae swiveled lethargically toward her, which Clarion chose to interpret as a yes.

It occurred to her that she had never interacted with a bee before. Many fairies kept them as pets—as much as one *could* keep them, considering they came and went as they pleased. The fairies befriended them with dishes of nectar left on windowsills and home gardens full of their favorite flowers: catmint and lavender and black-eyed Susans. Elvina had never *forbidden* such things, of course, but she had not encouraged them, either. The ease others had with the animals of Pixie Hollow was yet another thing Clarion had never learned.

"Let's get you back in the air," she said. She felt only a little foolish, speaking to a bee as if she could understand. Only animal-talents could truly communicate with their charges. Still, for good measure, she added: "Please don't sting me."

Carefully, she scooped the creature into her arms. The bee offered no resistance, and Clarion would have sworn she saw gratitude in her weary eyes. Her fur was surprisingly soft—and gave off the faintest scent: the brightness of lemon and the earthiness of pollen. This close, it struck Clarion for the first time just how similar a bee's wings were to the rest of her subjects'. They were as fragile and precious as glass and

marked with an intricate pattern of veins. It made that protective instinct kindle brighter within her.

Cradling the bee to her chest, she made her way through the field of sunflowers. Through the canopy overhead, she caught glimpses of fairies flitting by. Motes of pixie dust drifted lazily through the air, along with the sparkling sound of their laughter. It filled her with happiness and longing—and also a terrible loneliness. All fairies who shared a talent lived together, worked together, played together. They mingled with others, of course, but there was an innate understanding among those who were made for the same purpose. Sometimes, Clarion wondered what it must be like to feel as though you belonged somewhere—to have so many others to turn to, who all understood you so completely.

They arrived at the edge of the field, where a lofty maple cast its long shadow over them. But it was the hollow in its trunk—a knothole a few feet off the ground, filled with precise rows of golden honeycomb—that caught Clarion's eye: the hive.

Gently, Clarion set the bee down in the grass. "I'll be right back."

She gave an answering flutter of her wings. On some level, perhaps the bee did understand her.

Clarion turned to the tree and drew in a steady breath. She'd already climbed one tree today. What was another? She hoisted herself up, finding footholds in the grooves of the bark and the caps of honey mushrooms blooming from the trunk. At last, she climbed onto the lip of the knothole. The soothing drone of the bees reverberated within her chest, and

the comforting, floral smells of wax and nectar washed over her. Clarion carefully pried loose a cap of wax that sealed the honeycomb. Immediately, honey welled to the surface. In the late-afternoon sunlight, it almost seemed to glow. Clarion plucked a leaf from a branch, then used it to gather honey dripping languidly from the comb.

The journey back down was perilous with one hand, but she managed not to fall. She hurried back to her bee and placed the leaf beside her. "Here you are."

Clarion watched anxiously as she drank. Slowly, the bee began to stir. First, she stood—cautiously, as though testing whether her delicate legs would hold her. Then, clearly emboldened, she took flight. She pirouetted and capered, twirling in circles around Clarion as if to say, *Join me*.

"I wish I could."

Clarion couldn't help grinning. Even if her talent eluded her, perhaps she could do some good.

"Mel?" someone called, her voice frayed with panic. "Mel?"

The bee perked up at the sound of her name.

Clarion looked up to see an animal-talent frantically combing through the sunflowers. "Looking for this one?"

The fairy's tawny face appeared between the petals, confusion writ plain on her features. She blinked hard at the empty space in front of her. "Is someone there?"

"Down here."

She startled, nearly plummeting from her perch. Clarion winced. It was admittedly rare to see a fairy on her feet. Self-consciously, she adjusted the fall of her cloak. Fortunately, the

brilliance of the summer sun muted the light her wings shed. What little escaped from the collar only faintly stained her skin, no more obvious than the reflection of a buttercup held beneath her chin. Sweat trickled down her back, sliding between her cramped wings. She really could not wait to be free of this cloak—and the heat, for that matter.

