

# Misty Falls



Joss Stirling

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of  
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

Copyright © Joss Stirling 2014

The moral rights of the author have been asserted  
Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,  
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate  
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction  
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,  
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-273735-9

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain

Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,  
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.  
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental  
regulations of the country of origin.

For my editor at OUP, Jasmine Richards.  
Without your enthusiasm for the  
Benedict boys, they would never  
have been published.

*Thank you.*



# Chapter 1

‘On the Misty scale of disasters, one to ten, where would you put it?’ Summer asked me.

I stared miserably at my two best friends as they clustered together on the screen of the laptop. Summer looked sympathetic, Angel amused.

‘It’s an eleven,’ I admitted.

‘Surely not?’ Summer twirled a lock of dark hair, dusting her cheek absent-mindedly as she reviewed my record. ‘Misty, it can’t be as bad as the time you told Jenny Watson that she was a lying cow with all the character appeal of a cow pat.’

‘And Misty was righteous to do so,’ said Angel firmly. ‘Jenny had split you up from Tom, Summer, so you had to agree with her.’ While giving the impression of being a fairylike waif, Angel had a surprisingly husky voice. It had shocked me when we met at our first savant summer camp together three years ago but, fortunately, she had forgiven me for declaring that before everyone and gone on to become a loyal friend.

Summer kept to her plan of making light of my most recent mishap. Being sweet-natured, she always wanted everyone to

feel better, which had made me even angrier that Jenny had picked on her. ‘OK, I agree that Jenny Watson is a no-good boyfriend-stealer but most of us don’t say this in front of an audience including her very influential school governor of a father at Speech Day. That has to be worse: Misty had to transfer to another school.’

‘I didn’t like that one anyway,’ I muttered. ‘They should have known better than to put me in front of a microphone.’ Jenny and her friends had mocked me unrelentingly after that incident and I was more than happy to leave.

‘So what could be worse than the Jenny Watson Misty moment?’

Time to confess. ‘Remember I told you I thought Sean in Year 13 was *so* hot?’

Angel bent closer to the screen. ‘We saw the prom photos and we agree. But you said you weren’t going to do anything. It’s not as if he’s a savant like you so he can’t be “the one”,’ she made quotation marks in the air, ‘and you said he was way out of your league in any case.’

I propped my forehead on my finger and thumb, elbow resting on the dressing table. ‘I know, I know. The ones I like always are out of my league.’

‘Don’t run yourself down, Misty. They would be lucky to be your boyfriend.’

I love my friends. ‘Thanks, Angel.’

‘So what happened?’ prompted Summer.

I sighed. I had to force myself to say the words aloud. ‘I went up to him yesterday to wish him a good summer—you know, that kind of thing.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘And it just popped out.’

‘What popped out?’ Angel had a cheeky twinkle to her eye as her gaze dropped to my shirt.

‘Nothing like that. No wardrobe malfunctions. Geez, remind me why I’m your friend again?’

‘Because you think I’m great.’

Summer elbowed her to let me finish. ‘Go on. You need to tell us so you can get past it.’

‘OK, OK. I intended to say—coolly—“Hey, Sean, have a great holiday,” but out came “You have the most gorgeous bum”.’

Summer clapped her hands to her cheeks. ‘You didn’t!’

‘I’m afraid I did.’

‘And what did he say?’ asked Angel.

‘He said: “Thank you for sharing that with me”, laughed and went off to tell his mates.’

‘The rat.’ Angel was trying not to smirk. She really didn’t understand what it was like to live with my gift.

‘I spent the rest of the day having boys come up to me to ask if I thought their bums were attractive too.’

Angel dipped off the screen. She was probably rolling around on the floor in a fit of giggles.

‘You poor thing,’ said Summer. At least one of my friends knew how to react appropriately to social death.

‘I can’t face them again. I’ll have to move schools.’

Summer sighed. ‘Misty, you can’t do that. You’ve been to three schools in the last five years already because you were bullied for being different. You’ve got to stick it out for Sixth Form. And just think, you’ve the whole of the summer for them to forget about it. They won’t remember in September.’

‘You sure?’

‘Of course, I’m sure.’ There was a faint tingle of a lie to her words as if she wasn’t entirely convinced but I let it pass. ‘Sean will have left, won’t he, as he’s done his A-levels, so you won’t have to see him or most of his friends.’

I brightened up at that thought. ‘You’re right. I’m getting panicked about nothing.’

‘You’ll be in South Africa for a month so you’ll have time to forget about it too. When you get back for camp, we can talk more.’

‘Thanks, Summer. You can tell Angel to stop laughing now.’

Angel came back on screen. ‘I wasn’t laughing.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘You can’t get away with lying to me.’

‘Sorry. I feel your pain.’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘And Sean does have a gorgeous bum.’

I smiled as I ended the call. ‘Ain’t that the truth, girl.’

The flight to Cape Town climbed towards the top of the display screen. Boarding gate was now listed. I had already said goodbye to my parents and my three sisters and two brothers a few minutes earlier—the little ones were too much of a handful to wait until I went through to departures. My Aunt Crystal had stayed with me to check I made the plane.

‘You’d best go through.’ Crystal bent down and kissed my cheek, her mop of curly dark-blonde hair tickling my face as it swung to envelop me. ‘Give my love to Opal, Milo, and the little ones, won’t you?’

‘Will do.’

Crystal squeezed my hands. ‘I’m so envious, Misty. You’ll be there to see Uriel track down his woman.’

