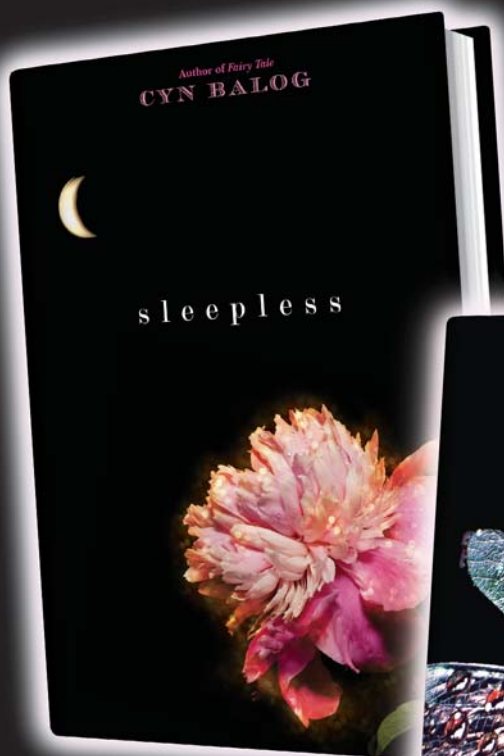



CYN BALOG



CHAPTER SAMPLES



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your dreams.

Discover two love stories that prove that love, true love, can reach across other worlds. In *Sleepless*, Eron DeMarchelle is a Sandman—and a sandman isn't supposed to fall for one of the humans he helps to seduce to sleep. But Eron can't stop his feelings for Julia.

In *Fairy Tale*, Morgan's about to discover a magical secret about her boyfriend, Cam: he's a fairy. The night he was born, fairies came from their world and switched him with a human baby. Now, the fairies want Cam back to take his rightful place as Fairy King. But Morgan isn't about to let him go so easily.



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Author of Fairy Tale
CYN BALOG



s l e e p l e s s



CHAPTER SAMPLE

Griffin Colburn knew something was wrong the moment he slid into the driver's seat.

It was a twinge. Nothing more. He shook his head, blinked. Pushed it off.

His Mustang started fine, like always. He revved the engine a few times, like always. He always said it was to keep it from stalling, which it sometimes did in cold weather, but really he loved to feel the power behind the car. It was old, but still fast and dangerous.

He wouldn't know how dangerous, though, until that night.

As he backed out of the driveway, Julia blew him a long, exaggerated stage kiss, as if he were shipping off to war. As if she knew she'd never see him again. Then she wiped some nonexistent tears from her eyes and pretended to sob hysterically into her hands. His headlights illuminated her slight, pale body, crowned with long reddish hair. She squinted in their glow and then smiled toothily, like a preschooler.

He fed a Sinatra disc into his CD player and grinned back at her, then listened as Ol' Blue Eyes crooned, "Someday, when I'm awfully low." The tinkling of the piano keys drowned out the screeching of his tires, and as he began to sing along, he felt it, fiercer now. It started in his temples,

trailed behind his eyes, the momentary shiver that comes somewhere between wakefulness and sleep. Twinge. Twinge. For a second, he felt as if he were falling. He blinked again, gripped the steering wheel to steady himself.

Twinge.

This time, he squeezed his eyes closed, only for a moment. In that moment, the image of the beautiful young woman appeared.

Whoa, he thought. Too many late nights. He sat up in the driver's seat, stretched his spine. Usually when his mind wandered, it went to NFL play-offs. Or to the scantily clad, Playboy Playmate type of beauty. And yet, when he blinked again, he could see her, as plainly as if she were sitting in the passenger seat next to him. She was dressed in the pink silk of a fairy-tale princess, braiding her black waist-length hair. When she batted her heavy lashes, a slow smile spread on her face.

Then her eyes focused on him. Shark's eyes, two emotionless black buttons.

He shook his head, rubbed one temple with his free hand, checked the seat beside him again. Nothing but his baseball glove and a grease-stained fast-food bag. I definitely need more sleep, he thought as he sped out of the neighborhood. He was halfway down Peasant when he felt a slow, warm caress run up his neck, down his chest—twinge. His whole body lurched forward. It was almost like he skipped forward a few moments in time. He must have driven right through that stop sign on Peasant, because he couldn't remember coming up to it. Instead, he found himself on Main Street, at an amber light, which normally he would have sped through, but sensing something was off, he slowed. Suddenly—twinge—he blinked and it was green again, without ever having turned red.

"What the . . ." He gripped the wheel tighter.

He thought about turning back, but only for a second. Griffin Colburn didn't have a reputation for spinelessness.

Just a few more minutes. Just a few more minutes and I'll be in bed. He pressed down on the accelerator, thinking of home.

He blinked again. Twinge.

And she was there.

This time, clearer.

Beckoning to him.

CHAPTER 1

Julia

“You can ring my be-e-ell, ring my bell!”

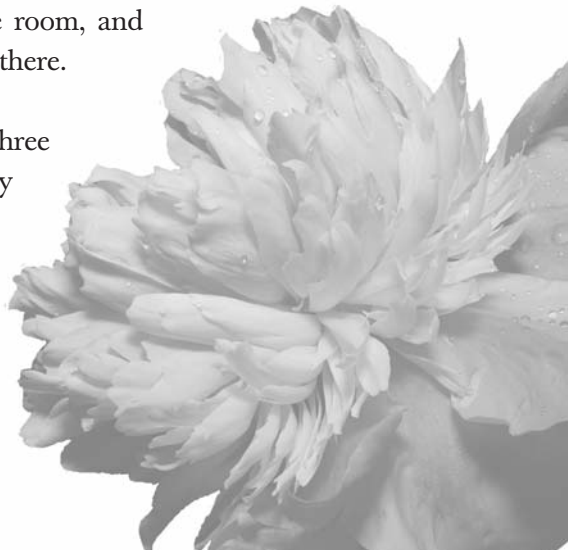
My eyes flicker open. All I see is a pink satin pillow, which I’ve clamped over my face to block out the rest of the world. When I remove it, I recoil in the morning sunlight like the undead and crane my neck to check the clock at my bedside.

9:20 a.m. *Oh, hell no.*

Before I can theorize who on earth hates me enough to be playing cheesy disco music on the only day of the week I can sleep in, I realize that the noise is coming from under my other pillow. Grinding my teeth, I rip the pillow off the bed, throw it across the room, and see my cell phone vibrating there.

Griffin.

He’d been quiet for all of three minutes during our “study session” the night before, while I was fixing him cookies and milk, which was plenty of time for



him to reprogram my phone with music he knew would make me want to hurl. I quickly pick the phone up; the display says “private.” I know only one person who has a private number, all the easier to annoy me with. This is, without a doubt, the last time I’ll ever play Betty Crocker for him.

As I flip the cell open, my eyes trail to the floor, where I’ve thrown the proofs of our picture from prom. I’d been convinced I looked like a princess in that photograph, until he proudly showed me the proofs last night. He’d had his pointer and middle fingers behind me, giving me rabbit ears. Jerk. “What?” I groan.

