

AN EXCERPT FROM

# The Edge of Everywhen

The day the girl and the boy showed up at my door was like any other. Their arrival is now etched into my spine and has become part of me, just as I have become part of them.  
Just as I will become a part of you.

Do not worry, Dear Reader. You will become part of my existence, as all my Readers do, leaving chocolate bar smudges or chicken nugget fingerprints on a few pages before returning me to the library shelf. Just to let you know, I am rather averse to honey, because my pages get sticky. And milk can sour into an awful stench if it spills on the cover, but I really don't mind. I was created for you, Dear Reader.

You fascinate me.

Ah, I'm distracted from my tale; my apologies. Back to the somber children shivering at my door. The pristine air of the library was friendless and still that morning, like much of the estate; empty of Readers, empty of children. The arrival of two smallish humans was a breath of invigorating air, for I had grown musty of late.

The frigid wind pressed hard against the outside walls that afternoon. Can you feel it? Wafting from my spine and over the pages of Chapter One, misty vapor curls up to clasp your gloveless fingers clutching my cover, a vapor that sends a shiver down into your slippers. Perhaps you should fetch a blanket for this part. Careful with the cocoa. Marshmallows can be worse than honey if they escape the mug and dribble, sticky, down the side.

That morning some of the chill demanded to be let in through the gypsum and twelve decades of paint and wallpaper. Icy pools of air curled in the hollow spaces near the corners of the library, and the costly Persian rugs looked warm down there on the floor.

Quite a pair, those two. Piper and Phoenix.

What's that?

Well, I couldn't see them, Dear Reader. I don't have eyes as you do. But I did see them. I perceived them as they stood on the landing. I could feel the heavy thrum of Piper Guthrie's steadfast, tired heart as she stood at the door clutching her bravery like a stone in her stomach. Her heart had been ticking for thirteen roller-coaster years, and now it was tough and bruised around the edges, like the heart of the kid picked last for dodge ball six years in a row.

I sensed the birdlike chirp of her little brother's inner clock as well. The one and only Phoenix Guthrie. His ten-year-old heart skipped and twittered, going through its instinctive motions as he stood and waited on the landing with his sister. He wondered again where Naomi was, and whether she would be there with peanut butter on the other side of the door.

Peanut butter, straight from the jar. It was the boy's favorite food of all time, and he could have lived on nothing else.

Phoenix knew the presence of Piper. She was here, and he could see her and hold her hand on the rare occasions that he wanted to, like now. Her hand was soft and familiar while everything else around him was sharp, unknown, and bitterly cold. This imposing dwelling was nothing like the trim little cottage in not-as-cold Atlanta where Phoenix had lived from his birth until this raw April morning.

Phoenix understood the presence of his mother; or rather, the opposite of her presence. He felt her absence like an entire section of suddenly missing teeth, searching with his tongue for the solid mass that was once there and finding only empty craters still raw and in need of healing.

The ghost of a foggy reminder that used to be called Dad drifted in and out of the boy's thoughts as well. Every now and then a sand-covered memory would rise to the surface and then slip away.

The pictures in the boy's laminated flip-book showed these people all in order. His mother Naomi; his father Gordon; his sister Piper; Phoenix. Phoenix.

Who was Phoenix?

Who, indeed.