I squeezed hers back. ‘It’ll be epic.’ I couldn’t wait to get away and put the embarrassing last few days at school behind me. We looked over to the two brothers, Uriel Benedict, my fellow traveller, and his younger brother, Xav, Crystal’s fiancé. They were standing close together, Xav displaying none of his usual teasing as he murmured encouragement. As two insanely good-looking guys, they attracted more than their fair share of admiring glances from the girls queuing at the check-in desks.



It had to be a relief for my amazing aunt that she matched Xav in the looks department, with her catwalk height and unusual features, dark brows and film-star mouth.

Crystal shook her head, an amused glint in her eyes. 'Why do they both act as if Uriel is going off to war?'

She was right: Uriel was running his hands through his golden-brown hair in a nervous gesture I'd not seen before as he was usually so calm and self-contained. Blessed with classic bone structure, he reminded me of St Michael, the warrior angel as depicted in a stained-glass window I'd seen in Italy, all competence and athletic goodness, dispatching dragons with one hand and justice with the other. He wasn't quite as tall as Xav but almost, so the pair of them stood out a head above the milling crowds pushing trolleys around the brotherly pep-talk on the concourse of Terminal Five.

'They're too macho to admit it, but it looks like Uriel is terrified and Xav is worried for him.'

Crystal laughed. 'You're right. Poor little scaredy big guys.'

'Have to say, it's a big deal heading off to meet your future partner. You did tell him enough to take him to her door?'

Putting her arm around my shoulder, Crystal steered me towards the security check. 'As much as I could without holding his hand all the way to the first face-to-face. My gift tells me she's in Cape Town. I can't get too exact from such a distance but I see white buildings—crowds of people. Opal is fairly sure that means one of the hospitals and she even has a shrewd idea which of the savants in that part of town might be the match. She's arranging a get-together so they can meet.'

I hadn't realized that preparations were so far advanced. 'Is she tipping off her target?'

'No, just in case she raises hopes that then get dashed. If she's wrong, I'll fly out next month and see if I can get a closer bead on Uri's girl.'

Of course, Crystal would come to the rescue if necessary. She would do anything for family and now Xav's six brothers were all included in the term. Crystal was only a couple of years older than me, making her more like a sister than an aunt, but she took her responsibilities seriously. My mum, Crystal's oldest sister, always said the baby in the family had been given the heaviest burden with her gift.

I brushed her arm. 'But you can't fly out for every soulfinder you locate or it would break the bank.' That was also something my mum said. Crystal had been busy since her gift was discovered in the autumn, helping family and friends find their savant counterpart. It was not a simple process: she could give a direction and a sense of place but people had the annoying habit of hiding out in big cities full of potential matches or they moved about, following a pattern that made perfect sense to them, no doubt, but to a soulseeker like Crystal was infuriating.

'You sound just like Topaz.' Crystal frowned slightly, thinking hard. 'I wish I could afford it but I don't believe it'll be necessary this time. The direction I've sensed has stayed pointing to South Africa. Uri would've gone sooner if he hadn't been locked into a work commitment but luckily she stayed put.'

I wondered what could be more important to Uriel than meeting his soulfinder but with a gap of twelve years between him and me it didn't seem my place to ask. I was still at school and he already had a doctorate from Denver University in the United States.

'It's a total bummer,' admitted Crystal, 'that I can't now go with him as Xav and I have to be in the US next week so we can hunt for a place to live in New York. He has to start at uni soon.' She pulled a face. 'And we're saving up to help Victor and Will. I've got a feeling Victor's one is going to be a really expensive hunt.' She looked a little harassed for a moment,

lining up all the tasks she had to do before the beginning of the university year. Then her face cleared. 'So it's down to you, Misty, to look after my brother-in-law-to-be.'

I was thrilled she thought me up to the job. She was one of the few in my family who didn't treat me like a screw-up. Mum and Dad had spent much of the last decade clearing up the messes I made at home and school with my blunt talk; it was a pleasant change to be trusted. 'No pressure then.'

She gave me a hug. 'No pressure. Enjoy your holiday.'

'It's going to be interesting, I know that much already.' I tried to lighten her mood. 'And I can't change your mind about telling me where my soulfinder is?'

She raised her eyes to the ceiling at my familiar pleading, hands on hips. 'No—and you know that I'm not lying so don't bother to argue. No soulfinders before you're eighteen. You tell your little brothers and sisters the same thing. Gale's already been nagging me. You all need to have a normal life until you join the rest of us in that stuff.'

'Aw, spoilsport!' I mock-pouted but I knew she was serious. She'd explained before that her gift of finding our counterparts came with a cost. Life could be cruel and not all matches would be successful. She firmly believed that the people she linked should be mature enough to cope with any disappointments or disasters. All of us savants, like Summer, Angel and I, are born with special mental powers, but we have to face up to the negatives about our gift as well as the benefits. Look at me: I'm a poster girl for the downside. I have a problem with the truth. Thanks to my savant gift, I can't get away from it. Best friend with dodgy taste appears before me in new purchase to ask my opinion. She circles with a pleased smile just waiting for me to bolster her self-esteem. I line up my white lie: *Hey, don't you look great!* but, oops, out pops *Sorry, but you look fat in that!* It is as though I have Google translate in my brain: feed in a fib and

it gets straightened out into the unvarnished truth. Worse still, if I lose control, it can be infectious; people end up telling the truth around me, even when they don't intend to do so.

My friends have to be very understanding.

Savants come in all shapes and sizes. Nearly all of us are telepathic and can move things with our mind. On top of that, some get awesome gifts. Uriel can sense the events of the past attached to place, object, or person. My mum can see through solid objects when she concentrates. It makes being a teenager in her house particularly difficult, trust me. Her brother, my uncle Peter, can change the weather. Even Gran can make you fall asleep, which means she is much in demand as a babysitter.