“Ms. Devine?” The voice is professional, kind of effeminate . . . but I’m smarter than that. Griffin can disguise his voice better than anyone.

“Yeah?”

“Coby Baker from the *Bucks County Courier Times*.”

I sigh. This is a good one. Last weekend, I won a major cash award from Publishers Clearinghouse, which was just too obvious, since I’m not that lucky. “And?” I snuggle back under the covers.

“Are you Julia Devine, Griffin Colburn’s girlfriend?”

“Who?” I ask innocently. There’s silence on the other end; I’ve caught him off guard, a small victory for me. “Yeah, I am. What about him?”

“I was hoping I could get a quote from you, as his girlfriend.”

Oh, I can give you a quote, I think, but I doubt any paper would be able to publish it.

I’m silent, choosing the words, when his voice comes through again, more serious. “I’m sorry for your loss, Ms. Devine.”

“Oh,” I say, thinking fast. “I thought this was about him robbing the 7-E again. Did he finally croak?”

“Um . . . a-are you . . .,” the voice stammers. “The car accident?”

“Oh, *right*,” I say. Wow, Griffin is pulling out all the stops today. “It slipped my mind. Okay. Let’s see. He was a really nice guy, except for that weird fungus. And the funny smell. He was always taking chances. Clearly he is responsible for his own undoing.” I pause. “How’s that?”

More silence. This is where I expect Griffin to break in with his usual “What’s up?” Instead, “Coby,” still businesslike, says, “Um . . . thank you, Ms. Devine.”

“Pug, it’s nine in the morning,” I begin, but then I notice the words “call ended” flashing on the display.

Huh.

I toss the phone aside and slip deeper under my comforter. Ten minutes later, I’m almost asleep when it happens again.

“You can ring my be-e-ell, ring my bell!”

Cursing, I find the phone tangled within my sheets and check the screen. Private, again. My first and only boyfriend is *so* dead.

I flip the phone open. “Yeah?” I say, grouchier this time.

“Ms. Devine?”

“Who are you now, the *Wall Street Journal*?”

“Actually, it’s the *Intelligencer*.”

Okay, now this has gone too far. “Do you want a quote from the victim’s girlfriend, too?” I ask, my voice saccharine.

“If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“Actually,” I say, “it’s a lot of trouble. Pug, I’m trying to sleep. This. Is. Not. Funny.”

“Hey. Julia Devine.” The voice on the other end sparkles with recognition. “You’re *the* Julia Devine. The one who made all

those headlines. Right? How long ago was that? Five years ago?”

I bite my lip, suddenly aware of my heart thudding against my camisole. If there's anything, any topic in my life, that Griffin knows is off-limits, it's that. Even *he* wouldn't touch it. “Nine,” I whisper.

There's silence on the other end. “Ms. Devine,” the voice finally says, “have you not heard about the accident?”

My voice is a squeak. “Accident?”

“Ms. Devine. There was an accident, on Main Street, last night. Griffin Colburn was killed.”

It seems I was right about one thing, I realize as I flip the phone shut without another word and numbly stare at the display.

My first and only boyfriend *is* so dead.



CHAPTER 2

Eron

If Mama, God rest her soul, could see me now, crouching outside the window of a girl's house, in this tree, she would surely rise from her grave and swat the life clean out of me. And I agree with her; this is no place for a man. But that is one thing I am not.

At least, not yet.

Watching the bedtime ritual of a woman from a clandestine post is perfectly acceptable behavior for us Sleepbringers, known as Sandmen to humans. In fact, I watch more than one woman every night. I'm sure Mama would get out the belt if she knew that. It's not proper human behavior, so it was a struggle even for me to grasp. After all, I still *appear* human, and one's human sensibilities are difficult simply to disregard. Even now I'm not entirely comfortable with stalking women in the dark, though I've been carrying out this seduction for nearly a hundred years. I'm about as used to it as I'll ever be.

When I died and made my choice to join the Sleepbringers, it was Mama I thought of. She was the only one I hated to

leave behind—well, besides Gertie, perhaps. Without me, Mama was alone. I was only seventeen, and I had aspirations to be someone, to make something out of my life. But all too suddenly, that was over. I was a picker in a textile mill in Newark and snagged my shoulder in one of the machines as I was trying to free some bunched fabric. Tore my arm up dreadfully, and by the time they got me to the hospital, I'd lost too much blood. It didn't hurt. Or perhaps it did. I can't remember. Like I said, it was a hundred years ago.

I do remember, like yesterday, sitting in a dream state and talking to a beautiful young woman. She told me not to be afraid, and it felt as if I'd met her before, perhaps in my dreams. For the first time, I didn't trip over my words, didn't make a fool of myself like I always did with the fairer sex. I was comfortable with her. Little did I know that as I spoke to this young woman, she was drawing me further and further into her world, seducing me, and pulling me forever away from the simple life I'd known as Eron DeMarchelle, textile picker from Newark, New Jersey. By the time she explained to me that my life was over, there was nothing left to be done.

Julia is sitting at her vanity, applying some cream to her skin. If I could speak to her, I would protest; her skin is already the color and texture of Ivory soap. Perfect. That is, except for the three small purple scars, like a cat scratch, on her right cheek. She always wears her reddish hair down. It looks lovely when it spills upon her satin pillows, but during the day, it covers too much of her face, which I suppose is her objective. She has always been wildly self-conscious about those scars, which she received when she was seven, in an incident she has otherwise done a wonderful job of forgetting.

Her eyelids sag heavily, so my job should be easy today. For some reason, the thought saddens me.

I'm woken from my reverie when the room suddenly goes dark. I strain to see through the glass the covers of Julia's bed floating down upon her small frame. Time to begin.

Stepping into the room, I adjust my cuff links and pat my coat pockets to ensure I have a good supply of sand in them. I pass the collection of running trophies, the posters and models of architectural masterpieces, the dusty shelves of discarded stuffed animals she cuddled faithfully when she was a child. Julia is on her side. I peer over her and realize that she's holding a frame in her hands. Julia's bureau is covered with framed photographs of family and friends; she feels safe with them watching her. In the darkness, I can't see the picture she's holding beneath the glass. I spread the sand over her, and before my ritual is anywhere near completion, she's dreaming away. She turns onto her back and mumbles something I can't quite make out.

Julia often talks in her sleep, and usually, her words are laced with worry. She speaks things in her dreams that she is afraid to say while conscious. She is quiet, prefers to keep to herself, which is something I've always understood, because I was quite the same way. When she was younger, she was the most precocious, talkative child I had ever known, but she's much more tentative now, as if she no longer believes that her thoughts have worth. I want to soothe her, but that would break the first rule of the Sleepbringers: once the human is asleep, we must make our exit. Quickly, I leave the way I came, but I can't bring myself to move on to my other charges right away. I sit on a branch and attempt to find her

form in the darkened room, but all I can see is my reflection in the glass.

“Hello, my pet,” a voice breathes, tickling my ear.

“Good evening, Chimere,” I whisper. I don’t need to turn to know that it is my mentor. A hundred years has bred a familiarity I didn’t know possible. She is that beautiful young woman I spoke about—well, if one could call her a woman; she is not human, either. Though, the difference between us is that she never has been and never will be. I’ve almost come to take for granted that she will forever be in my life. It’s hard to believe that in another few weeks, I will never see her again.

