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# ONE

Another Being falls as we're driving into Edinburgh. Not here – that would be lucky, and luck doesn't run in the Mackenzie family.

'Number eighty-five!' Rani shouts. 'Just landed two minutes ago!'

She leans between the front seats, waving her phone like a newsboy hawking the evening paper. On the screen, a slim copper-coloured woman lies slumped over a pile of broken wood and burst watermelons. Golden blood trickles out from under the debris, tracing shimmering lines in the dust.

'Where is that?' I ask.

Perry, our West Highland terrier, raises her head off my lap for a look, then gives a disinterested *ruff* and goes back to bird-watching through the car window.

'Malaysia again,' Rani says. 'Some market near Kuala Lumpur.'

At least the Falls have improved my sister's geography; she was still calling it 'Koala Lumper' last month. She taps the screen and a pixelated video stutters into action. The Being is only visible for a second before the crowd swoops. Tourists form a heaving scrum around the body; a woman

emerges red-faced and grinning, clutching a handful of feathers. My stomach churns. I've seen dozens of clips like this – everybody has, by now – but they still make me want to throw up.

Dad's head swings between the video and the rain-spattered windscreen. 'Is it badly damaged? Masculine or feminine?'

*It*. Always 'it', not *he* or *she*, and 'masculine' or 'feminine' to describe how they look – as if the Beings were a style of jeans, or a Spanish noun. The papers talk about them the same way; it's their way of making them seem less human. It's Dad's way of rationalizing his obsession with them.

'*She's* a woman, if that's what you mean,' I say. 'Besides, she's not just damaged; she's dead. No one could survive a fall that far.'

'We'll see.' Dad gives me one of those infuriatingly patronizing smiles that he does so well, and I have to physically bite my tongue to stop myself from snapping at him. Behind us, Rani keeps tapping through photos on Wingpin or 247being or one of the other hundred or so apps she's downloaded.

'This one looks young.' She nudges her glasses up her nose. 'Like, seventeen or eighteen.'

'You're judging by human standards though, pet,' Dad says. 'We don't know how time affects their bodies yet. It's possible that a Being who looks twenty in our terms could be a hundred, maybe even a thousand years old.'

He launches into yet another speech about yet another

theory and, yet again, I don't give a crap. Ever since the first Being fell almost eight months ago, our house has been like the Michael Mackenzie Centre for Really Boring Theological Research. I can't even remember the last time he asked if Rani had lunch money or if I'd done my homework. He's too busy cutting articles out of newspapers, sticking pins and Post-its on to maps, chatting with Wingdings – a not-so-polite term for angel chasers – in Germany and New Zealand and Japan.

'At the moment it's difficult due to the different chemical composition of their teeth, but scientists think they may be able to calculate their ages by the end of this year . . .'

He witters on and on, getting so caught up in his tales that he misses the change of the traffic lights and a pissed-off lady in a four-by-four beeps her horn at him. Rani nods and 'mmms' and 'uh-huhs' along. I'm pretty sure that even she, eleven-times winner of Daddy's Girl of the Year, can't *actually* be interested in the levels of linoleic acid in the Beings' fingernails, but she puts on a good act.

I stick my earphones in and gaze out of the window, nodding along to imaginary music. (My iPod ran out of battery just before we passed Pitlochry, but I've learned it's easier to pretend I can't hear Dad's ramblings.) Outside, the drizzly city streets pass by in a blur. Seagulls swoop across the pale grey sky on the hunt for chips. Perry whines and scratches at the door.

'Almost there, Per,' I murmur, stroking the white fur of her back. 'Just ten more minutes.'

I know how she feels. We've spent five hours in Dad's stuffy Renault Clio, stuck in traffic on the A9 from Inverness to Edinburgh. It's a shitty way to spend the summer holidays, but neither of us had any choice in the matter.

In hindsight, I should have known something was up when I woke up to the smell of pancakes last Saturday. It was the first time Dad had cooked in months; ever since the Falls started, we've lived on a diet of ready meals, cereal and takeaway pizzas. Just as Rani and I had finished drenching our plates in maple syrup, he gave a nervous cough.

