

Chapter One Thunderbolt

The day Aura's invisible zebra Harold disappeared, her new best-friend-to-be arrived on a thunderbolt. Aura didn't know it when she got home from school that afternoon. The coming storm would change her life.

Aura Corinne Speltzman's house perched on the top of Merryweather Hill like a nervous parrot. Four floors high and half as wide, the tan wooden structure teetered in the vicious wind. The shutters grumbled and the shingles sang. The house looked across Marshall's Pond, almost frozen into a mirror of ice-skating bliss. A storm crept over the neighborhood, closing in like a restless lion.

Aura slumped off the bus and dragged her bag across the gravel driveway. Her mom waved from the front door and hugged her hello.

"He's gone." Aura tried to hug her mom back, but her arms felt like sacks of wet boulders. Heavy, loose.

"There's more than one way to train a zebra," said Aura's mother, folding the laundry into color-coded stacks. "Harold will be back."

Shading her face from the sharp fall sun, Aura Speltzman scrunched her seaweed-green eyes. She tugged her spring-loaded, mud-brown curls across her scalp, taming them with a chipped yellow headband. "Mom, that's just it! Harold made me really mad last week, when Gennifer and Kiara laughed at my book report on squid, and he laughed right along with them."

She cradled her head on the dented oak table. "I told him I never wanted to see him again, and now he's gone." Aura's mouth twisted like a pretzel. Chubby tears wiggled down her face like jitterbugs.