Chimere peers through the window. “Ah! Of course. This one shall be the hardest for you to part with, no doubt.”

“What makes you say that?” I ask, finally looking at her. She carefully adjusts her white petticoats and absently begins to braid her waist-length black hair. It’s one of her most endearing habits.

She smiles at me, her eyes saying, *Must you even ask?* “You two have been through much together.”

“That’s of no importance. It’s not as though she realizes that,” I mutter darkly.

“It matters to you, though, does it not? I can always guess where to find you. Most often when I come to check on you, you’re in this very spot.”

I don’t answer. Perhaps I was spending a few extra moments outside Julia’s bedroom, but I hardly felt it noticeable.

She smiles again. “It’s not at all unexpected. This one replaced your beloved, after all.”

I hitch a shoulder. Yes, Gertie was the girl I loved when I

was seventeen, though it's hard to think of her as that. "Beloved" would suggest a closeness I hadn't achieved with the choirgirl from my church. In fact, we had never touched, or even spoken to one another. I firmly doubt she even knew my name. We only exchanged glances and smiles back and forth across the pews at St. Ann's Church every Sunday for a year. Before the accident, I'd made plans to ask her to the church social. Since then, I've spent a hundred years regretting not following through with those plans. "Beloved" sounds rather presumptuous.

That is one of the reasons I agreed to join Chimere; Chimere had told me that if I joined her for "a spell" and served her well, I could continue my life as a human. She said that every one of us Sandmen had unfinished business, and I was certain that Gertie was mine. She also told me that if I became a Sandman, I could lull dear Gertie to sleep every night. Yes, I could be closer to her than I ever had been as a human. But time passes quickly among our people, and I had no inkling that the "spell" Chimere spoke of was equal to a lifetime in human years. When Gertie died at the age of ninety-six, after being married to another (almost too much for me to bear) and having many children and grandchildren, I mourned her as if she were my beloved, despite my being little more than a glimmer in her vast scrapbook of memories. But I accepted it. After all, that is what we Sleepbringers must learn to do: put the safety and happiness of our charges ahead of our own. It was enough to see her living a good life, even without me in it.

After Gertie's passing, I was given Julia. She was only a

baby when I first met her, a smiling, redheaded little bundle who much preferred chewing on the railing of her crib to my visits.

Chimere says, “Our people always seem to have a fondness for the one who takes our beloved’s place.”

In body, Chimere is only sixteen. But she has thousands of years of wisdom about the Sandmen, enough that I sometimes think of her as a mother hen. I can never argue with her logic. “Yes, I suppose.”

“Well, are you ready?” she says, pouting.

In a few weeks, my obligation to the Sleepbringers will be fulfilled, and I will be able to continue the life I left a hundred years ago. In truth, though I am excited, I am a wreck about the whole thing. Among the countless other worries, I imagine that the world has changed quite a bit since I left it.

“I suppose. Was my replacement called up?”

She nods. “Yes. He agreed. And he is Julia’s beloved, so I think it will work nicely.”

I can’t help bristling. Julia has a beloved? Most often, I learn these things through the dreams of my charges, but Julia has never dreamt consistently enough of one person for me to think she has a special attachment. Julia doesn’t dream often, and when she does, she is usually alone. She dreams of places, of mountainous buildings of steel and glass. Julia is much different from the rest of the women I’ve been charged with. Like me, she feels more content among beautiful works of architecture than around people. I’ve always thought she’d be forever searching—like I was when I was alive—for a kindred spirit, one soul to understand her.

I think of the silver frame she's holding, and her eyelids, sagging, I realize now, not so much from fatigue but from grief. Her *beloved*. "And when will I be expected to begin his training?"

"In time. He's still getting accustomed to his new powers," she explains.

I look back through the window, at Julia. It's almost unbelievable that in another few months, I will no longer be in those dreams of hers, beside her, staring up at buildings whose roofs touch the moon. I will be human, like her, and yet she will not know me at all; the gap between us will be immeasurable. Insurmountable. "All right," I say, trying to keep my nerves quelled.

"You are worried, no doubt, about the training?" Chimere asks, studying my eyes. "Do not be. It's very rare that a replacement cannot fulfill his duties."

"But it does happen," I murmur.

"Well, yes . . . but so? It's not as though this life has been all that torturous for you, has it?"

"Of course not, but after one hundred years of the same . . . it tends to be a bit . . ."

She grins. "Tedious. I have heard that before."

"I have no idea how you've done it for so many thousands of years."

"You forget. I was never human. Maybe it is that I do not know what I am missing," she says. "You do want to be human, do you not? To finish that which has been left undone?"

"Of course. More than anything. Though I still do not know what my unfinished business is."

“It will become clear to you, in time.” She clasps her hands together and inspects me. “Is there anything else troubling you? As you know, the further you proceed in your training of your replacement, the more human you will become. As he accepts your duties, you will gradually become human. At first you may be human for only a few minutes a day, but eventually that time will stretch, until you are completely human. It will take several days, but that is a positive thing. If you became human all at once, the transition would be a bit jarring, to say the least. After all, becoming human is not easy, nor is becoming a Sleepbringer.”

“Yes, I understand.” I smile. “If anything is troubling me, it is that I will miss you.”

“I’ll still see you. As before. In your dreams.” She blushes, and a slow smile spreads over her lips. “The elders and I will be sorry to see you go. You have served us quite well.”

Chimere is never stingy with her compliments, so I note with some consternation that she says “quite well” instead of “superbly,” or “outstandingly,” or “without fail.” That is the best I can hope for. Nearly a decade has passed, and yet one incident, one transgression, mars my record with Chimere. Originals have never been human, so Chimere doesn’t understand that if given the same chance, I would do things much the same. I suppose if a thousand years passed, she would still not forget it and still not understand.

She scans the street. Most of the lights in the houses along Peasant Street are still ablaze, but I do have my three other charges to tend to. She must be thinking the same thing, because she says, “I know it’s a lovely night, but are you going to stay out here until dawn?”

“I can’t very well move on if I’m talking to you,” I say with a grin.

She huffs dramatically and throws her parasol over her shoulder. A parasol that, since it’s nighttime, is completely absurd. “Fine, fine.” She bats her eyelashes for dramatic effect and disappears into the night.

I turn back to the window. Yes, it is time to move on. But for some reason, I am frozen in place.

It’s just my nerves getting the best of me. Soon I will be alone in a new world.

Chimere’s words, “Julia’s beloved,” repeat in my head. There are so many human concepts I know nothing of, things I’ve waited a hundred years to experience. Things I intend to experience.

A breeze gently blows through the tree, rustling the leaves all around me. Julia is still, and my next charge is waiting.

