



DEAD RIVER

CYN BALOG

## Also by Cyn Balog

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*Fairy Tale*

*Sleepless*

*Starstruck*

*Touched*

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DEAD RIVER

CYN BALOG

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PRESS

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For Mandy Hubbard

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for taking this wild journey with me

# Contents

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*Cover*

*Other Books by This Author*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

*Acknowledgments*

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Epilogue

*About the Author*

## Acknowledgments

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## Prologue

---

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice flat. Seven-year-olds are all about blunt. No “Hi, how do you do, nice weather we’re having.” After all, he was fishing in my spot.

“No one worth knowin’,” he said in a gooey Southern twang, turning back to his fishing pole. “Fish’re bitin’ like mosquitoes on a hog.”

I took a step closer. His fishing pole wasn’t a nice one like mine. Just a stick with string tied to it. His jeans were holey and dirty, too. He didn’t have a shirt; from the color of his skin he was probably one of those boys who went shirtless from May to September. Freckles like tiny coffee beans mingled with the deep russet hue on his shoulders and nose.

I kicked a stone with my big toe. “You’re in my spot,” I said as the stone skittered off the bright red paint of my dinghy, nicking it.

My spot was the best on the whole Delaware. It was on an island twenty yards off the bank on the Jersey side. The island was big enough for only a couple of shade trees, my cooler of lemonade, and the spot where I’d plant my backside. A lot of times when it rained, it was underwater. But now it wasn’t. It was a perfect time for fishing.

He wiggled his toes in the mud, looked around, patted the ground beside him. “Room enough for two.”

Just barely. I eyed the spot suspiciously. That was where I usually put my cooler. His backside was where mine usually went. I couldn’t tell how old he was; most everyone on my street was so much older than me, they might as well have been from another planet. He was a younger older, though. Maybe only a decade or so older. That made him the most interesting thing I’d seen all day. So I deigned to sit beside him on my mound in the river. “You talk funny,” I said.

He laughed. “Way I see it, you’re the one talking funny, kid.”

I gave him a big “hmp” and cast my line. He watched my every move, silently, like a cat until his string began to bob. He pulled a big fat silver beauty out of the water and grabbed it in his hands as its tail swished back and forth, painting dots of midnight blue on his faded denim. Then he smiled and let it go.

“What did you do that for?” I asked.

“Don’t eat fish,” he answered.

“Then why catch them?”

He shrugged. “Somethin’ to pass the time.”

I shook my head. “There’re a lot funner ways to pass the time, if you don’t eat fish.”

He chuckled. “Well, kid, if you must know, I’m waitin’ on someone.”

“Oh yeah? Who?”

“A missus. She’ll be along in a shake.”

“A what?” When he didn’t answer, I asked, “Your girlfriend?”

“Nah.” His fishing line bobbed again. He pulled in another one, silver and beautiful. The fish dangled from the fraying, sad excuse for a line as he inspected it closely, smiling with pride. I looked at my own rod, glittering red in the sun, a present from my mother for my birthday. The sinker floated on the water, still.

“Well, she’s not taking my spot,” I muttered as he tossed the fish back. “You’re ju



catching the same fish over and over again. What bait you using?"

"Just some worms and bugs I dug up." He looked at my pole. "You ain't gonna catch nothin' with that gleamin' piece of horse manure. The fish'll spot that thing a mile away."

"I do just fine," I said, even though I hadn't caught anything with it yet. My fishing spot had always been good to me, but not lately. I'd been thinking that maybe it was a curse on the pole, since I'd gotten a paper cut on the wrapping when I opened it. "I may be a girl, but I know plenty about fishing."

He shrugged again. "You underestimate them fish," he said with a snicker. "Fish are suspicious creatures, kid."

Know-it-all. And that was stupid. Fish, suspicious? Fish are dumb. About as dumb as he sounded.

His line bobbed again. I wanted to punch him. Instead, I just wrinkled my nose at him. Then I got my pole, stuffed it in my dinghy, and grabbed my oars. "You could give whatever you catch to my family. We eat fish. Which is what you're supposed to do with them."

"Maybe so, maybe so. You going, girl?"

"Yeah. You're in my spot." I sighed heavily, hoping he wouldn't decide he liked my spot enough to frequent it. Then I pointed at my house on the bank. "I live in that white house over there. Where do you live?"

