



We Never Asked for Wings: A Novel

By Vanessa Diffenbaugh

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From the beloved *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Language of Flowers* comes her much-anticipated new novel about young love, hard choices, and hope against all odds.

For fourteen years, Letty Espinosa has worked three jobs around San Francisco to make ends meet while her mother raised her children—Alex, fifteen, and Luna, just six—in their tiny apartment on a forgotten spit of wetlands near the bay. But now Letty’s parents are returning to Mexico, and Letty must step up and become a mother for the first time in her life.

Navigating this new terrain is challenging for Letty, especially as Luna desperately misses her grandparents and Alex, who is falling in love with a classmate, is unwilling to give his mother a chance. Letty comes up with a plan to help the family escape the dangerous neighborhood and heartbreakin injustice that have marked their lives, but one wrong move could jeopardize everything she’s worked for and her family’s fragile hopes for the future.

Vanessa Diffenbaugh blends gorgeous prose with compelling themes of motherhood, undocumented immigration, and the American Dream in a powerful and prescient story about family.

Praise for *We Never Asked for Wings*

“Deftly blends family conflict with reassurance: *Wings* is like *Parenthood* with class and immigration issues added for gravitas.”—**People (Book of the Week)**

“This poignant story will stay in readers’ hearts long after the last page. . . . Diffenbaugh weaves in the plight of undocumented immigrants to her tale of first- and second-generation Americans struggling to make their way in America. Moving without being maudlin, this story avoids the stereotypes in its stark portrayal of mothers who just want the best for their children.”—**RT Book Reviews (Top Pick)**

“Diffenbaugh is a storyteller of the highest order: her simple but poetic prose makes even this most classically American story sing with a special kind of vulnerable beauty.”—**Bustle**

“[A] gripping, heartfelt exploration of a mother’s love, resilience and redemption.”—***Family Circle***

“Satisfying storytelling . . . Diffenbaugh delivers a heartwarming journey that mixes redemption and optimistic insight [and] confirms her gift for creating shrewd, sympathetic charmers.”—***Kirkus Reviews***

“I was hooked from the first breathtaking pages of *We Never Asked for Wings*, caring about this exquisitely vulnerable family, hoping right along with them on every page that each heart-rending, impossible choice would lead them somewhere better together.”—**Lisa Genova, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Still Alice***

“Vanessa Diffenbaugh’s *We Never Asked for Wings* propels us into a mother’s heart as she and her family travel down a rocky path to understanding and forgiveness. With breathtaking imagery and lyrical prose, Diffenbaugh makes Letty’s growth from a troubled young mother to a responsible woman who learns to put her children first, but also allows herself the possibility of love, entirely believable. Hers is a hard-won victory you will cheer even as you wish this graceful, moving book would never end.”—**Melanie Benjamin, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Aviator’s Wife***

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Vanessa Diffenbaugh is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling novel *The Language of Flowers*, which was translated into more than forty languages. A mother of four, she lives with her husband in Monterey, California. In addition to being a writer, Vanessa Diffenbaugh is a passionate foster care advocate and sits on the board of Youth Villages, where she supports their mission to radically improve outcomes for America’s most vulnerable children and families.

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1 The edge of the mattress dipped as Alex sat down. Luna was curled into a ball, doing that thing she did when she wanted someone to believe she was still asleep: eyes scrunched too tightly closed, lips pulled down at the corners because Alex had told her once that she smiled when she faked sleep, so now she overcorrected. Wisps of long black hair had escaped her braids and tangled around her gold earrings; a smudge of drool flaked white off her cheek. Checking to see who was there, she squinted at Alex through crusted eyelashes and then snapped her eyes shut again. Where she’d recently lost her two front teeth, her gums were swollen and red.

How could he possibly tell her?

She was only six. Only six and tiny too—even with their grandmother cooking constantly, there were weeks she lost weight instead of gaining it, and she didn't have any to lose. What would he feed her? He felt again the despair washing over him, as it had when he'd first woken up and read the letter; with puffed cheeks, he held his breath until it passed. Everything is going to be fine, he told himself. Everything is going to be just fine. He was fourteen years old, fifteen in a month. He'd been watching his grandmother long enough to know what to do. But it wouldn't be easy. Luna wasn't the kind of kid who just listened. Getting her to do anything took extensive negotiation, distraction, and occasionally—even with his grandmother—bribery.

Alex decided to skip straight to the bribery.

“Too bad Luna’s not awake, because I’m about to have donuts for breakfast.”

She pressed her face into the pillow to muffle a squeal and clamped her hands over her ears as if this might prevent their grandmother from hearing. It was breaking three rules, at least: (1) Stopping anywhere on the way to school, (2) Eating sugar before noon, and (3) Eating donuts, ever.