CHAPTER 3

Julia

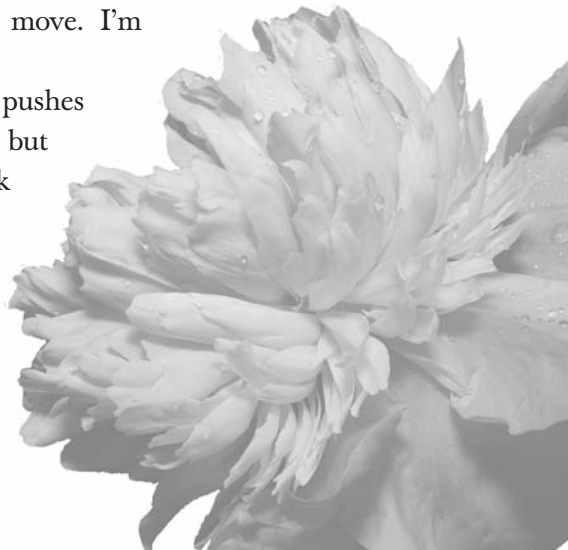
My dad throws the car into park but keeps it running. “I don’t think I can get any closer.”

The street is filled with the cars of mourners, all here to say a final farewell to my boyfriend, so yes, I guess this is it. The end of the line. Time for me to face the music. For some reason, my mind is allowing me to think only in clichés. My eyes trail down to where I’m digging my fingernails into the vinyl armrest. I quickly remove my hand, but by then there are three little slits there, as well as the sweaty imprint of my palm. “Uh, I know. I’m going.”

But my body refuses to move. I’m frozen.

My dad reaches over and pushes a lock of hair behind my ear, but I shake it loose so it falls back against my cheek. “Take your time,” he says.

That’s something my parents are always telling



me. They never push me. I could be spending this morning in bed, and they wouldn't mind. In fact, they would be perfectly happy if I stayed with them until I was sixty. As I'm starting to wonder why I'm putting this pressure on myself, why I don't just have my dad turn the car around and take me home, I remember.

It's Griffin. My boyfriend.

I can't let him down by not showing up, especially after making such a mockery of his death on the front page of the newspaper. That was just brilliance, Julia. Pure brilliance, I think.

I give my dad a peck on the cheek and push open the car door. The smell of grass greets me, and the heat burns my face. I totter among the headstones, heels digging into the mud as I make my way to the crowd of people gathered around Griffin's coffin. I can already hear the sobs of my female classmates as they huddle together, clutching tissues and talking about the "senseless tragedy." I can't help wondering, Do tragedies *ever* make sense?

One of the girls looks up and studies me with her red-rimmed eyes, then taps her friend on the shoulder and whispers. They turn to watch me, and it's almost as if big question marks are hanging over their heads in cartoon bubbles.

I know that the chasm separating Julia Devine from her classmates is as wide as it will ever be, thanks to that latest newspaper story. When my classmates get into the newspaper, it's usually in the Community News section. They get positive little puff pieces about awards won or scholarships received. Both times I've been in the newspaper, the first when I was seven, it was front-page news. The kind of news people whisper about, and not in a good way, so that all you want to do is close your curtains and hide under your bed. The kind of news you wish you could run away from.

Before, they eyed Front-Page Julia with pity laced with fascination. Now there's a little shock woven in there as well, as if I've finally proven them right and lost my marbles. If I could, I'd tell them, *I thought it was a joke! You would have thought so, too, if your boyfriend was as sick in the head as Griffin Colburn.*

The "dearly departed" was always prank-calling me, pretending to be the committee choosing runners for next year's Olympics, or the selections board at Rutgers, offering me a full scholarship if I'd participate in their clam-baking team, or the Italian American Society, insisting I had won a Lamborghini. I only did what any of them would have done.

The reporter from the *Courier Times* had the sense not to print the stuff about Griffin's fungus and his smell. Thank goodness for small miracles. But he did insinuate that I thought Griffin Colburn was a loose cannon. What the article said was "The victim's girlfriend, Julia Devine, believes that the victim's reckless nature may have contributed to the accident. 'He was always taking chances,' she said. 'Clearly he is responsible.' "

The weird thing is that his mom *still* asked me to give his eulogy. She probably did it before she saw the story alerting the world to her son's rep as an eff-up. At the time, she hugged me so tightly my gallbladder nearly caught in my throat, and moaned something about how she'd never be able to make it through the ceremony. Now I'm afraid that when she sees me, she'll want to squeeze the rest of my organs out of my body, on purpose this time. I'm behind a bunch of freakishly tall men in suits (did Griffin know a lot of NBA players?), but between them I steal a glimpse of her—skin white, body crumpled, looking like she's ready to jump on the coffin and join her son in the afterlife.

I can't really blame her; Griffin was her only son. Though she, of all people, should realize that wherever Griffin is, he's probably looking for the nacho dip and calling every last one of these mourners a pathetic sap. I can just hear his voice now: *Go home, Griffin Groupies. Take your Prozac.*

As I hide in the crowd, grimacing at the mud caked on my one good pair of heels and cursing the god who made it improper to wear flip-flops to these things, I hear a few voices mutter "eulogy." People in the crowd start to look at one another, confused. Because of the wall of guys in front of me, I'm not sure what's going on until I hear a full sentence: "Who is giving the eulogy? Please step forward." It appears that Mrs. Colburn has gone mute, or else has forgotten that she asked me, or else is picturing how she might slay me, because she's staring at the coffin as if attempting to levitate it.

"Here I am!" I say, squeezing past the Michael Jordan wannabes, waving a crinkled sheet of paper in my hand. My voice comes out wrong, too cheery for a funeral. Everything about me is wrong lately. I really should have listened to that little voice inside telling me to stay in bed. I turn the volume knob down and mumble, more weakly, "Um, here."

I wobble through the crowd, all eyes on me. My heels kick up the mud, and I feel it splattering on my bare ankles and the hem of the only black skirt I had in my closet. When I get to the podium, I attempt to look up, but all I see is Mrs. Colburn squinting at me like *How can you betray my son's memory?* and a bunch of girls hunched over, whispering and crying, crying and whispering. Crying for Griffin. Whispering about me.

I reach up and pat my cheeks; they're hot but completely dry. In a way, it's my fault that Griffin is dead; he died on the way

home from my house at two in the morning. I should have seen how exhausted he was, made him stay, pumped coffee through his veins. But I didn't. Plus we were always together; he was my Pug (because like the dog, he made ugliness cute), number one on my speed dial. You'd think these things would bring about some emotion in me. Sophomores and juniors who Griffin barely spoke to in the hallway are wailing in grief right now, but me? I've got nothing.

I clear my throat. "Griffin Colburn was a good person," I say, pulling a lock of my hair forward to cover my right cheek, to hide the scars there, since I'm sure that's what everyone is seeing.

Shock, Julia, you're in shock, that's all, I tell myself. I mean, I'm not made of steel. If anything could make me cry, I'd think Griffin's death would be it. But that's not the type of relationship Griffin and I had. Where Griffin is concerned, tears are *not* an option. "He was a good friend to many."

I venture a peek over the podium, away from the weeping girls and Mrs. Colburn, and see Bret Anderson, Griffin's best friend, rolling his eyes. He pretends to string up a rope and hang himself.