But best of all is Crystal, as her ability allows her to locate our savant counterpart, our soulfinder, and so she can solve the central problem of our lives. You see, when one of us savants is conceived, somewhere on the globe the person who is to be our other half in a very real sense also starts life. They have half our gifts and together we can be even more than we can be apart. So, roughly nine months later, two people destined to be drawn to each other are born. But have you seen how big the world is? Talk about needle-in-haystack! That's why Crystal is so special: she can send you right to the doorstep of your destiny. What she can't guarantee is the reception. Your soulfinder might fall headlong in love with you but it is also possible their emotions will be violently against you, depending on how their experience has shaped them. Savants have a huge capacity for feeling for their soulfinder but whether they are filled by love or hate is beyond Crystal's control. When I was little, I concentrated more on the fairy-tale potential of the prince in my gran's tales of soulfinders, but now I realized that those tales contained an equal number of trolls and witches so, for all my testing of Crystal's red line, I was in no rush to meet mine.

For the hundredth time, Uriel checked his boarding pass

and ticket were in his carry-on bag. He knew that this gamble was what was in store for him at the other end of the plane journey. At twenty-eight, he was more than ready to meet his soulfinder. No doubt he was praying it would prove to be as successful a match as those of his own parents and his four brothers who had found their girls. Among the Benedicts, only Uriel, Will, and Victor remained unattached.

I could see Crystal was biting her lip as she watched Uriel. I gave her a hug, which was harder than it sounds as she is almost six feet and I'm an ordinary five foot four.

'Not your fault if it goes wrong,' I whispered as I pulled her ear level with my mouth, 'but you can claim the credit if it turns out well.'

She chuckled as I hoped. 'Good philosophy.' She straightened up and gave an impressive whistle. 'Hey, cupcake, let your brother go or he'll miss his plane!'

Xav looked across at us, his eyes alive with laughter. Next to the fair St Michael Uriel, Xav was more a dark-haired Lucifer, or, changing mythologies, Loki with a wicked twinkle. 'OK, Beauty, message received loud and clear.'

Uriel picked up his carry-on bag and squared his shoulders for what came next. 'Got everything, Misty? Passport? Boarding pass?'

I opened my mouth to make a joke but Crystal nudged me before I could protest at his mother-hen act. 'It's doing him good to worry about someone else. Takes his mind off it.'

I smiled at Uriel sweetly. 'Yep. All present and correct.'

Xav gave me a hug (my heart went pitter-pat as he was so swoon-worthy) and shepherded me to the barrier with a brotherly hand on the shoulder. What was it about these Benedict boys that made them want to order us around? I rolled my eyes at Crystal but she just grinned. I guess she'd come to like that side in her man.

Just after I had waved a final time to Crystal and Xav, the first Misty moment of the trip struck.

‘Miss, I’m afraid you can’t take liquids over a hundred millilitres in your hand luggage.’

I looked up at the security guard who had unzipped my bag. There at the top were all the bottles I had intended to transfer to my suitcase but forgotten in the excitement of the morning.

‘Oh, sorry. I am such a scatterbrain.’

I could feel Uriel beside me frown. He must have been thinking that I was a total baby not to know about the restrictions.

‘You’ll have to leave them here.’ The guard took them out one by one.

I watched sadly as my curl-taming lotion, favourite shampoo and conditioner were consigned to a bin. He looked closely at the suntan lotion before deciding that too infringed the rules and chucked it in the rubbish.

‘There you are. Ready to fly.’ The guard passed over my now much lighter bag.

Uriel glanced at his watch. ‘I’m afraid we’ll have to run, Misty. No time to replace your things at the shops.’

‘It’s OK. My fault.’

‘Yes, it was.’ Uriel looked disconcerted. He had been intending to say something kind and consoling but instead had blurted out the truth. My grip on my gift had to have slipped. Again.

‘That was me,’ I muttered, cheeks burning. ‘My control is a bit iffy.’

He gave a funny-sounding laugh. ‘Yes, Xav warned me about that. I’ll have to take care around you, won’t I?’

Behind us I could hear a woman confessing, to her own great surprise, that she was attempting to smuggle drugs through security. Policemen were descending. Uriel arched a brow. I nodded.

‘Maybe I should leave you here. They wouldn’t need a scanner.’ Uriel took my bag and added it to his. The loudspeaker announced that our plane was boarding. Uriel handed me the tickets to hold. ‘Come on. I don’t want to be late for my future.’

On the flight, I watched crummy films while Uriel worked quietly away on his laptop. We had excellent at seat service thanks to his all-round hunkiness; the cabin attendants couldn’t do enough for him and I was the happy recipient of the overflow of their goodwill.

I nudged him after we had yet another refill. ‘It’s not fair, you know.’

He looked up from his screen. ‘What’s not fair?’

‘You good-looking people. You don’t realize what it is like to be the rest of us.’

He opened his mouth, then paused, trying to sense if my gift was under wraps or roaming free.

‘It’s OK. You can lie if you want. It’s in here.’ I tapped my head.

‘I wasn’t going to lie exactly.’

‘But . . . ?’

‘I was going to say that I didn’t notice, but I do. And it’s stupid.’ A little huff fluttered his golden-brown fringe. ‘I don’t see myself like that. It’s what’s inside that counts.’

‘Yeah, but us moths are attracted to flame and you and your brothers are like candles.’

He grinned. ‘Was that an example of your inability to lie?’