'How would you two feel about going down to Edinburgh for a few weeks? I think . . .' He was trying to sound casual, but I could tell from his hesitation that I wasn't going to like what he had to say. 'I think I could catch a Being there.'

My food went cold as I listened, open-mouthed, to his plan. He'd done some 'research' (i.e., chatting with other Wingdings on CherubIM) and, based on the fact that south-east Scotland has had the highest number of Falls in the world, had 'come to the conclusion' (made a wild guess) that another one was due to land in Edinburgh 'within the next few weeks' (at some point in the future, or possibly never – he'd figure out the details later).

'Think about it, girls,' he said. 'We'd finally be able to find out where they're coming from, and why they're falling.'

I put up a fight. Dad pretended to listen, but when I

finally ran out of reasons why this was the stupidest idea since chocolate teapots, he just smiled and ruffled my hair.

'I know it's a long shot, Jaya,' he said, 'but I really need to do this.'

The car glides through a puddle, splashing the windows with murky rainwater. My phone buzzes. I know it won't be from Leah, but my heart leaps with hope all the same. Instead, I find Emma's name on the screen. *Look what sad sausages we are without you!* Attached is a photo of her and Sam pretending to cry, their frowns hidden behind curved hotdogs. The sky above them is bright blue, perfect weather for a barbecue. They're only two hundred miles away, but suddenly the space between here and home seems infinite.

I'm tapping out my reply when Rani pipes up with another update. My sister is on constant Being-watch. She could tell you when and where each one fell, what he or she looked like, sometimes even how much their blood and feathers sold for. Personally I think there's something kind of creepy about an eleven-year-old trawling the internet for news of dead bodies, but Dad finds it useful.

'Listen to this,' she says. '*Today's news means that seven Beings have now landed in Malaysia. The only other country to have hosted as many Falls is Scotland, also with seven; Russia has seen five, and Algeria four.*'

I twist in my seat to face Dad. 'What if you got it wrong? What if the next one falls in Malaysia? I mean, they've had just as many, so it's just as likely, right?' I kick

my right foot on to the dashboard, jab a toe at the sealskin-coloured sky. 'Maybe we should be on our way to Kuala Lumpur right now. At least it'd be sunny there.'

'Malaysia's a lot bigger than Scotland, Jaya,' Dad says, swatting my trainers away. 'Plus, the Falls over there have been scattered all around the country, whereas here they've had seven within thirty miles of the city. There's no comparison. If I'm going to catch one anywhere, it'll be in Edinburgh.'

I grit my teeth, trying to still the anger bubbling up inside me. He's so stupid. This whole 'plan' is so stupid. You can't catch a Being. You just can't. They fall at insane speeds. They've smashed through buildings, turned highways into craters. One caused a mini tidal wave when she landed in the South Pacific, and another accidentally killed a woman when he fell in a town square in Armenia. It's not a bloody *Looney Tunes* cartoon: you can't stick a trampoline under them and spring them back to safety.

Nobody knows when the next one will fall. Sometimes three will tumble down in one day, and sometimes weeks will go by before another appears. There are scientific and religious institutions pouring billions into working out a pattern, but they haven't even come close to finding one. It's not like Dad, former Sales & Marketing Manager for Tomlinson Cigarettes, now stay-at-home layabout, is going to be the one to crack the code.

He makes a right turn on to a brightly lit street of shops and restaurants. Outside Pizza Express, a man in a kilt and tin-foil wings is playing something that sounds

vaguely like Robbie Williams's 'Angels' on the bagpipes. Dad sings along, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. Rani joins in for the chorus. They belt it out together, carefree and off-key, the excitement crackling off them like static. A dash of pity simmers my anger. He really thinks he can do this.

He actually thinks he's going to catch an angel.

# TWO

The flat that Dad has rented is a dump. The kitchen is Barbie-sized, the bathroom walls are cloudy with damp, and the living-room carpet looks like somebody's gone all Jackson Pollock with a bottle of red wine. Behind the smell of chemical lemon cleaning products, there's a stubborn undercurrent of beer, weed and takeaway pizza.

'I rent it out to students during term time,' says Shona, our landlady for the next few weeks. 'Gives the place a youthful energy.'