Thanks, Bret. Love you, too. Okay, so it is cliché, but would they rather a dramatic reading of "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night"? I speak a little bit about how he'd gotten a full-ride academic scholarship to UCLA, how he was the "always smiling, happy-go-lucky, life-of-the-party" type of guy, and how he will surely be missed for many, many years to come. It's corny, but what else can I do? This is what I knew of Griffin. Even though we dated for almost a year, we didn't have deep, mind-blowing conversations. When we talked, it was mostly in the form of one-liners.

That's when the priest clears his throat. The wind whips my hair away from my face, and suddenly I feel the scars pulsating, screaming, *Hey, look at me!* so that it drowns out my voice. I cut the next full paragraph from my speech, quickly mumble a thank-you, and step away from the podium. After that, nobody makes eye contact with me, which, I've come to discover over the years, is much preferable to being stared down. I fidget about in my ruined heels, searching for a safe place to stand, but Bret, the only person I trust right now, is way over on the other side of the coffin.

The priest does the whole "ashes to ashes" thing and then people begin to walk away from the casket, milling about, looking lost. Tracy McLish walks toward me. We were best friends up until last year, when I was a freshman. She moved to town when I was eight, so she missed all my drama, and we became friends. The thing was, after the story broke, I still felt the same, but everyone else expected me to be emotionally scarred for life. She didn't expect that, so she treated me just like anyone else and made what was left of my childhood feel normal. But that was before I met Griffin. Tracy had a hard time "getting" Bret and Griffin; a lot of people do. Thin-skinned people need not apply. And Tracy, like most girls, is too easily offended. I know; I used to be that way, too. She started hanging out with us less and less, and I finally stopped calling her. It was just a mutual drifting-apart, I guess, so that's why I expect her to walk right past me. Instead, she stops and says, "I'm so sorry, Jules."

Her eyes are a little teary. Leave it to Tracy to get torn up over a guy she didn't even know that well. "Thanks," I say.

She hugs herself. "I just . . . wish everything wasn't a big joke to you. Like it was to Griffin."

“What do you mean? I’m just . . .” That’s when I realize she must have read the newspaper article. But I know she means more than that. I haven’t had a good cry since . . . well, since I started going out with Griffin.

She shrugs. “Take care of yourself.”

I start to thank her, but by then she’s disappeared into the group. Yeah, having Griffin as a boyfriend helped me develop a thick skin. I had to, to last even a day with him. Instead of greeting me with a kiss, he’d squeeze my ass and say, “What’s up, Bubble Butt?” Told me I ran “like a Muppet” at cross-country practice. Said I should “suck it up” when my cat Banshee died. He called things the way he saw them, even if it sometimes hurt people’s feelings. But that was just his way, and the price you paid for having a guy who was an utter blast to be around. The way he told stories, the way he lit up a room . . . he knew how to keep things light, fun. I was the only one who learned to take it *and* dish it right back at him until he thought of me as his equal. He was authentic, which is more than I can say for any of these people. Crying for a guy they hardly knew?

I look at the coffin and tell myself, That’s Griffin in there. Your boyfriend. I cough and try to think of something that might make me cry, for Tracy’s benefit. Three-legged puppies. Onions. That’s all that comes to mind.

Nope, no tears.

I’m sure Griffin would be proud of me. But I can’t help wondering if it means that I no longer have a soul. That maybe I am as messed up as people think I am.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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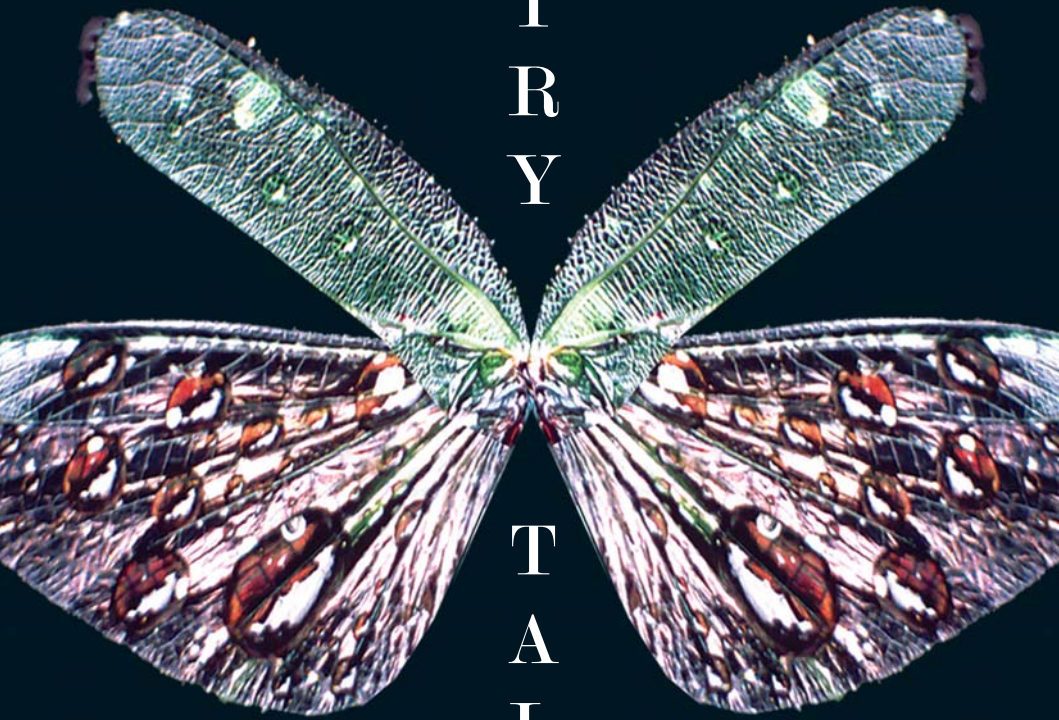
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CHAPTER SAMPLE

1

P EOPLE CALL ME spooky.

Maybe because by eleven o'clock on that day, I'd already told Ariana Miles she'd starve to death in Hollywood, Erica Fuentes she'd bomb history, and Wendell Marks that he would never, ever be a part of the A-list, no matter how hard he tried.

Now, sitting in the bleachers after school, half watching a meaningless Hawks football exhibition game and waiting for some nameless freshman to bring me my French fries (psychics cannot work on an empty stomach), I've just about reduced my fourth client of the day to tears (well, Wendell didn't cry; he just pretended to yawn, covered his mouth, and let out a pathetic snurgle). But hey, sometimes the future is scary.

Sierra Martin won't look at me. Instead, she's taken an

unnatural interest in the Heath bar wrapper wedged between the metal planks her sequin-studded flip-flops are resting on. A tear slips past her fake-tanned knees and lands perfectly on her porno-red big-toe nail.

“Sorry,” I say, offering her a pat on the back and a couple of orange Tic Tacs for consolation. “Really.”

Sometimes this gift does suck. Some days, I have the pleasure of doling out good news—BMWs as graduation presents, aced finals, that sort of thing. Today, it’s been nothing but total crap. And yes, it obviously must have come as a shock that I’d envisioned Sierra, whose parents had bred her for Harvard, walking to Physics 101 on the Middlesex Community College campus, but it’s not my fault. I just deliver the mail; I don’t write it.