He didn't seem interested, didn't even bother looking toward where my finger pointed. "Other side of the river."

"In Pennsylvania?"

He nodded at the tree-lined bank as if it had just been introduced to him. "That where that is?" Then he smiled. In all my days on this earth I would never forget that smile. The hot summer sun paled in comparison. "Yeah. Pennsylvania."

"Wait. How'd you get here, without a boat?"

He laughed. "Swam."

"No way. The current?"

"I'm a powerful good swimmer, kid. Current's no match for a powerful good swimmer like me."

I raised my eyebrows. My parents would never let me out in the middle of the river like that. The island was as far as I was allowed to venture, because even when it was rough, the water was barely up to my waist. "Oh. Well. You ever catch any fish you want to give me? I'm right over there," I said slowly, pointing the way to my house again. But he didn't bother to turn. He just stared at the ripples in the water. His line began to bob again. I couldn't start it.

"Sorry," he said, shaking his head. "Can't."

I fought back the urge to shove him as he pulled another big beauty in. "Why not? Are you some kind of fish-loving wacko or something?"

"'Cause I don't go over there." He looked at me, the corners of his mouth hanging low. That was another thing I'd always remember. That look. Not frightening. Sad. More than sad. Regretful. "Not unless I have to."

Turned out I didn't have to worry about him taking up permanent residence on my fishing spot. I suppose he found who he was waiting for and moved on, just like the river, never settling in one place for too long.

# Chapter One

---

*Row row row your boat  
and please please please take me  
gently down the stream  
to where I can't be hurt. We'll go  
merrily merrily merrily merrily  
and I won't fight  
for life is but a dream  
and death I think is the awakening.*

**H**ave you ever heard of suicide by river? You just wade out deeper and deeper, and before long the current carries you away. And by then there is nothing you can do about it.

A lot of people wonder what goes through a person's mind during the moments they're pulled away. Do they regret those steps into the churning waves? Do their lungs burn as they gulp for air and get nothing but earthy, thick liquid instead?

I don't wonder, though. Because wondering means I'd have to start thinking of *her*. And I won't spend a second thinking of someone who didn't think of me.

"You're zoning," a voice calls me back. Justin. One of his arms is draped over the steering wheel, and for the first time I realize his other arm is around me. He drums his thick fingers on my shoulder.

I give him a smile. "No, I'm not."

"Then what was the last thing I said?"

"The river is going to be outrageous," I answer.

That's only a guess, but a safe one, since all winter he's been talking about this trip and how the river is going to be outrageous. He keeps fidgeting the foot that's not on the gas pedal. Justin likes outdoorsy things, like climbing mountains and sleeping under the stars at subzero temperatures. He's been going to dam releases on the Dead since he was eleven. He's wearing a red-and-black-check lumberjack shirt, for God's sake. How did we ever get together? I much prefer sleeping in a warm bed. Hot cocoa. Icy water *not* dripping off the end of my nose. I'm, like Jack says in *Titanic*, more of an "indoor girl." Nothing wrong with that.

Though I should probably *not* be thinking about freezing waves and peril in the water right now.

"You write a good poem?" he asks me as I close the cover of the little leather-bound book I carry everywhere.

I wrinkle my nose. I'm never sure anything I write is good. I'm the editor of the yearbook and literary magazine only because nobody else wanted those jobs. Wayview High is big into hockey, and that's about it. My school puts out only one issue of its literary magazine, *The Comet*, a year, mostly because we get no submissions, and so half of the poems in this year's issue were from me. I'd even written a few haiku *about* hockey, hoping it would grab someone's, anyone's, interest. Little good it did. I'm not sure anyone read them, other than

my English teacher. Oh, and Justin. At least he said he did. But looking down at my most recent effort, I'm not sure if I want anyone to see it. "Please take me gently down the stream to where I can't be hurt"? Somehow I can't escape the thought of icy cold water and death, even in my writing.

"Are you scared?" Justin asks me.

"No," I say quickly, resolute. "Of course not." At least, I try to sound resolute, but it's hard, especially since the thought that's now center stage in my brain is that of a thousand human icicles bobbing in a black, endless sea.