She fixes me with a wide mulberry smile. She's white, fifty-something and looks just like an aubergine: skinny on top, round on the bottom and purple all over. Baggy violet trousers, an indigo blouse, hair the exact shade of Ribena. At first I thought it might be a cult uniform, but then she told me I had 'aggressive red tones in my aura', so I think she might just be a bit odd.

'I'm sure you'll be comfortable,' she says, as she leads us back to the living room. 'It's small, but the chi flows very well.'

'It's great,' Dad says. He hasn't noticed the scowl on my face, or that Rani has pulled the collar of her T-shirt over her nose to block out the smell seeping from the sofa.

‘Reminds me of my uni days.’

For Dad, this flat is yet more proof that his angel-chasing plan is destined to succeed. Just a few days ago, he was frantically searching hostels and campsites – with the festival a couple of weeks away, most accommodation in Edinburgh has been booked for months. Shona’s place was too, until one of the acrobats she’d rented it to broke his ankle tripping over a paving slab and the duo had to cancel.

‘And it’s just a few metres from St Giles’ Cathedral!’ he said as he eagerly sent off the deposit. ‘Being No. 8 fell there on New Year’s Day, remember? That has to be a sign!’

Now in the living room, he goes to the window and pushes it open. ‘You can see it from here! Look, Ran, see the scaffolding?’ He twists back to look at Shona, a stupid grin on his face. ‘If this doesn’t help my research, I don’t know what will.’

Shona nods gravely. ‘Aye, I find the atmosphere in this part of the city very vitalizing. It’s sure to inspire you.’ Her eyebrows – also purple – rise slightly. ‘So, is it just the three of you?’

I shoot her a dirty look. This again. I’d noticed a split-second of confusion in her eyes as she opened the door, wondering how my pale, blond father could have two brown-skinned daughters. It quickly faded as she worked it out, but now she’s looking for the missing part of the set. It happens a lot when we’re out with Dad, sometimes accompanied by a bunch of nosy questions. I’ve always

hated it when people do that. Since Mum's accident, though, it's felt a hundred times worse.

To my relief, Dad changes the subject without answering. Soon they're talking about his research, and the trip that Shona's taking to a silent retreat in Italy. I leave them to their small talk and wander off to the room that Rani and I will be sharing for the next few weeks: cucumber-green walls, grey metal bunk beds, three dried-up ferns in one corner. My heart sinks a second time as I dump my bag on the floor.

'Bagsy top bunk!'

Rani scrambles up the ladder and dives on to the bed, tossing her spindly legs into the air. She's barely hit the mattress before she whips out her phone again.

'Guess what? They think No. 85 could be the sister of the Being who fell in Greenland in April. Look, they're like twins!'

She holds out the phone to show me, but I swat it away and go to the window. I miss my room back home already. It's one of the few places in the world where I can escape the news, photos, adverts and non-stop mindless 24/7 chatter about the Beings. Not much chance of that here.

'No. 85 also landed at the same longitude as the Being in Laos.' Rani taps on another link, ignoring the fact that I'm ignoring her. 'Isn't that interesting?'

I bump my head against the windowpane. Raindrops race down the glass, sketching ghostly rivers over my vision. 'Fascinating, Ran. Utterly fascinating.'

It poured last time we came to Edinburgh too. That

was two years ago, during the Fringe, the huge arts and theatre festival that happens here every August. Never one to be put off by a 'bit of drizzle', Mum dragged us all over town to see the street artists: a cappella groups and contortionists and hip-hop dancers, acrobats and fire-eaters and a tightrope-walking violinist, all scattering flyers like wedding confetti. My hair went frizzy, Perry smelt like compost, and Rani kept moaning about her wet trainers, but it was sort of fun.

'A city of spirit and spectacle,' as Mum said. She was always saying stuff like that. Dad used to call her 'my poetess', then laugh when she'd go off on a rant about the term being sexist.

This time round, Edinburgh is full of fake angels. Performers dressed head to toe in gold are dotted around the street, re-enacting the Falls in stilted clockwork dances. Two little girls skip past Starbucks, plastic halos bobbing over their heads, and tour guides lead groups of Wingdings to and from the cathedral. The spectacle goes on, but the spirit has darkened: it's all just a way to squeeze money from dead Beings, and I hate it.