“Are you . . . su-ure?” she asks me, sniffing and wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

I sigh. This is the inevitable question, and I always answer the same thing: “I’m sorry, but I’ve never been wrong.”

I know that probably makes me sound like a total snob, but it’s simple fact. Since freshman year, I’ve correctly predicted the futures of dozens of students at Stevens. It all started way before that, though, in junior high, when I correctly guessed who would win the million-dollar prize on every reality-TV show out there. At times I would have to think, really think, to know the answer, but sometimes I would just wake up and, clear as day, the face of the winner would pop into my mind. Soon, I started testing my abilities out on my friends, and my friends’ friends, and before long, every other person at school wanted my services. Seriously, being a psychic will do more for your reputation than a driver’s license or a head-to-toe Marc Jacobs wardrobe.

Sierra tosses her frizzed-out, corn-husk-blond spirals over her shoulder and straightens. “Well, maybe you saw someone else. Someone who looked like me. Isn’t that possible?”

Actually, it isn’t possible at all. Sierra has a totally warped sense of style, like Andy Warhol on crack. Everyday things lying around the house do not always make attractive accessories. I shrug, though, since I don’t feel like explaining that hell would have a ski resort before two people on the face of this earth would think it was okay to tie their ponytail up in a Twizzler, and crane my neck toward the refreshment stand. I’m starving. Where are my French fries?

“I mean, I did get a twenty-three hundred on my SATs,” she says, which is something she’s told me, and the rest of the student body, about a billion times. She might as well have broadcast it on CNN. However, she hasn’t taken into account the fact that there are thousands of other students across the country who also got those scores, and took college-level physics or calculus instead of Dramatic Expression as their senior extracurricular activity. Everyone knows that Sierra Martin screwed herself by deciding to coast through her classes this year.

See, I’m not *that* spooky. Truth is, most people don’t use enough of their brains to see the obvious. Part of it is just being keenly aware of human nature, like one of those British detectives on PBS. It’s elementary, my dear Watson. Colonel Mustard in the Billiard Room with the candlestick, and Sierra is *so* not Harvard material.

“We need to do the wave,” Eden says, grabbing my arm. She doesn’t bother to look at me; her attention is focused totally on the game, as usual. “They need us.”

I squint at her. “It’s an exhibition game.”

She pulls a half-sucked Blow Pop from her mouth with a smack and says, “So?”

“Okay, you go, girl,” I say, though I wish she wouldn’t.

She turns around to face the dozen or so students in the bleachers, cups her hands around her lips, and screams, “Okay, let’s do the wave!” Auburn hair trailing like a comet’s tail, she runs as fast as her skinny, freckled legs can carry her to the right edge of the seats, then flails her arms and says to the handful of people there, “You guys first. Ready? One, and two, and three, and *go!*”

I don’t bother to turn around. I know nobody is doing it. It’s human nature—doing a wave during an exhibition game is totally lame. Actually, doing a wave at all is totally lame. And nobody is going to listen to poor Miss Didn’t-Make-the-Cheerleading-Squad.

She scowls and screams, “Morgan!” as she rushes past me, so I feel compelled to half stand. I raise my hands a little and let out a “woo!” Sierra doesn’t notice Eden’s fit of school spirit, since she’s still babbling on about her three years as editor of the yearbook, as if giving me her entire life story will somehow get her closer to the Ivy League.

Eden returns a few seconds later, defeated, and slumps beside me. The spray of freckles on her face has completely disappeared into the deep crevasse on the bridge of her nose. “This school has no spirit.”

It’s true—and ironic, really—that, though my best friend, Eden McCarthy, probably has more school spirit in her pinky than the entire student body put together, she didn’t make cheerleading. Being a cheerleader, though, isn’t just about having spirit.

Eden could make a cow look graceful. I say, “Well, good try; *A* for effort,” and pat her back.

“But, *Morgan*,” she whines, “it’s Cameron out there. He’s about to score another touchdown.”

For the first time in a half hour, I look toward the field. And, wouldn’t you know it, the Hawks are on the ten-yard line. I watch as the ball is hiked into the hands of my boyfriend, Cameron Browne. He backs up on the toes of his Nike cleats and throws the ball perfectly to the wide receiver, who is tackled at the one. “Oh. Good.”

“You could try being a little more supportive,” Eden says with a sigh.

“But you have enough school spirit for the both of us,” I say, giving her a hug, even though I’m kind of irked by the insinuation. Of course I support Cam. Otherwise I wouldn’t have spent every Saturday night in October last year with my butt frozen to the bleachers, sipping watery hot cocoa and watching my manicure turn all shades of purple. “And it’s just an exhibition game.”

Anyway, if you know Cam, which I do, since we’ve been attached at the hip since kindergarten, you know that he does not need a cheering audience in order to kick ass. He’s incredible, which is why he’s the only sophomore on the varsity football team. In fact, the Sunday *Star-Ledger* once said, and I quote, “It appears that Cam Browne can do anything.”

And, ahem, he’s all mine.

“That’s my boy!” I shout out, mainly to appease Eden, and give him a wolf whistle. Few girls can wolf-whistle like I can, but that’s because I’ve had so much practice. Because Cam Browne

“can do anything.” And everything he does seems to deserve one. He turns, grins, then holds up three fingers, brings them to his mouth, and points them at me. One, two, three. That’s our secret way of saying “I love you.” Since we were together when other kids from our class were still in the “Ew! Cooties!” stage, we learned to keep everything corny and romantic a secret. Back then, our lives depended on it. Now, it’s habit.

“First and ten. Do it again!” Eden shouts another one of the Hawkettes’ most popular cheers. She knows them all by heart. Luckily, she doesn’t do the arm movements, or else I don’t think I could be seen with her.

Sierra must have realized I’m not listening to her. She clears her throat. “I know you don’t care, but this is *important*.”

That’s the worst part about being psychic to high-schoolers; they’re so insecure. You can’t just be the all-knowing prophet who spits out wise fortune-cookie sayings all day—you have to be part “Dear Abby,” too. “I do care, Si. I feel really bad for you, honest. But you have to move on. Rise above it.”

“Easy for you to say. You probably already saw yourself at Yale,” she says bitterly.

I shake my head. “I’m not very good at seeing my own future.”

It’s kind of like being a genie; I have this amazing power, and yet I can’t use it on myself. But I’m okay with that. I’m only a sophomore, so, though my college choice is pretty much up in the air, it’s probably the only thing that is. I know that my future is with Cam. I know he and I will go to the same school, or at least schools close to one another. After all, we’re next-door neighbors, and we’ve known each other almost since we could walk. We’ll both be turning sixteen on October 15. We’re so in

tune with one another that I can detect when he's having a bad day from a football field's length away.

But Cam rarely has bad days. Today, as usual, he's in top form.

"Be. Aggressive. Be. More. Aggressive. B-E A-G-G-R-E-S-S-I-V-E!" Eden shouts as Sara Phillips, an actual cheerleader, walks past and rolls her eyes.