“Don’t worry, she isn’t here.”

Luna peeled away from the pillow. Her brown eyes studied Alex, looking for clues as to how she should feel about this unfamiliar state of being. “Where is she?”

He forced himself to smile. “Mom took her to get Grandpa.”

“They found him?”

Alex paused, then moved his head in a kind of circle, a motion that Luna would interpret as a yes but that was ambiguous enough to get Alex off if he was ever questioned for lying at the gates of heaven. He'd hidden his grandmother's letter behind the tip jar his mother kept in the kitchen cabinet, which he'd hoped would be full (she'd taken most of the money, though, leaving only three inches of coins at the bottom of the jar) and estimated the time it would take for them to return by the miles to Oro de Hidalgo and back, calculated at seventy miles an hour. Best case scenario: “They’ll be back on Friday.”

Luna was quiet, and for a minute Alex thought she was worrying, as he was, about how his mother would get his grandparents, Maria Elena and Enrique, back across the border—or whether they would get back at all. But then she asked what day it was.

“Tuesday.”

She hummed the days of the week to the tune of “Clementine” and counted on her fingers. “Three days.”

“Exactly. Three days of eating whatever we want and staying after school with our friends.”

They didn’t have any friends; Luna did not look convinced.

He squeezed her feet through the blankets, trying to think of something to comfort her. “We’ve been alone before, remember?”

She nodded, fear in her eyes for the first time, and he realized too late that it was the wrong thing to say. They'd both gotten stomachaches from the potatoes he'd half-baked, and she'd cried, inconsolably, the whole night through. That time, Maria Elena hadn't meant to leave them alone. She and Enrique had gone out of town and hired a babysitter, but the girl got sick and left, and even though they'd called Letty in a panic, she hadn't come home until six o'clock in the morning.

"I'm older now," he said and then, because he couldn't think of anything else to say: "Sprinkles?"

Luna studied him. "Are we really going to get donuts?"

"If you ever get out of bed, we are." She reached out, and he pulled her up and set her on the floor. "Need help?"

"Nana said I could wear my heart dress. She said she'd wash it."

"I don't know where it is."

"But she said."

It was exactly the kind of conversation that could spiral into hysteria; the recovery would take half the morning. "Hold on."

He looked in the closet, where his grandmother hung the clothes she'd ironed, and then in the kitchen sink, where she soaked things overnight; finally, he found it on the drying rack in the stairwell, stretched flat on top of a towel.

"It's wet," Luna said when he handed it to her.

"So wear it wet, or wear something dry."

"But I want to wear this. And I don't want it to be wet."

She held her dress by the sleeves and swung it around in a circle. The material flew just inches from his face. He reached out and grabbed it.

"Stop that. Come here." From her dresser he found leggings and a long-sleeved shirt, and dressed her in both before pulling the damp dress over her head. "You can't even tell it's wet."

Luna wrinkled her nose. "But why are we even going to school?" she asked. "Please, please, please, can we stay home and watch TV?"

"No way," Alex said. They were so different, he and his sister, that sometimes he couldn't believe they were even related. But then, Alex was different from just about everyone he'd ever met. While the other eighth graders in his class read banned magazines behind textbooks and painted their nails under their desks and avoided answering questions, Alex came to school every day armed with some strange fact to shock or impress his teacher. Most of these facts he got from his grandfather, the only person he knew who was like him. Enrique could recite the name of every bird that traveled the Pacific Flyway in alphabetical order, a skill he'd learned from his own father, and his grandfather before that. Alex had been able to do it for as long as he could remember.

Grabbing his clothes from the closet, he went to the bathroom to get dressed. Behind the locked door he pulled on the white shirt his grandmother had ironed. The kids at Cesar Chavez called him “Newsman” because of his shirts, but Alex knew he looked nothing like a television reporter. He was too skinny, for one, and his nose had grown before the rest of his face. But the real problem with Alex’s appearance was his hair: a wavy, almost-blond mop he assumed he’d inherited from his father. Alex had never seen him, but in a shoe box under Letty’s bed was a sealed envelope addressed to Wes Riley, 536 Elm Street, Mission Hills, California. When he’d searched the name on his school computer, Alex had found images of a man who looked almost exactly like him—blue eyes, milky skin, and a square jaw. In every photograph he wore scrubs and held a different dark-skinned baby. The captions read “Mumbai,” “Malawi,” “Guatemala City.” He’d been given some kind of award in 2005, but the article about it was written in an African language Alex didn’t recognize and couldn’t understand.