‘I suppose, yes. I’m blunter than most people as I can’t be any other way. I tell it how it is.’

‘Then let me say that no one in your family is exactly homely.’

‘Homely? Is that like American for butt ugly?’

His eyes twinkled. 'A better translation would be plain. Crystal is stunning.'

'Yes, she is.'

'Diamond is beautiful.' Diamond, the next sister up in age from Crystal, had married the oldest Benedict brother, Trace. She was the epitome of elegance, sleek and coordinated.

'I know.'

'And you are very cute too.' He winked.

I checked my lie detector but nothing he said had set my teeth on edge, the usual sign of a fib. Uriel thought I was cute? Aw! I honestly believed myself to be a bit of a mess in the looks department. I had inherited the same wildly frizzy hair as Crystal but several shades paler. Without my hair lotion I would be wandering round Cape Town looking like an alpaca in need of a shearing. I had pale skin and freckles, weird long blonde eyelashes and eyes that had settled on an unremarkable grey. I should not press him for any more compliments as he would have reached the end of the road of his honest opinions.

'So what are you working on?' I asked in a none-too-subtle change of subject.

Brought back to his task, his smile dimmed. 'Please don't read the screen.'

'Sorry.'

He could tell from my tone that I was feeling shut out. 'It's nothing to do with the trip and it's not that I don't want to tell you; it's more that I can't.'

'I don't get it.'

He sighed. 'You know I work in forensics?'

'Yes, Crystal mentioned it. You're doing post-doctoral studies, she said.'

'I undertake investigations for the American authorities into crimes that seem to have some link to the savant community. Victor brings me in when he needs me.'



Victor, Uriel's younger brother, worked for the FBI.

'Oh, I see. So it's like a state secret or something?'

'More like it's too grim for you to see. Post-mortems aren't exactly vacation reading.' He closed down that document and called up a map. There were red dots scattered over the globe, clustered in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and several countries in Europe. 'I can tell you, though, that I'm looking into some connected deaths.' He angled the screen for me to see. 'Twelve we know of so far—a serial killer who preys on the savant community. We're searching for a way to stop there being another victim. My job is to tug the thread loose that will trap our murderer.' He rubbed his hands over his face. 'I'm a little obsessed with it—haven't been able to put it aside since the first murder last year.'

My truth power was perhaps encouraging him to confess more than he normally would, or maybe he just needed to offload, but it gave me an insight into what the last few months had been like for him.

'Twelve—that's terrible!' I suddenly wished I wasn't so far from the ones I loved. I'd have to text them on arrival to take special care.

Uriel's expression was really grim. 'Each one an unspeakable loss for the family involved. I can't bear the idea that there will be more.'

'And that's what's kept you from flying off to South Africa?'

He gave a hollow laugh. 'Yeah. I wanted to solve the case so it didn't tarnish this moment. Victor finally told me it was time to take a break. He thinks I'll see things more clearly once I get the soulfinder business over with.'

I lifted an eyebrow. 'Business?'

He shook his head at his own clumsy phrasing. 'I hope not. Pleasure: I hope it is going to be a hundred per cent pleasure.'

'Don't worry, I'll be there to help.' I crossed my fingers that

he hadn't heard too much about my Misty moments or he'd be even more worried.

He snapped his computer screen closed. 'Thank you. Now, you've reminded me that this isn't supposed to be work. I should arrive with something other than murder on my brain, agreed?'

I nodded.

'Game of cards?' He pulled a pack out of his pocket. 'What do you want to play?'

'Go Fish?'

His smile was wry. 'How appropriate.'

My Auntie Opal was waiting in arrivals with my three cousins, Willow, Hazel and the toddler, Brand. Willow and Hazel had crayoned a banner for us, an amazing drawing of a lion roaring a welcome. Both had inherited a savant gift for capturing images in all sorts of forms—for Willow it was drawing, for Hazel sculpture in any material—paper, clay, cardboard, wood. What they saw they could reproduce with amazing accuracy and artistic flair. I doubt anyone on the concourse suspected that the excitable five- and seven-year-olds were responsible for making the banner unaided. I had last seen them at Diamond and Trace's wedding in Venice in December where they had run wild with my younger sisters, Gale, Peace, and Felicity only pausing to pretend to be angelic bridesmaids for an hour. Not that anyone in the family was fooled.

'Misty! Misty!' shouted Willow as if I couldn't see the party waiting for us.

I waved, only to be taken aback by a lion's roar that came, no, surely not, from Brand? The huge noise from a tiny boy caught many by surprise. I saw the hordes of taxi drivers looking nervously around in case a wild creature was prowling the

concourse. My aunt went into a flurry of distraction activity and handed Brand a drink to prevent a repeat.

'Sorry about that. His gift has begun to show,' she said as she kissed me and then hugged Uriel.

'What kind of gift is that?' I asked, eyeing with suspicion the squirming bundle of black-haired toddler. 'Does he turn into a lion or something?'

'Not as bad as that.' Opal started with the pushchair for the car park, expecting us all to follow. She always acted like mother duck, no matter the age of her ducklings. 'He's a natural mimic. It might even be a gift for animal languages, we're not quite sure.'

I sensed there was more to tell. 'But?'

'He seems to have long conversations with our dog.' She wrinkled her brow. 'In fact, I'm not sure if Brand doesn't think he is a puppy, as he likes playing fetch for hours.'

'It's nice that he likes playing with the dog,' said Uriel kindly, catching the bottle the little boy had dropped as he bobbed up and down in his seat.