Eden doesn't seem to notice. She is clueless in so many ways, which makes her my polar opposite. For example, she has had a crush on Mike Kensington forever and can't seem to get it through her head that he's obviously gay. His sense of style, the fact that he spends way too much time on his hair . . . none of this has thrown her off, and I refuse to disrupt her plans to one day bear his children. She clutches my arm and screws her eyes shut as Cam shouts, "Hike!"

"Oh, this is so nerve-racking! I can't look!"

I've loved Eden almost as long as I have Cam, but not only is she clumsy and clue challenged, she's also so neurotic that I'm surprised I haven't envisioned her having a heart attack at eighteen. Her grip is enough to cause nerve damage, so I pry her fingers up one by one and say, very calmly, "It's. Just. An. Exhi—"

And that's when it happens.

Cam has the ball in his hands, and he's searching for a receiver, but they're all blocked. A defenseman breaks free from his left and rushes in for the sack. Just as he's about to throw his hands on Cam's shoulders, my boyfriend takes three quick steps forward, and before he can step on the head of a fallen teammate, he's airborne. He sails, like a feather on the wind, over the massive pile of bodies in his way, right into the end zone.

Instantly, the bleachers erupt into thunderous applause, which

is weird, considering the effect of Eden's recent Wave Effort. Even Sierra jumps to her feet, her bleak future forgotten for the moment.

Eden opens her eyes and shrieks like a banshee. "Oh! He is so amazing!"

I can't move, can't even bring my hands together for applause. I think even my breathing stops, for the moment. Am I the only one who noticed something strange about that last play?

Am I nuts, or did my boyfriend just *fly*?



MAYBE OUR NEWSPAPER is right. Cam Browne really *can* do anything.

The Hawks win the game, which sends Eden into a state of euphoria I thought could only be achieved by doing meth. Even if it's just an exhibition game. And, hello? The win was no surprise. Her best friend is a psychic, after all.

Following every win, we go to the Parsonage Diner and the boys eat. A lot. I get a celebratory chocolate milk shake. I'd never thought there was such a thing as too much chocolate, but last year, I had so many milk shakes that now I can't look at one without getting a little queasy.

This year, the J. P. Stevens Hawks will probably be New Jersey's finest again, though I haven't actually envisioned that.

My gift can be a little tricky to control sometimes, because I never know exactly to *when* in the future it's going to take me. Plus, Cam doesn't want to know. He's one of those "let the chips fall where they may" types.

After twirling my hair into a ponytail in the lav, I spot Cam at a booth, and immediately I catch my breath. When he's scrubbed up like that, his broad chest pressed solid against his T-shirt, shoots of black hair falling carelessly into his cavernous brown eyes, he can still make my heart flutter. I'd like to say that, lookswise, I'm just as showstopping, but aside from my psychic abilities, there isn't anything remarkable about me. So, though we've been together this long, the phrase "Is he really mine?" always seems to repeat in my mind like a broken record. He's using some foreign football language with Scab and the other maniacs on the team that mostly includes a series of grunts and growls, so I part the sea of testosterone by sliding in next to him and giving him a kiss. "Just as I predicted," I tease.

He takes a crinkled envelope with today's date on it out of the back pocket of his jeans and tears it open with his teeth. Pulling out a slip of paper, he reads to the table, "Twenty-four to seven, Hawks.' Morgan wins again."

I grin proudly as the rest of the guys congratulate me on another correct prediction. This time, it's even more halfhearted than it was last weekend. Sigh. My powers impressed them like crazy my freshman year, but the effect must be wearing off. When I complained to Cam last week about how nobody really appreciates my gift anymore, he suggested that maybe they still would if I gave them the predictions in my underwear.

Eden stares at my boyfriend dreamily. She says to him, "That touchdown in the second quarter was *amazing*."

That was when he'd done the Superman.

The thing I love most about Cam is that, though the entire warped little microcosm that is Stevens High adores him, he remains humble and shy. He blushes and says, "Well, thanks."

"Yeah," I add, "you practically flew."

Cam turns to me for a second, a dazed expression on his face, then nudges Scab. "Scab put that play together."

Scab, Cam's best friend, fits the football-player mold perfectly. When we were younger, he used to pick all his mosquito bites until he was just one big, bleeding sore. Now, he has a round, ruddy face, and he's bigger than a Mack truck and rough around the edges. The nickname, strangely, has always suited him. He polishes off a superdeluxe breakfast with sausage, bacon, eggs, and a double stack of pancakes, punches Cam on the shoulder, and laughs like a chain-smoker, a kind of "haw haw haw." There's a red ring of ketchup, like lipstick, on his mouth. Blech.

Just then, Sara Phillips prances by in her cheerleading outfit. Eden calls, "Great job, Sara!" to her, since she's still holding out hope that the squad will give her a place junior year. Scab gives her a ketchup-soaked grin, and she waves and says sweetly, "Hi, Marcus!" He is so infatuated, and has been forever. At this point, it's kind of a joke.

He turns to Cam and says under his breath, "She totally wants me."

Cam and I look at each other, then burst out laughing.

"What? She's just playing hard to get."

"Since kindergarten?" Cam asks.

Scab comes to me for defense. "Hey, Morg. Don't any of your visions show us together? You saw the way she looked at me."

I pass him a napkin. “Maybe she was jealous of your lipstick.” Dejected, he wipes his mouth and shakes his head.

“Besides,” I say, “I told you, I see you playing defense at some college with palm trees.”

That perks him right up. “Miami, baby!”

And they all start growling and high-fiving again. Blech.

Eden starts talking to John Vaughn, who is safety. He’s really cute and nice, and I think they’d make a great couple, which means they’ll never get together. I, unfortunately, envision Eden being thirty and living in a cramped apartment with nobody but fourteen cats and a collection of Precious Moments figurines to talk to. Especially since she doesn’t seem likely to figure out that her major crush is playing for the other team anytime this century. John, who so blatantly has a thing for Eden that he might as well print up T-shirts advertising the fact, says to her, “It’s cool you come to all the games and practices.”

Eden says, “School spirit is important. Last year’s championship game was, like, the greatest night of my life. It was so fun.”

I elbow her. “Ahem. Well, I hope that will change next Friday.”

She thinks for a second and then shrugs. “Oh, right. I can’t wait.”

“My sweet sixteen,” I explain to John. “Next Friday, October fifteenth. It’s going to be really big.”

He raises his eyebrows. For some reason, guys just don’t get the whole sweet-sixteen thing. But mine is going to be one big-with-a-capital-*B* party. Not like a Super Sweet Sixteen on MTV (my parents aren’t owners of a rap label or anything), but pretty cool, since my father was college roommates with the manager of the Green Toad, a very exclusive restaurant in the city. I’ve been planning the event since April, and it’s all Eden and I ever talk about now.

John doesn't feel the excitement. "Sounds cool."

"It's at the Toad!" Eden exclaims.

"You're invited," I say. "Didn't you get the invite?"

He looks confused. "Uh, I don't know."

Huh. Boys. Whatever; it's still going to be fantastic. "It's actually a joint birthday party for me and Cam, since we're both turning sixteen," I tell him, nudging Cam, who is busy flicking through the pages of music on the tabletop jukebox at our booth. "Right?"