But of all the information he’d gathered about his father, the address was the thing that most captivated him. It was just over the freeway. For years, Alex had imagined walking past the house, his father recognizing him from the window and rushing out. He’d never gotten far enough from Maria Elena’s watchful eye to venture there alone, though, and he’d never summoned the courage to ask his mother about the man or the circumstances of his birth—mostly because he’d never summoned the courage to ask his mother about anything at all.

He brushed his teeth quickly as Luna pounded on the door.

“Alex! Let me in.”

Maria Elena had packed their lunches for the week and stacked them on the top shelf of the refrigerator, all labeled. alex: tuesday, luna: tuesday, and behind those the Wednesdays, the Thursdays, and the Fridays. Below their lunches were the remnants of every meal their grandmother had made for the last two weeks, stored and dated and—Alex could imagine the smell without cracking open the lids—many edging toward decay. He pulled out the Tuesday lunches and stuffed them in their backpacks, checking to see that their tennis shoes were still at the bottoms of the bags, where they belonged.

From the bathroom, he heard the toilet flush and the faucet turn on and off, and then Luna stood in the doorway. Water dripped onto her forehead, from where she’d slicked the loose hair back into her braids. If her teacher ever noticed anything, she would notice that Luna’s hair had not been rebraided that morning for the very first time all year. But Luna was the least of her teacher’s problems—she probably wouldn’t even look at her the entire day.

Fishing through the tip jar, Alex extracted a stack of quarters and stepped into his rain boots. He handed Luna hers: knee-high with pink polka dots. They were the one item of clothing necessary to survive life at the Landing, and the one thing his grandmother did not buy generic. Luna pulled them on.

“It’s still there, did you see?”

“What is?”

She gestured for him to follow. In their grandparents’ room, the bed was made as it always was, the quilt pulled tight and square, but he saw immediately that things were different. Only a nail remained where a small cross had hung over the bed; the top of his grandmother’s dresser was empty of photographs and

glistened with some kind of polish. Alex imagined her dusting while she packed. Luna pulled him across the room to where his grandfather's workbench sat under the window, his most recent project spread out exactly as he'd left it.

For six months, their grandfather had been focused on a single feather mosaic, a landscape of a rural village in Mexico, with small stucco houses tilting in imperfect rows and a shawl-wrapped woman looking up at a full moon. It was only the profile of the woman, and she was young, but Alex could tell it was his grandmother. It was always his grandmother. The feather work was so fine that from a few feet away it could be mistaken for an oil painting, each feather a single stroke, but instead the mosaic was created entirely of naturally occurring feathers stuck into a thin layer of campeche wax. The smell of wax hung heavy in the air, and it made him miss his grandfather intensely: the way he patted his thighs every time Alex stepped into the room, even after Alex grew too big to sit in his lap; the way he stopped everything to stand up and look outside, narrating the natural world for his grandson, who remembered every word he said.

Enrique had been gone for six weeks, returning to Mexico to be with his dying mother, and now Maria Elena and Letty were gone too. Alex moved to the window and looked out at the empty landscape.

They were completely alone.

More alone than seemed reasonable, given that they stood less than twenty miles south of San Francisco. Most of the time he didn't notice the isolation, or else he tried to think about only the good things: the birds, the view, the water. But every once in a while it hit him. Where was civilization? Outside, Mile Road stretched through the empty marsh, from Highway 101 to the edge of the bay, ending at the three squat buildings of Eden's Landing: Building A, painted an industrial peachy brown; Building B, half a shade darker of the same dull color; and Building C, closest to the water and painted a faded robin's-egg blue. A barbed-wire fence separated the Landing from the San Francisco International Airport to the north; nothing but a stretch of ever-shifting wetlands separated it from the bankrupt blight of Bayshore to the south. There were other towns nearby, nice ones like Hillsborough and Burlingame and San Mateo, but the expansion of the 101 freeway had cut off the Landing and Bayshore from the rest of the peninsula. Alex could see Mission Hills, the most affluent of the suburbs, directly across the freeway from where he stood—but it felt like a world away.

“He'll come back. Won't he?” Luna asked, interrupting his thoughts. She was studying her grandfather's mosaic. In a ring around the full moon the wax showed through, chocolate-colored and sticky; beside it, blue-black feathers poked from the top of a labeled envelope as if waiting for his return.

“Of course he will,” Alex said.

But he wasn't sure.

Just before his grandfather left, Alex had complained that they didn't have even one piece of Enrique's work. He'd been sitting beside him at his workbench, as he did every day after school, separating the striped from the solid feathers of a marsh wren. Enrique had nodded solemnly but hadn't said anything, and now he was gone.

Perhaps he'd left the mosaic for them on purpose, Alex thought: a silent apology for his sudden flight.

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