'No, I meant Brand likes us to throw *him* a stick; the dog doesn't get a look in. And he gnaws things, trouser legs mostly.'

I laughed as Willow and Hazel giggled. Uriel handed him back his bottle and Brand gave a bright yip, which suggested he was following more of the conversation than a two-year-old could usually be expected to understand. He promptly dropped his drink again.

Uriel snatched it up before it hit the tarmac. 'I think I'm being taken for a ride. He's playing bottle-fetch.'

'Welcome to my family,' I said to Uriel. 'We are all certifiable.'

He offered his hands to the girls to hold for crossing the road. 'Makes me feel right at home.'

## Chapter 2

After a shower and time to unpack, we convened in the kitchen for our council of war. My family home back in the UK was in a leafy suburb of London; Opal's house was in a similar area in Cape Town: the Zwaanswyck district, an affluent neighbourhood with fabulous houses and gardens, south of the centre. Cape Town has one of the world's best climates so everything looked fresh and green, except for the rocky flanks of Table Mountain that dominated the skyline. A cloud-cloth covered the top, formed as the moist sea air bumped into Africa. Her husband and soulfinder, Milo Carr, worked as a dental surgeon; Opal was a lawyer but was taking a career break to be with the children. Their house was a lovely place to spend a holiday: a long low building with sprawling lawns and a circular pool, though during the cooler and wetter winter days, only the hardiest swimmer would take a dip. That would be me. Coming from England, I was going to take advantage of the slightest glimpse of sunshine and had laid out my bikini in case it warmed up later.

But first things first: Uriel's big moment.

Opal put coffee cups on the kitchen table in front of us and

then carried over a plate of homemade biscuits. Through the picture window behind her I could see the girls playing on the swing hanging from the silver oak at the far end of the lawn; Brand was sitting in a playpen having an earnest conversation with Nutty, the family's chocolate Labrador. The girls' pictures and models decorated every spare inch of the kitchen cabinets: a random collection of unicorns, family faces, butterflies, and safari animals. Pot plants exploded in happy blossom on every spare ledge and windowsill. I thought the whole place had a friendly messiness to it, which had to be Milo's relaxing effect on my aunt as she was famous among her brothers and sisters for being a neat freak, a good practical example of soulfinders balancing out each other's gifts.

I picked up a biscuit and took a bite. 'Hmm-hmm—chocolate chip! You made these?'

Opal finally took a seat, hauling a large file with her, which wafted the crumbs as she dropped it down in front of Uriel. The surface of his coffee ringed from the centre out in the shockwave. 'Hardly, Misty. I don't have time to cook. I've been too busy with this. Willow made the cookies with her dad last night.'

'Compliments to the chefs,' said Uriel. He tapped the file. 'What's this?'

'My research.' Opal took a sip of coffee. 'On your potential soulfinder—I've trawled through those with the right age who fitted Crystal's hints. They're only the ones known to the Savant Net but I had to start somewhere. To save you time, I've narrowed it down to one front-runner.' She frowned slightly, reviewing her material. 'Of course, we can't rule out that there is another candidate out there who doesn't know about us.'

'You are very thorough.'

'Legal training.' Opal shrugged as if that explained it. She also had a savant gift for restoration, returning things to their

original condition, which went well with her compulsion to see to the detail. She would have been knockout as a picture restorer but had surprised the family by choosing law. She explained that she preferred restoring justice to lives than flecks of paint on old masters. 'My favourite is the one at the top; there isn't really anyone else in her league of suitability. You'll see I've gathered a lot of information on her, educational background and professional qualifications. She works at the Groote Schuur Hospital in the paediatric department. I got to know her a little when she treated Brand for a bad chest infection.'

Normally so controlled, Uriel's hand was shaking very slightly as he opened the file to the first photo. 'Francie Coetzee.' He studied the picture, his finger tracing the edge, then put it down, expression puzzled. 'Strange, I was expecting something, I don't know, *more* when I saw her.'

Opal gave him an understanding smile. 'It isn't always a bolt of lightning, Uriel. Milo and I weren't sure until we connected telepathically.'

'And then?' I asked, curious to hear this part of the story.

She grinned. 'Zap!' We laughed as she blushed.

'Well done, Uncle Milo!'

'Yes, well.' Opal cleared her throat, too late to hide her embarrassment at letting that out. 'I've asked Francie if I can meet up at the hospital café after her shift. I mentioned I was bringing savant guests who were visiting Cape Town for the first time.'

'What's she expecting from us?' Uriel asked.

'I said that Milo and I were very boring hosts with the kids limiting our partying and wondered if she could introduce you to some younger locals. She's got a group together for tomorrow night. Is that soon enough for you?'

He swallowed. 'Yes.'

Opal patted his hand. 'Look through the file. She's a lovely girl, brilliant at her job.'

Uriel nodded, but I could tell he was disappointed. It was probably just jet lag so I told him so.

'You're right. I should sleep on it.' He picked up the file. 'Is it OK if I take this back to my room?'

'Absolutely. I'll let you know when it's time for lunch.' Opal whisked some crumbs into her palm in a nervous tidying gesture.

We waited for him to leave the room before letting our eyes meet.

'Oh dear,' said Opal. 'Do you think I should phone Crystal?'

'Let's not panic, auntie. It's just the first candidate.'

'I think I convinced myself I'd done a good job finding the right woman but now I'm not sure.'

Brand started whimpering because Nutty had left him to join the girls. Opal used her telekinetic powers to make his teddy bear do a jig in front of him. He switched to a throaty chuckle.

'He's gorgeous,' I said. 'So sweet. He is going to have all the little girls in kindergarten after him.'