"Of course you are, Ki. This is the Dead River we're talking about," Hugo Holbrook says from the back of the truck. I dig my fingers into the vinyl armrest. Of all the people my cousin Angela could have invited on this trip, I can't believe it's Hugo I'll be sleeping in this cramped cabin with for four nights. It's bad enough that I have to spend hours after school in the closet-sized yearbook office with him when we're on deadline. How does she find him even remotely attractive? He has nostrils like black holes and eyes so close together that the space between them is a rickety footbridge. And I'm convinced that his laugh is why earplugs were invented. *Wahah wahah wahah*. "Look at her. She's shaking."

"It's freaking cold," I mutter, grimacing at Angela, Miss He's-Kind-of-Cute-and-Really-Like-Me, in the rearview mirror. She's the same cousin who nursed a frighteningly ugly and smelly three-legged lizard back to health in her bedroom when we were eight, after my aunt and uncle ran it over with their Cadillac SUV. Most people wouldn't have touched it with the back of a shovel, but Angela let it sleep on her pillow.

But Angela doesn't notice my scowl. Her eyes are focused on the river. It's black and churning because they released the dam yesterday, something they do about ten times a year so that the rapids will be intense for rafting. Not exactly as inviting as, say, a dance floor. And lucky me, I'll be in the middle of it tomorrow.

We pass a wooden sign in a stark field: WHAT A MAN SOWS THAT SHALL HE ALSO REAP—GALATIANS 6:7. I shudder and avert my eyes. I'd actually convinced myself that I wanted this. That this would be fun. The sparkling white frost in the bottom of a roadside ditch makes me think about the ice-blue satin gown I saw in Macy's. Then Angela says, "Turn here."

She points down a narrow dirt road descending into the thick forest.

"You're not going down there," I say, incredulous, as Justin barrels in. It's clear, of course, that he is, that we all are, but I think the visions of white water are dancing through his head, crowding out all the sane thoughts.

"Why not?"

"Hello? Mud season?" Among other things. It looks so dark and final down that road. As *People have gone in, but they've never come out.*

"That's what four-wheel drive is for," he says, shifting into gear. The engine revs and we push forward. He pats the dashboard. "That a boy, Monster." Justin always wanted a dog, so since his parents forbade it, he named his truck Monster.

"It's cool, Ki." Angela smiles and pounds her fists on her thighs. "Come on, Monster. You can do it!"

I shiver again, thinking that if my aunt and uncle, Angela's parents, didn't own a cabin in Caratunk, we never would have considered coming here. But Justin, Angela, and I have been planning this forever. Well, mostly Justin and Angela. They've talked about it constantly.

was Justin's idea. Instead of going to the prom, we would skip school and drive up to the cabin for a long weekend during the release. The two of them were so into it, and so anti-prom, that I didn't want to be the brat to tell them I thought dressing up for one evening might be fun. Of course, since I thought my dad would freak out if I even mentioned the word "river" to him, I told Justin we'd have to lie. I didn't explain the details to Justin, just that my father thought rafting was dangerous. So we decided to tell my dad that we were going camping at Baxter State Park. Justin hates deceiving anyone, so for him to lie to my father so convincingly, I knew this was where his heart was.

Back when the idea was hatched, I'd convinced myself I didn't care about the prom. My friends had a way of rolling their eyes and making snide jokes about the event every time it was mentioned, so I went along with it. Angela is a flip-flops and T-shirt girl, so she was dying for an excuse to dodge tripping in three-inch heels. Plus, she's been on the Dead End a hundred times. I'd always seen myself in ice-blue satin, descending a long, winding staircase with a tuxedoed prince, but I couldn't tell them that. They would have laughed their heads off at me.

*You reap what you sow*, I think, leaning my forehead against the cool window, letting my breath condense on it in a circle so I can draw a smiley face. Then I wipe it out as Monster sticks again and Angela shrieks, "Just gun it! Gun it, boy!" like a total hick.

I so sowed this.

It's too late now. I should have said something to Justin. Something like "I'll go rafting with you if you go to the prom with me." After all, the heart of *compromise* is *prom*. But this weekend is all him. And it's too late to change that. I'll just need to suck it up, pretend I'm enjoying myself, and make him take me shopping next weekend. This weekend can be his, as long as the next one is mine.