'Jaya!' Rani shouts suddenly. 'Jaya, look!'

I spin around. '*What*, Rani? What now?'

She points through the second window. I follow her stare – and my heart drops. Across the street, twenty, thirty, forty people are emerging on to the rooftops of the flats opposite ours. It's them. The Standing Fallen.

They look just like the chapters on the news: a mix of ages, all dressed in stained shirts, ragged jumpers, jeans

far too ripped to be fashionable. Most of the men have uncut beards, and the women's hair lies long and lank around greasy faces. One of the members, a short, squat man holding a loudspeaker, tiptoes across the ridge. He hops nimbly on to the chimney as the others inch towards the roof's edge, forming a line behind the rain gutter.

I've seen scenes like this on TV dozens of times, but it's different this close up. I'd imagined fear on their faces, panic in the air. The members slither a little as they creep over the wet tiles, but most of them don't look scared. Beneath the dirt, their expressions are cold and blank.

'Jaya!' Rani grips the edge of the bunk bed. 'They have *kids* with them!'

My mouth goes dry. She's right: there's boy of around thirteen up there, and a younger girl, maybe seven or eight. Unlike the adults, they're obviously terrified. The girl has her eyes squeezed tight shut, as if making a wish, while the boy stares at the crowd gathering seven storeys below. His legs are shaking so much I'm sure he'll slip. A small woman holds one of their hands in each of hers, but she doesn't comfort them. She doesn't even look at them.

'I'm going to get Dad.' Rani slides down and runs out of the room. The man by the chimneys switches his loudspeaker on. It gives a sickening squeal, but he doesn't flinch.

'Sinners.' His voice is loud but calm, more a statement than an accusation. 'For nearly eight months, angels have fallen from the skies. Not for millennia has the Creator sent so clear a sign of his wrath – but does Man repent?

Does he scrub his soul of spite and greed, devote himself to a higher cause? No. He picks like a vulture at the bodies of angels, hungry for naught but blood and gold.'

I tell myself to turn away, just like I do when they come on TV, but my body won't comply. Though their displays make my stomach churn and my head spin, there's something about the Standing Fallen that forces me to keep looking. I've watched and rewatched the videos. I know the speeches off by heart.

The man on the rooftop pauses for effect, just like all the leaders do. It's hard to tell how old he is. His beard hides one half of his face, and the other is coated in a thick layer of grime.

'We represent no one church, no one religion,' he says. 'We are only a reminder: a reminder of the evils of greed and godlessness, the unwavering arrogance of the human race. We are a reminder of your *sin*. No good awaits man on Earth now. Our only chance at redemption is to eschew earthly pleasures, to degrade our bodies as we have degraded this planet, to sacrifice our lives as so many have been sacrificed in the ruthless race for so-called progress . . . to repent and prove ourselves worthy of the freedom of the afterlife.'

Somewhere in the distance, a siren begins to wail. Someone on the street below is screaming. Tears are running down the little girl's face; the boy tries to talk to her, but the woman snaps at him and he shrinks back. The speaker carries on, seemingly unfazed by the ruckus he's creating.

‘We are the Standing Fallen.’ His voice swells with pride, though I’m sure it’s not supposed to. ‘As the Beings tumble, we take to the rooftops. We climb to remind you of the precipice upon which you teeter. We stand to remind you of how far you, too, could fall.’

In perfect unison, the followers place one foot on the rain gutter. My head spins. They won’t go through with it. The Standing Fallen have put on displays like this on Seoul skyscrapers and Caracas tower blocks; they even made it to the second floor of the Eiffel Tower back in April. They’ve tiptoed over cliffs and swung from scaffolding. They’ve threatened to jump countless times – but so far, they haven’t actually done it.

I know all that, but it doesn’t stop the sinking feeling in my stomach, or the pulse pounding in my ears –

The weightlessness in my legs –

The storm spinning in my head –

The last thing I see, before my eyes close and I hit the floor, is the boy on the roof bow his head and begin to pray.