'That's savant boys for you. Heartbreakers, all of them. I just hope Francie is tough enough to take it tomorrow. She must have suspected I was up to something.'

'Why?'

'Her gift is to read minds. That's why she's so good at what she does: she can pick out the thoughts of even the most confused little person who doesn't understand what's making them feel bad. I'm afraid she'll be expecting something momentous to happen.'

I felt a moment of *déjà vu*. Hadn't I had a similar conversation with Crystal? The women in my family all seemed to feel

they were responsible for everything. ‘It’s not your fault, aun-  
tie. You’ve done your best. Anyway, I’ll be there to help you  
both find out the truth.’

Uriel pulled out all the stops for his first encounter with  
his potential match; he emerged from his bedroom shaved,  
groomed and dressed in a carefully picked green T-shirt  
with a tree on the front and faded jeans that showcased his  
yummy golden skin and cyclist’s lean fitness. I emerged from  
my room looking like I’d had a close encounter with a hedge  
trimmer. I’d made the mistake of washing my hair before  
going to bed, forgetting that my curl-taming lotion was back  
in a Heathrow bin.

I held up my hand as Uriel and Opal caught a glimpse of  
me. ‘Don’t. I know.’

Hazel cartwheeled into the kitchen. ‘Hey, Misty, what’s  
happened to your hair? You look funny.’

Just then I felt a hot resentment of Hazel’s neat black plaits.  
Opal had escaped the plague of the frizzy hair that had been  
inherited by some members of our family and so her children  
were free of the jinx.

‘I do not look funny, Hazel. I’m just channelling my inner  
alpaca.’

Brand made a sound like a high-pitched donkey bray.

‘What was that?’ I asked.

‘I think he’s imitating the alpaca alarm call,’ said Uriel,  
bending down by the little guy. ‘That’s so cool. Where did you  
learn that?’

Brand howled like a wolf.

‘Discovery Channel,’ said Opal. ‘He gets Nutty to fetch  
him the remote when my back’s turned. He loves nature  
programmes. And you wonder why I’ve not yet gone back to



work? Think what he would do at nursery.’ She laughed and shook her head. ‘Milo, we’re leaving!’

Uncle Milo came in from the garden, Willow riding piggy-back. A short, rounded man with a high forehead, Opal’s soul-finder was built for comfort rather than speed. He had a gift for making things grow and bloom so was usually very restful to be around. But not today. Instead of calming with wise words, he looked anxious. ‘I hope it goes well, Uriel. We’ll be rooting for you.’ He reached out and shook hands with his American guest. Here was another one treating it like a major battle.

‘OK, guys, let’s go then.’ I headed for the door before Uriel got too spooked.

Mercifully, the drive to the hospital did not take long. Opal swung into a bay in the visitors’ car park and we got out onto the damp tarmac. The evening was turning sunny after the earlier rain showers; long shadows stretched out before us so we looked like an alien landing party. Nudging Uriel, I put my fingers by my ears and wagged to make antennae, hoping to make him laugh.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ Opal asked, locking the car with a click of the key fob.

Normal people would make up a lie at this point, something about massaging their temples, but I can’t. ‘Making a Martian?’ It came out with a question mark as I realized how stupid it sounded.

‘If you can’t take this seriously, Misty, perhaps you’d better stay in the car.’ Her tone was more irritated than justified by my goofing around; nerves were getting to her too.

Uriel smiled at me. ‘She’s fine, Opal. She’s making me relax. I feel a little fish-out-of-water. You know, Misty, you remind me of Xav—in a good way.’ He slung an arm around my shoulders and we walked together to meet his destiny. ‘He’s our family clown.’

We sat with our drinks around a mosaic-patterned table near the door to the café. Coffee beans fought with the anti-septic smell of the hospital foyer—caffeine just winning. I stirred my raspberry frappuccino, enjoying the marbling effect through the clear glass. Opal kept checking her watch every minute.

‘She’s late.’

‘I imagine that she can’t just down tools at the end of her shift doing what she does,’ Uriel said quietly. His leg under the table was jiggling nervously. I had to do something to make him relax or this would be one awkward first-day-of-the-rest-of-their-lives.

‘OK, Uriel, if you could be an animal other than a human, which one would you pick?’ My mind was still pondering that alpaca thing so this was the first question that came to mind. I liked ‘what if?’ conversations as they didn’t involve lies and there was nothing to set my teeth on edge.

‘Misty.’ Opal sounded so like my mother it was uncanny.

‘No, it’s all right. She’s attempting to distract me while we wait.’ At least Uriel understood me.

My aunt gave a funny little snort. I tabbed her as a show pony tossing its mane in displeasure.

‘I’ll start. I always think I’d want to be a dolphin,’ I confessed. ‘Fabulous swimming ability combined with huge smile: what’s not to like?’

A woman approached from behind Uriel, stethoscope stuffed into one pocket. Francie: it had to be. Petite, with a short brunette bob framing an elfin face, she struck me as appearing too young for the doctor’s coat, reminding me of Peace and Felicity when I caught them tottering about in our mum’s high heels. Opal’s face lit up on Francie’s arrival but Uriel had not yet noticed. Francie paused, not wanting to interrupt as Uriel had already started speaking.

‘If I were an animal I’d be a . . .’ He rubbed his chest then leaned forward as an idea struck. ‘Yeah, I’d be a condor. Imagine flying above the Andes. Amazing.’ He stretched out his arms.

‘Yes, that would be amazing,’ said Francie.