When the animal-talent recovered her senses, her gaze landed on the bee. "Mel!"

Mel careened toward the fairy at full speed, veering away at the very last moment. The animal-talent did not flinch, as though she was accustomed to such displays. She seemed to be fighting back a smile as Mel dove into a sunflower.

"You were supposed to pollinate marigolds today," the fairy grouched, but Clarion could tell from the look on her face that she was relieved to have found her.

Mel resurfaced covered in pollen. She shook off the excess like a wet dog, then flew off to join the rest of her hive. Even Clarion could tell she was preening.

"She seems like a handful," Clarion observed.

"Oh, you don't know the half of it." The animal-talent shook her head with fond exasperation, then turned to Clarion. "That was a kind thing you did."

Clarion found herself caught off guard—and somewhat flustered by the praise. Few fairies ever spoke to her without being addressed first. Elvina exuded a commanding aura that enshrouded Clarion in its protection. It kept her in, yes—but everyone else out. She was woefully out of practice with any sort of small talk.

Fighting to keep the formality out of her voice, she said, "It was no trouble at all."

"Even so, thank you." The animal-talent's smile was as warm as summer itself. "I'm sure you're plenty busy without chasing down wayward bees."

Clarion tentatively smiled back. "You're welcome."

"Have I seen you around before?" The fairy frowned, searching her face as if trying to place her features. "You look almost like—"

"Clarion?"

Clarion flinched at the sound of her name—and at the familiar voice of the Minister of Summer. *Exposed*. Dread seized hold of Clarion as she turned to face the minister. Aurelia hovered just behind her with a look of mild surprise. She had deep black skin and eyes as golden as pixie dust. Her hair fell in twists down to her shoulders. Today, she dressed in a gown of yarrow; the tiered skirt frothed with blossoms, arranged in clusters of pink, orange, and white.

"What are you still doing here?" she asked. "I thought you'd have returned to the palace by now."

"I took a brief detour," she replied wanly. "To rest?"

Aurelia brightened at that. She'd been shaped by an eternity of languid summer afternoons and valued peace and quiet above all else. Here in the Summer Glade, there was always time for a nap or a glass of lemonade. But while they dozed during the brunt of the midday heat, they truly came alive at night. Summer was the only season that never truly slept. If Clarion lingered here long enough, those who lived beneath the light of

the moon—firefly-talents and star-counting-talents—would emerge from their slumber.

"My brilliant protégé," Aurelia cooed. "See? You *are* learning about Summer."

The praise rang hollow, but Clarion forced cheer into her voice. "Thank you, Minister."

She smiled indulgently. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I have to check in on my light-talents."

With that, she left. Reluctantly, Clarion glanced over at the animal-talent, who had gone quite pale. She opened her mouth to say something, *anything*, to put her at ease. But it was too late. She saw the exact moment it dawned on the other fairy. The exact moment her shock slackened into mortification—and something like awe. Clarion could hardly bear it.

"Princess Clarion," she choked out. "I am *so* sorry."

Clarion held up her hands placatingly. "There's no need to apologize."

"But there is." The animal-talent bowed her head deeply. "Your Highness, please forgive me for my impertinence. If I had known..."

Then she never would have spoken to Clarion at all.

What else was there to say? Quietly, she said, "You're forgiven."

The animal-talent bowed her head again. Murmuring a breathless thank-you, she rushed off. Back to her work, no doubt—and back to her friends.

That familiar ache of loneliness unfurled through her like a collapsing star. For a few precious minutes, Clarion had almost

been able to forget who she was. Here, there were no guards following her at a distance. No one snapping to attention as she passed. No conversations dying as she approached. No whispers rippling in her wake. But none of it mattered in the end. Even here, she could not escape what she was.

She should have wanted this: respect, deference, impartial distance. But she didn't. More than anything, she wanted the only thing that felt truly impossible: to be *known*. Elvina would never . . .

Elvina.

Oh, stars. If she didn't leave now, she was going to be late.