Justin grins, digs his foot into the accelerator, and we lurch forward. More shrieking and laughter. This morning's cinnamon raisin bagel gurgles in the back of my throat. I'm not even in the water yet and I can already feel the current carrying me away.

A minute later the cabin comes into view, and my spirits brighten considerably.

"Whoa, Angela. You said 'cabin'?" Justin asks, staring up at it.

"Yeah. Cozy, huh?"

My mouth drops open. Justin, Hugo, and I live in trailers on the west end of Wayview in Maine. It should be called Noview, though, because everywhere you look, there's nothing but tall pines. It was Dad's way of insulating me from anything that could possibly remind me of the river where my mother died. There's not a brook, a pond, or even a puddle anywhere in sight. Angela's house, or *mansion*, as most would say, is on the east end of the forest. Angela's dad, my uncle, is a retired CEO and owns a lot of real estate. This vacation "cabin," which they bought last year but have maybe used a total of twice, is probably bigger than all three of our trailers put together. I look over at Justin, and for once, his expression matches mine.

Then he sighs. I am sure he was looking forward to "roughing it." I'm feeling better already. I can keep my distance from Hugo. Maybe we'll even have running water. A steam shower would be so ...

She catches me smiling. "It's nice, huh? But my parents turned off the water for the winter, so ..."

Of course. They only use the cabin in the warmer months. The pipes would have froze

and burst during the long Maine winter if they hadn't turned off the water. I swallow the bitter taste in my throat. "It's cool."

We pile out and Justin begins pulling things from the bed of his truck. Groceries, backpack of my clothes, my travel chess set, the liter of Absolut Justin took from his dad's overstocked and underused liquor cabinet to celebrate our conquering of the Dead. Hugo starts snapping pictures of all the trees, as if we don't have enough of them back home. From here, the river sounds like the gentle hum of an electric toothbrush. The sky is the somber color of castle walls, and the leaves turn out, welcoming rain. Shapeless heaps of dingy snow fight for survival in the new spring grass. Angela grabs a handful of snow and molds it into a ball.

"Don't you dare," I whisper, shivering as I back away.

But it's obvious she has other plans. She launches it over to Justin. It breaks into pieces squarely at the back of his neck, making him jump. He turns to us, amused, but before I can point her out, I realize Angela is already pointing at me, an innocent expression on her face. "Dude, I know it's you," he says to Angela.

He throws my pillow at her. It lands in the mud. "Justin!" I shout, annoyed, but I stop when I realize everyone else is laughing. Sometimes it bothers me how well the two of them get along. After all, they are best friends, and have known each other since way before I came into the picture. Justin once told me that Angela is like the sister he never had, and physically she's not at all like the long line of fair, willowy blondes he's been associated with, of which I'm the latest. She's not fat, but she's solid, with wild, curly black hair and dark skin that turns almost chocolate in the sun. Angela was afraid that she would feel like a third wheel on this trip, which is why she invited Hugo, but she and Justin have so much in common, sometimes *I* feel like the odd person out.

I've heard the story a thousand times. They met on a skiing trip at Sugarloaf when they were both trying to learn the bunny slope. Their parents became friends and then they found out that they both lived in Wayview, so they kept in touch, going on vacations together, sometimes in the winter and summer. Angela went to a private school in Massachusetts, but when I came up, my father insisted I go to the public school, mostly because we didn't have the money. Justin was in my class, but I didn't know him well. When we reached high school, Angela successfully convinced her parents to transfer her to public school by failing out of every class she took. Her parents thought that with my father teaching at Wayview High, maybe she'd be inclined to goof off less. Freshman year, she introduced me to Justin, but I didn't think anything of it other than that he was really cute. He was dating some other blonde in our class, but we always seemed to get thrown together when Angela had parties. It wasn't until junior year, when I had to do an article on the swim team for yearbook, that we fell for each other. He was the captain, and he came by the yearbook office one day after school to identify all the people in the group photo. He was leaning over me, really close, and then he just moved in and kissed me. We made out for an hour, right in the yearbook office. I remember constantly saying, "But Angela ...," and him whispering, "Angela has nothing to do with this."