Cam looks at me. "Huh?"

"I was just talking about our birthday," I tell him.

"What about it?"

Hello? Earth to Cam. "Our sweet sixteen?"

He purses his lips, hesitates, and then says, "Oh. Yeah." Then he goes back to flipping through the music.

Huh. Totally not the response I was expecting. Last year, when I brought up the idea, he was into it. He said he couldn't wait to put on a fancy suit and have a really swanky night, just like a prom. Maybe the guys got to him. I mean, wanting to have a sweet sixteen isn't exactly something a football player would admit to.

"What's wrong?" I say, shaking him by the elbow. I wrap my arm around him and lean in close. He smells clean, like soap and his barbershop aftershave. "You okay?"

He shrugs, then relaxes. "It may be a sweet sixteen for you, but for me, it's a studly sixteen." He says this with a deep, sexy voice and, though I'm not sure how he manages it, a completely straight face. Then he breaks into a grin.

The other guys laugh and I roll my eyes. "Oh, excuse me."

Abruptly, his smile disappears, and he shuffles in his seat. "Hey, I've got to get up."

“What’s—” I begin, but he slides out of the booth and scrambles past the dessert case before I have a chance to get the “up?” part out. Okay, so maybe he just had a major urge to pee or something.

Scab and the guys begin to go on about the plans for their next game. At least, I think that’s what they’re doing, because this is what I hear: “Blabbity blah blah blah.” It’s so boring, I’m superaware of every passing second that Cam is gone. And we’re talking many, many seconds. After roughly fifteen hundred of them, I begin to wonder whether terrorists hijacked his urinal.

By the time the guys start to write plays on the backs of napkins, I’ve had enough. I take another sip of my milk shake, stand up, and navigate around the dessert case, toward the restrooms. I’m halfway there, at the cash register near the entrance, when I look into the front vestibule and see Cam. He’s standing among the nickel-candy dispensers and free-newspaper racks. He has his hands shoved in his pockets and is surveying a bulletin board filled with want ads. He’s staring intently at one that says 25' SCHOONER FOR SALE.

What is going on? Does he suddenly want to become the Skipper?

I open my mouth to say something to him, but before I can, he turns, grabs my hand, and looks intently at me. “You saw it, didn’t you? That play?”

“Yeah.” The intensity in his eyes makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. “It was amazing. So?”

“Everyone keeps saying that, Boo,” he says, using his way-embarrassing nickname for me. In first grade I was a child of few words. One, actually. I found that not only could it be used

as a frightening tactic, but it was also extremely effective as a question, a statement, a cry of frustration. Yes, I was weird. Leave it to Cam to bring up my long-lost weirdness on a daily basis.

“Because it was. Just accept it. Would you like me to feed you grapes?”

He glares at me.

“Sorry. What’s the big deal? You should be happy.”

He exhales slowly. “I probably would be. If I could remember any of it.”

3

MY PARENTS THINK they're so smart. Every time I go out with Cam, the porch furniture miraculously moves three feet away from the side of the house, so I nearly trip over it when I come home. As most concerned parents would, they leave the light on, but they also arrange the metal glider and side table so that they are in perfect view from the garage window. My dad has maintained a stalwart post from that window for so long that he might as well set up a Barcalounger and minifridge there. He thinks Cam and I don't know, despite the way the curtain in the window does nothing to disguise his hefty silhouette, and the way he says his good nights—completely out of breath after hightailing all four hundred pounds of his flesh up the stairs before I can get inside. Once, in the early days, I went into

the garage at 11 p.m. to find him “fixing the lawn mower.” Cam had the bright idea a few years back of using the situation to our advantage instead of busting him, which would be way uncomfortable.

And it would have worked great if only Cam weren’t the worst liar in the world.

“Wow, it’s fifteen minutes past your curfew, Morg,” Cam says in this loud voice as we settle onto the swing. “If only you hadn’t Heimliched that poor old lady who was choking on the meat loaf, we would have been home from our volunteer work at the soup kitchen on time.”

“Yes!” I say, then shake my head at him and whisper, “I love you, but you really suck at this.” My dad can’t possibly believe that I work at the soup kitchen, the ASPCA, the League of Women Voters, and Greenpeace.

Cam grabs me longingly, like he’s going to launch into the steamiest hookup since *The Notebook*, and then, when my face is an inch from his, gives me a very sterile, grandmotherly peck on the cheek. “Sorry.”

At times like this, the “Is he really mine?” recording plays loudest in my head. He has the sexy bad-boy face, with dark skin, the black, intense eyes of an animal on the hunt, and, since last year, a constant spray of stubble on his jaw. That alone makes him easily the hottest guy at school, but he’s also got a wicked sense of humor. And, to seal the deal, he’s a total sweetie. My long, sometimes frizzy chestnut hair; heavy, dull brown eyes; pale complexion; strong profile, with what my father calls a pronounced but I call a freakishly big nose; and body, on the slender side but soft around the edges, make me just average; I’ve inherited my mother’s Sicilian looks. But we

met when making friends was easy and appearances didn't matter. If we hadn't known each other all these years, I doubt he would have given me a second look.

"So," I whisper, putting my feet up and resting my back against his enormous shoulder, "you don't remember it, really? Like amnesia?"

He shrugs and wraps his arm around me. "I remember the huddle. The next thing I knew, I was flat on my back and the refs were peeling guys off me."

"You must have gotten hit pretty hard," I tell him, matching my palm against his. His hands are twice the size of mine, and I can feel the calluses beneath each finger from his daily weight-lifting sessions. "You'll be fine."

"But I've never blacked out like that before."

Boys. Such babies. I push my back against him. He's two of me, so it's like trying to move Mount Everest. "Is there anything, other than your ass, you want me to kiss and make better?"

He smiles and pats his backside. "You can't improve on this perfection."

I try to smack him, but he grabs my wrist and leans over me to kiss me. He gets the bottom of my cheek, right near the tip of my chin, instead of my mouth. Huh. Missing the mark is totally uncharacteristic of Cam. "Hey. It's nothing. Don't let it get to you," I growl at him.

"I'm not. I'm just tired," he says.

"Okay, if you say so." Did I mention that Cam is a terrible liar?

He leans over to kiss me on the forehead, slides his body out from behind me, and stands. Then he loudly says, "I hope to see you tomorrow, for our UNICEF meeting."

“Whatever,” I sigh as he turns and heads off between two manicured bushes surrounding my porch. Cutting across my lawn is the quickest way to his house. There’s a little path worn into the grass there; we’ve involuntarily created it after years of visiting each other. We could both walk that route in our sleep.

I hear my father lumbering up the stairs inside my house. I decide to give the old man a minute’s head start, so I sit back, watching a moth dance in the porch light. I’m expecting to hear the creaking of the Brownes’ screen door, but it never comes.

I stand up and walk to the edge of the porch. It’s getting chilly, so I pull my jacket around my shoulders and push aside the branch of a Japanese maple that’s resting on the railing. That’s when I see Cam standing all alone, staring up at the sky.

I knew it. He’s letting it get to him.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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