Uriel leapt to his feet, the chair legs scraping on the floor with a horrid grating sound. If he had been a condor he would have squawked in surprise and shed a few feathers.

‘Hello there. I’m Francie Coetzee.’ She shook hands with Uriel in a matter-of-fact manner. ‘I guess you must be Uriel. Nice to see you again, Opal. And this has to be your niece; Misty, isn’t it?’ She laughed. ‘That sounds odd on a sunny day.’

‘Yes, I get that a lot.’

‘Sorry, I guess you do. Welcome to Cape Town.’ She slid out of her white coat and folded it over the back of a chair. ‘Can I get you anything?’

‘We’re good, thanks.’ Uriel gestured to the round of barely touched drinks.

‘I’ll be back in a second.’ She went over to the counter to order a coffee.

I had tried not to be nervous for Uriel’s sake but I couldn’t contain my excitement any longer. ‘Well?’

Uriel’s eyes followed Francie as she chatted with the barista. ‘I don’t know. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be feeling.’

Opal did not look happy; she had really thought she had cracked the case. ‘Please give it a chance. She’s a perfect match in age, Uriel.’

‘It’s not that I’m not grateful, Opal, for all your work. She’s pretty, and talented, but she doesn’t seem to stand out from the crowd for me—and my brothers said that was the first thing they noticed about their partners.’

‘Wait till she comes back and try telepathy.’ I shifted in my seat, ill at ease with the tension and Uriel’s disappointment. I

hadn't imagined the moment like this: I'd expected zap and we were getting zilch. Were we going to have to call in Crystal after all? I'd promised I'd sort it out for her. I was letting her down.

A man sitting across from us, who had been peacefully sharing a sandwich with a heavily pregnant woman, suddenly jumped up and thumped the table. The mum-to-be stared at him in shock. 'What do you mean: it's not my baby?'

'Did I say that?'

'Yes, you did!'

'I was going to tell you—eventually.'

The man slapped the car keys on the table and walked out. 'I'll catch a bus home.'

'Mason, Mason!' She scooped up the keys and hurried after him. 'I'm sorry!'

'I don't know how you can say that!' exclaimed a nurse who was passing with two friends. 'You always said you liked Benjamin. He is not a creep.'

I'd let go of the barrier I put around my gift.

Opal buried her head in her hands, knowing what was going on. I felt frantic. It is much easier to lose control than regain it after I've reached a certain point. Picture a game of spillikins: simple to drop them; next to impossible to pick them up without making others wobble. 'Do something,' she pleaded.

'I am, I am.' I tried to pull back the sticks of truth-telling that had escaped from me. My heart was pounding. I had to do this before Francie got back but she was already on her way.

'I hate my job,' growled the waiter to a surprised woman who had asked him to wipe the table. He wore a badge that declared him 'Happy to help'.

'Why are you working here then if it's too much trouble to please a customer?'

He opened his mouth fully intending to apologize for his

lapse in manners but out came: ‘Customers like you are always complaining. I can’t stand you moaners.’

Francie came back bearing a frothy latte. ‘There: I deserve this after a day of pain-in-the-neck consultants.’ She frowned. ‘Did I just say that out loud?’

‘I’m afraid so.’ Uriel was now looking grimly amused. ‘Misty here is having one of her moments.’

Francie turned her attention to me. If she could read minds she had to know mine was shouting ‘Help!’ and ‘Sorry, everyone!’

‘She has a truth gift?’

‘Curse,’ I muttered.

‘And she lost control because she was . . . ’ Francie’s eyes flicked to Uriel, ‘worried that you might not be my soulfinder after all? Opal, what have you been scheming behind my back?’

Opal couldn’t duck this with a fib as she might under normal circumstances. ‘I wanted Uriel to meet you as we think there’s a possibility of a match. A strong likelihood. Your dates of birth are close and a soulseeker had a lead for him that mentioned a white building in Cape Town. I immediately thought of the hospital.’

Francie turned back to Uriel. ‘I’m sorry. Not that you aren’t a gorgeous man but there’s no chance, even with a soulseeker tip-off.’

Uriel blinked at her strong rejection. ‘Why? Shouldn’t we at least check with telepathy?’

She patted his hand. ‘Trust me, I know.’

‘How do you know? Have you located your soulfinder?’

‘No.’

‘Then why?’

She took a sip of coffee, eyes sparkling over the rim of her tall glass. ‘My soulfinder, when I meet her, is not likely to look like a GQ model.’

Oops: seems as if Opal's file missed out some essential facts about Francie.

I have never seen Uriel blush so red before.

'Awkward,' I whispered.

'I apologize for wasting your time,' he said stiffly.

'No worries. And I don't think you have wasted a second of my time. Thank you for thinking of me. I'm flattered.' She sipped her coffee, her gaze sweeping Uriel speculatively. 'You may not be my match but I'm thinking it might be a good idea to introduce you to my twin sister.'

'Twin?' Uriel looked like he had been on the receiving end of a second sucker punch. Good job he was sitting down.

'Yes, she's called Tarryn. I can assure you that you won't be wasted on her.'

I couldn't help myself: I started to giggle. The threads of control I had gathered scattered to the four winds again. Opal was going to be so embarrassed she had landed Uriel in this situation.

'You have a twin?' Opal looked horrified. 'How can I have missed that?'

'Because she keeps a low profile in savant circles—doesn't take part in the Net. She finds her gift . . . unpleasant and tries to keep it quiet.' Francie nudged me. 'As much as I like to hear you laugh, can you do us all a favour, Misty, and get a grip before you're responsible for the sacking of several employees round here?'