I snatch the pillow up and dust it off. It's not that bad. I feel stupid for overreacting. Hugo confirms the fact by snapping a picture of me and captioning it "Girl About to Explode." Hugo grins. "Not like there probably aren't four thousand pillows in this place."

I push the camera out of my face. I'm about to explain that my pillow is hypoallergenic and my allergies are always worst in the spring and it's the only pillow I've found that's comfortable enough, but he's right. I do need to loosen up. Funny, I've spent so much energy trying to convince my dad that he'd be okay if he took the shackles off my wrists that I never even thought about whether *I* would be okay once I finally got loose. This is my first trip away from my dad, away from home. And that is thrilling ... but terrifying.

I stifle a sneeze, then cross my arms over my chest, pinching my skin and mentally reciting my motto: *You will be chill. Ice cubes will be jealous of you.*

I'm about to pick up my backpack from Justin's feet but stop when I see something in the woods. The curve of an elbow, pale white against the lush green, still and stark among the new leaves as they sway in the wind. But the next second, it's gone. I suck in a breath, exhale slowly. The last thing I need to be doing is seeing things. Again.

The thing is, nobody here knows about my mother. Not even Angela. Hell, *I* don't really even know. The mystery Nia Levesque became a part of is five hundred miles away, and I like it to stay there. Nobody here knows my history. And I'm going to keep it that way.

## Chapter Two

---

It's been almost ten years since I moved into the tall pines of Wayview, Maine, the last place on earth I'd have picked to live, if it was up to me.

Unfortunately, it wasn't.

So I guess that means it will be the tenth anniversary of my mom's death. Not that I'm keeping track. We left New Jersey only a couple weeks afterward, and we've never been back.

These are the facts I have: Nia Levesque waded into the Delaware River one fair summer night shortly after my seventh birthday. I know little else because how much a person's mother hated life is not something people like to discuss with a seven-year-old. I remember things, though, like that her skin was always damp and clammy and that her hair always looked like it needed a comb run through it. Despite those things, she was my sun. When she was gone, it was like my whole universe went out of orbit, because I'd been so used to following three steps behind her.

I've heard that after a suicide, the people left behind always look back and see signs in the victim, signs of pain or trauma they somehow ignored. I know I was only seven, but with my mom, there were no indications. Nothing. She was never distant; she smiled and hugged and kissed me all the time. When I look back at my mom, I can't help but think there was so much about her I didn't know, so much she must have kept hidden from me.

I know that I have forgotten things: the slope of her nose, the color of her skin, the exact blue shade of her eyes, the little mannerisms she had. Pictures don't convey a whole person, and I only have one of those. It wasn't the one I would have chosen, but I didn't know that my father and I would never return home. I would have taken my whole photo book, which had countless beautiful pictures of my mother, but he chose one picture, from my sixth birthday. In it, she's not even smiling. She's leaning over me as I blow out the candles on my birthday cake and she looks worried, probably that a lock of my hair might get caught in the flame. I don't know what her smile looks like anymore. Every memory I have is just a poor reproduction, merely a shade of her. I worry that as days go by I will forget more and more, and the only thing left will be this overwhelming feeling of abandonment. That and the worried, uneasy woman she was in that picture.

When we lived in New Jersey, we had a house right on the river. I had the best room, a pink, and the sunrise would bounce off the waves and create magical iridescent ripples on my walls. My father put glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling, but when the moon shone, it would splash the brightest white ripples right onto them. More often than not, I felt like I was sleeping underwater rather than under a night sky.

Strange things happened around the time of her death. I can't really explain it. I would lie in my bed, listening to the rush of the river against the rocks, and in time it would sound like voices. Whispering to me. Then the visions came. They didn't start off frightening. I'd lie in the dark with my eyes open, watching them parade through my room, oblivious to me, a series of who-knows-what—ideas or dreams or ghosts, playing on a movie reel. Redheaded boys in overalls, fishing. Girls in old-fashioned swim trunks, holding their noses as they plunged into the blackness. Men in waders, sleeves rolled up. Sometimes I'd have

conversations with them, play games with them, but usually I'd just watch them quietly, a night long, wishing I could be part of their carefree, happy lives.

Until the images ... changed.