She unclasped the brooch at her throat and dropped the traveling cloak from her shoulders. She gathered it up hastily in her arms and took flight, bursting from the sunflowers in a flurry of golden light and golden petals. A few bees lazily trundling by swerved off course to avoid her.

As she rose higher into the sky, she dragged a wake of pollen behind her. She allowed herself a single moment to glance back—and regretted it immediately. The light-talents had apparently finished their work for the afternoon. They'd separated themselves into teams and were volleying a ball of light back and forth over a net. Even from this distance, Clarion could hear their shrieks of laughter—and the mingled shouts of triumph and frustration when one team scored a point.

The sight of her subjects, so completely and uncomplicatedly happy, should have delighted her. But right now, it was only a painful reminder of her own queenly solitude. As much as she wanted to, she would never truly belong among them.



The Pixie Dust Tree loomed in the distance, stately and lush with its cloudlike canopy. Tiered cascades of pixie dust—as golden and bright as starlight—poured from the heart of its highest branches and pooled in the apex of its trunk. Its limbs curled protectively around the Pixie Dust Well before veering off in elegant arches and whimsical curlicues. Clarion had always thought one looked like an upside-down heart, another like the tail of a curious cat. And just below the well, housed in a hollow of the tree's ancient trunk, was the

palace. Windows dotted the bark, each one lit from within.

Even from here, Clarion could make out the glow of the light she'd left on in her bedroom, softly emanating from the glass doors of her balcony. She'd counted on sneaking back in being the hardest part of this little venture, but she had not anticipated the added challenge of her own lateness. Really, she had been on such a good streak of punctuality. Elvina would be so disappointed to see it broken.

If only Clarion had managed to master teleportation, one of the most useful governing-talent abilities. Elvina always made it look so easy: dissolving into a swirl of glittering gold dust, then reappearing across the room. Clarion had once managed to make her left hand disappear before it snapped back into existence with a vengeance. Given her track record with magic, she'd been half convinced that it would vanish forever, or that it would wind up halfway across the room without the rest of her attached.

She landed in the tangle of branches just outside her balcony and dampened her glow. With any luck, no one would be searching for a flash of gold among the foliage . . . although she secretly delighted in imagining how her subjects would react to the ever-dignified Princess of Pixie Hollow breaking into her own quarters. Imagining Elvina's reaction, however, was decidedly less amusing. Mercifully, she'd had the foresight to leave the balcony doors unlocked. She carefully eased them open, then slipped back into her room. As soon as she latched the doors behind her, muffled voices filtered in from the hallway. Clarion instantly recognized both Petra and Artemis.

"... feeling a little under the weather..." *Petra's voice*, Clarion noted with pleasant surprise. It was practically fraying beneath the strain of lying.

Her oldest—well, her *only*—friend had always been terrible at this sort of thing. It didn't help that even after all these years, Artemis—Clarion's guard—always managed to fluster her. Clarion supposed she appreciated the effort, considering she hadn't asked Petra to cover for her. She hadn't even known to expect her today.

What fortunate timing.

Clarion crossed the room and paused in front of her vanity, which was cluttered with bottles of fragrances and cosmetics. A quick glance in the mirror confirmed that she had no pollen streaked across her nose or any stray petals tangled in her hair. She looked a little flushed from her flight, but that was nothing that couldn't be explained away. Petra *had* said she felt ill, after all. Clarion was tempted to use the excuse to beg off her lesson, but there was no sense delaying the inevitable. She'd made little progress in her magic since Elvina began training her, and she did not anticipate a breakthrough before the next one.

A flicker in the corner of her eye caught her attention. The clouds had shifted, letting a wash of sunlight spill into the room. Beyond the glass of her balcony doors, she was greeted with the familiar sight of the mountains keeping their grim vigil over the Winter Woods. In the warmth of the golden hour, the snow cloaking them gleamed a brilliant white. No matter how many times she laid eyes on it, that cold, austere beauty never failed to stun her. As foolish as it was, Clarion yearned