'I think I'd best leave. I'll see . . . ' I hiccupped. 'I'll see you at the car.'

I had myself back under control by the time Uriel, Opal, and Francie approached the Volvo.

'Everything OK?' I asked.

‘Strangely, as soon as you left, things returned to normal,’ Francie said dryly.

‘Sorry about that.’

‘Are you still ready to come meet my sister? When Opal asked me to introduce you to younger people, I planned to take you to a barbecue Tarryn is holding tonight for some of her pupils. They’re your age, Misty, so I’d thought it would be more fun for you than hanging out with my doctor friends.’

I could hear that Francie was having doubts about launching me on her sister’s social event, especially as Tarryn could be ‘the one’ (second attempt). I decided it had to be Uriel’s call.

‘Do you want me there?’ *Don’t be hurt if he sends you home*, I told myself. I would be, of course, but I’d try really hard not to show it.

He took a moment to reply, crafting the most diplomatic answer he could manage, knowing I’d sense if he were lying. ‘I’m prepared to take the risk. But do you think, you could, you know, keep a grip on your gift, Misty?’

I drew a cross over my heart. ‘I promise. I’ll give it my best shot.’

‘That’s settled then. My car’s just over there.’ Francie waved to Opal. ‘I’ll bring them back to yours later. Say hi to Brand from me.’

I could tell my aunt would’ve liked to stay for the next stage in the hunt but she had promised to be back for the children’s bedtime.

‘Good luck!’ Opal called as she got into her car.

‘Tarryn’s expecting us.’ Francie led us over to a white BMW convertible. ‘Most of the people at the party have nothing to do with us savants so if it happens,’ she looked sideways at Uriel, ‘can you find a private spot? I’ve not given her any warning.’

'I've no problem with that,' said Uriel, his lips curving in a smile that suggested he was giving plenty of thought to what use he might put privacy with a newly discovered soulfinder. After the dent to his confidence that meeting Francie must have made, this guy bounced back quickly.

'Feeling good about this one?' I asked softly.

'Strangely, yeah, though you'd think I'd learn from what happened earlier not to expect plain sailing. Tarryn. I love the name already.'

I patted his shoulder. 'Great.'

Tarryn lived in a house in the Rondebosch suburb of Cape Town, not far from the hospital. Set in the grounds of the school where Tarryn worked, it was a sweet little bungalow with a covered porch that ran the length of the building, surrounded by a garden that needed no attention from Uncle Milo to make it flourish. Beyond the fence, the lushness continued as there were acres of playing fields, white uprights of rugby posts, fluttering nets of football goals, a cricket pavilion. The whole school setup had the air of privilege and wealth.

As we drove through the gates, I could see that the party was already under way. The guests seemed to be predominantly boys dressed in white shirts and blue trousers or shorts. I noted the white school buildings further up the drive. Maybe Crystal had got that detail right after all?

'Let me guess: this is a private school for boys,' I said, my unease growing. I had imagined that when Francie said 'people my own age' she had meant girls. I never did well with boys. Never. I had the social grace of a giraffe on an ice rink.

'Yes, of course. They're lovely boys. So mature for their age.'

And I was the kind of girl who made Martian antennae and had fuzball hair. I should've taken my chance and gone home with Opal. Francie smiled at me in the driver's mirror as if she heard my doubts.



‘Can you see her?’ Of course, Uriel’s thoughts were traveling a totally different path from mine.

I was here for him, I reminded myself. This wasn’t about me.

Francie parked in front of the bungalow, got out and waved at a woman hovering by the barbecue. An older man in a chef’s hat was wielding a pair of tongs as he turned the burgers.

‘Great, you made it!’ Francie’s sister left the grill to greet us properly.

‘Oh my God,’ said Uriel under his breath.

Tarryn certainly deserved such awe: she was so pretty. Long tanned legs well framed by her navy shorts, ballerina poise, swirls of brunette hair: I wondered how any boy in her class was ever able to concentrate. Perhaps her most striking feature, though, was her eyes: huge brown ones with long dark lashes. Something clicked inside me—and I guess Uriel was experiencing the same a hundredfold. I could tell she would be right with Uriel in a way that went beyond their surface good looks. For me, it was like the feeling I get when hearing someone speak the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Tarryn’s footsteps faltered. ‘Francie, what’s going on?’

Her sister looked wryly amused. ‘Why don’t you tell me?’ She folded her arms and stood back so the next move could be theirs.

‘Tarryn Coetzee, I’m Uriel Benedict, your soulfinder.’ He held out a hand but I could see the sheen of tears in his eyes.

‘Yes!’ I punched the air.

Tarryn reached out her hand letting him enfold her palm in his. The poor woman looked as though she’d been hit over the head by a blunt instrument, such was her shock. He pulled her closer so he could hold her, offering comfort until she had a chance to find her balance. Their conversation was now going on telepathically. They looked so perfect, arms looped round

each other's waists, bodies set slightly apart, heads together so their silhouette was naturally heart-shaped.

'Come on, Misty. We'd better leave them alone. Let me introduce you to some of the other people here.' Francie took my elbow.

'You knew, didn't you?'

'Let's just say I had a very good feeling about him as soon as I saw him. My twin and I aren't identical but I can sense her emotions from time to time and he had something like that about him.'

I glanced back. Uriel was now leading Tarryn further down the garden to where the shrubbery would hide them from the other guests.

'Fast worker,' I murmured.

'But you're not really surprised.' Francie must have picked that out of my thoughts.

'You should see the rest of his brothers. Runs in the family.' I just wished there would be someone like a Benedict for me when it came time to meet my soulfinder.