I fight back the picture of the girl in the pink party dress and tight, stringy braids. I didn't know her name, didn't know anything about her except that her expression was hopeless and sad, she was covered in dirt, one of her knee-high socks was pooled around her ankle, and her knees were bloody. I think she wanted to tell me something, but whenever she opened her mouth to speak to me, mud poured from it. Mud trickled from her nose, covering the lower part of her face like a beard. Her cheeks were muddy and lined with tears.

I stopped sleeping. My dad was stressed out enough teaching history to inner-city kids in Paterson, in a district two hours from our house, so he didn't need me screaming bloody murder in the middle of the night, like I so often did. He thought I missed my mom. And yeah, I did, but there was more. And I was afraid to tell him. Turned out I was as good at keeping secrets as my mom was.

I lost so many things from that room. My fairy brush, my favorite blue hair ties, my stuffed zebra. And every picture of my mother, except for one. One day, my dad took me out for what I thought was ice cream but turned out to be forever. He'd hastily packed a bag with only a few of my clothes, and so I lost my brand-new Cinderella T-shirt and my comfortable jeans. I don't know why we left so quickly. Luckily, he'd said, he had family up in Wayview with a kid just my age, and he couldn't wait for me to meet them. I knew my father was anxious, because when he is, he repeats himself. As we drove, he kept telling me, over and over again, how much I'd like Maine. How Aunt Missy and Uncle Jim and Angela couldn't wait to see me. How I was his "everything." That's the thing I remember the most, "You're my everything," spouted out again and again until it didn't mean anything. I didn't care. I had to pee so bad but kept thinking we were almost there. With every passing mile, I became more and more certain I'd never see my things, my old house, again. And I couldn't stop thinking that if Mom were here, she wouldn't have agreed to this. She hated the cold. I realized then that this was the first of many things she wouldn't be around to protect me from.

That was when I started to hate her. Not long after, I stopped asking questions about why she did what she did. My father always changed the subject anyway.

Last year Angela hooked up with this guy named Spee. Ken Specian, really, but everyone called him Spee. He was a big jock, totally full of himself, which tells you how much I liked him. Angela has the worst luck with guys; watching her trying to get on with a guy she's really into is like watching a plane attempting to touch down without landing gear. Anyway, she was so into Spee, but it was obvious that he didn't give a rat's you-know-what about her because, well, he never took her out in public. He never took her anywhere they might see other people from school. All they ever did was go to Frank's Diner, ten miles out of town on this deserted mountain road. Angela would just mention Frank's and I would know what she was up to. It was a place the toothless crowd frequented, so she and Spee brought the average age of the customers down to ninety.

But then, after three months of meeting her there every week, he just stopped calling her. Angela never said as much, but I know she was devastated, because two months later she finally convinced me to go with her to Frank's. "I need to see our place one last time. T



prove he has no hold over me,” she told me. So we went. It was completely uncomfortable sitting among dozens of people who had to put their dentures on the paper advertisements, place mats to keep them clean while they nursed their free senior citizen coffees. But we did it, and there was no mistaking the look of triumph on Angela’s face when we paid our bills and stepped outside.

That’s kind of what this trip is like to me. I think my dad thinks I’ll have a mental breakdown if I see another river. Maybe because that’s what he would do. But not me. This weekend, I’m proving that the river, that my mother, has no hold over me. She hasn’t been here when I needed her, so there’s no way I’ll let her dictate where I can and can’t go. She lost that privilege ten years ago.

And seriously, I’m fine. More than fine, now that I’m out of the Monster. I inhale the crisp, clean scent of pine and feel just perfect.

Angela bounds over to the front porch and pokes around in a snow-covered planter for the key. She and I never talk about my mom. I know Angela never met her, and I don’t think my aunt or uncle did, either, so there really isn’t anything they could say. I think someone told Angela my mom was sick. My mom sometimes complained of not feeling well. Headaches usually. She tried to hide that from me, too, but I was lost without her, so I’d often sit outside her bedroom, waiting for the Excedrin to kick in. She had a giant green vat of headache pills in the medicine cabinet and a little matching one in her purse. I guess the whole illness thing was the way to go if you wanted to avoid the “uncomfortable truths.” Which, really, everyone did.

Inside the “cabin,” there’s a three-story-high stone fireplace decorated with giant moose antlers. Uncle Jim loves the outdoors, too, but he’s no Davy Crockett. He is all about modern conveniences. Their place in Wayview, while full of big windows that bring the outdoors in, is crammed with all the latest gadgets: space-age coffeemakers that do everything but pour the stuff down your throat, wall-sized televisions, things like that. I should have known the place would be no different. Angela catches me looking and says, “The antlers are fake.”

“Oh,” I say, wondering where people buy fake moose antlers. There are paintings of mountain and forest scenes everywhere and it smells like pine, not real pine like outside, but pine air freshener. Something about it inspires me. There’s a poem in here somewhere. I pull out my trusty notebook and scribble some notes: *What is real? What is good about nature anyway?*

Justin looks around, his upper lip curled in disdain. It’s not exactly the great outdoors. He turns to me and laughs. “Well, aren’t we just glowing?”

I smile. “Oh yes. I’m going to go pick out my bedroom. Do you think it has a fireplace? Maybe a robe and fuzzy slippers?”

“What are you writing?” he asks.

“Notes. Observations. ‘My boyfriend’s upper lip disappears completely when he’s disappointed.’ ”

He realizes what he’s doing and sticks out his lips, moving them up and down like a fish gulping for air. “This better? Ah, well. And here I thought we would get the chance to snuggle.”

He’s mocking me. I’m always cold, so I’m the one usually trying to snuggle against *him*. I punch his shoulder as we climb the open staircase to the loft.

Angela follows us upstairs and leads us to a giant room with another fireplace and a huge brass king bed. "You can have the master suite, if you want," she says, giving me a wink.

We throw our stuff onto the bed. It's not really a big deal, having the master suite to ourselves for a weekend. Teaching AP history and supervising three extracurriculars, Dad can't always be around to watch us. At my house, we could have wild monkey sex every afternoon on the kitchen table if we so chose. As it happens, we don't choose that, ever. I know of people in my class who live under their parents' thumbs, so the second they're free they're going at it, in public restrooms, parks, wherever. Justin and I aren't like that. We never were.

Not that I have much to compare him to. Justin dated a bunch of other girls before me. I don't think I ever saw him single. But Justin is my first boyfriend. So when we started dating there were a lot of things I didn't know. But we've been together since freshman year. Not being with him is like sliding into a favorite T-shirt.

*And yet somehow, I think as I pull my long underwear out of my bag, I still couldn't tell him I wanted to go to the prom.*

Maybe because, after three years, he should have just known.

Angela walks back down the hallway, whistling something that sounds like a cross between "Let's Get It On" and "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah." Justin puts his arms around me. He looks around and sighs.

"I know, you wanted to toast marshmallows over an open fire," I say.

He nods. "Yeah."

"Fine," I say, thinking, *Next weekend. Next weekend we're going shopping, come hell or high water.* And high water is definitely coming, whether I like it or not. He can handle a couple of hours holding my bag as I try on new clothes. "It's pretty warm tonight. You and I can go out in our sleeping bags and light a fire and sleep under the stars. Okay?"

He raises his eyebrows. "You'd hate that."

"No, it'll be ... fun."

He laughs, because I'm sure my face must be twisted in disgust. "I knew I loved you for a reason."

"Besides, Hugo's really getting on my nerves. It will be nice to get away from him."

"He just makes fun of you all the time because he wants you," he says matter-of-factly.

I try to swat him away. Justin is always under the impression that anything with a chromosome is after me. This includes priests, dogs, and old men with walkers. "What? C please."

"What can I say? You're hot. Especially in that getup." I start to look down at my boring North Face jacket, which is the exact opposite of hot, but he pulls me back and hugs me tighter. Hugging him feels right, comfortable, like my pillow. "Besides, he's a guy. And I know what guys are thinking."

"Oh, right." I've heard this one before. "Sex, twenty-five hours a day."

"Yep. We basically want to nail anything female. Especially when she's hot."

"This is very comforting news, coming from my boyfriend," I mutter. I might be alarmed if he didn't tell me this anytime I get any attention whatsoever from a member of the opposite sex. Usually with a nudge-nudge and a *See-I-told-you-so* smirk of satisfaction. "So why aren't you trying to get some right now?"

“Because duh. I am a *gentleman*. Obviously.” He pats my butt to show me just how chivalrous he is.

“Oh. *Obviously*.”

“Well, the important thing is not that we’re thinking of sex with every girl in the world. Because, trust me, we are. The important thing is that we don’t act on it.”

“Ah, I see,” I say, as if we’re discussing the theory of relativity. “So this is proven? All guys? Sex all the time?”

“Ask any guy. Go ahead. Ask Hugo.”

I cringe. If Hugo is thinking about sex with me, I really would rather not know. “I’ll just take your word for it.”

We both turn toward the large picture window. I can make out the black water through the trees. It’s not far away. For a moment I’m in my old pink bedroom, watching the ripples dance on the walls. Then I think of that little girl, the one dressed in pink. She opens her mouth and the filth begins to ooze over her bottom lip just as I’m jolted back to reality.

“You okay?” Justin asks. When I look at him, confused, he says, “You’re shivering. Come on, Hugo’s not that bad.”

“No, it’s not that.”

“What, then? Look, you don’t have to spend the night outside with me,” he says, stroking my cheek softly with the calloused pad of his thumb.

“No, I wasn’t—” I begin, but it’s better he doesn’t know what I was really thinking. About that life that he knows nothing about. It’s not worth explaining anyway. The past belongs to the past. This trip is all about moving on, and that’s exactly what I plan to do.

## Chapter Three

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My cell rings while I'm pulling on my long underwear. I check the display and see a familiar number. "Hey, Dad," I say, watching Justin do a little jig by the window. He's so excited by the river, he's gotten dance fever.

"Hey," my dad says. "Where are you?"

"Just got to Baxter," I lie as Justin turns to watch me. I plant my butt on the edge of the bed. "We're setting up our tents now."

"Cool," my dad says. "How's the charge on your phone?"

"It's fine," I say as Justin twirls around the room like he's Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. Totally sexy.

"Mount Katahdin is *brehtaking*! The hills really are alive up here!" Justin shouts. Then he falls down on the ground. Then he pretends that something is attacking him. He gets up, runs, and falls, and by then I guess the imaginary thing is on top of him because he collapses on his stomach and screams. "And they're ... going ... to eat me!"

*Shut up*, I mouth, but my dad must have heard. "How is Justin?"

"Um, he's ...," I begin, watching him miraculously revive.

Justin calls out, "Going to wait until *after* dinner to murder your daughter."

I reach over and smack him. "... good."

"Are you okay? Do you need anything? If you do, just call. Just call me anytime. Let your old man know how things are going."

I sigh. That's my dad. By now Justin is making funny faces at me, trying to get me to laugh. He almost succeeds when he rolls his eyes back in his head and pushes up his nose to look like a pig. "Everything's fine. And I've got to go. We're going to the store. We forgot ..." I look around but can't come up with anything. I'm terrible at thinking on my feet like this.

Justin offers, "Beef jerky?"

I'm about to say it, but I catch myself in time and smack him on the shoulder again. "mean, we're going on a hike. And we want to get up there before it gets dark."

"*You're* a beef jerky," I whisper at Justin.

"Now?" my dad says. I can just picture him in the living room, looking at the kitchen clock through his bifocals and shaking his head. "It's awful late for that. Bring flashlights in case you're not back by nightfall."

"Don't worry, Mr. Levesque. Everything's fine," Justin calls, starting to make faces again.

I smack him again as I disconnect from my father and sigh. "I hate having to lie to him."

"He's being irrational. People who don't know the facts are quick to condemn it, but whitewater rafting is completely safe," Justin says, sounding like a public service announcement. Then he grins. "Now let's go outside!"

We don't get to ditch Hugo after all. While we're gathering our bags and trying to sneak down the stairs, Angela comes out of her room, her eyes big and round. She has eyes that would make the most hardened criminal confess and beg for mercy. They should be surrounded by a nun's wimple. "Where are you off to?"

"We were just, um ..." Justin looks at me. He's terrible at confrontations.

"We thought we would camp outside. Just for tonight," I explain.

“You?” she says to me, incredulous. When I nod, her eyes get wider yet. “But you can leave me alone with Hugo!” she whispers. “That would be so ... awkward.”

“You invited him,” I point out. “What happened to ‘He’s kind of cute?’”

“Yeah, well, he is, but ...” Pleading, she looks at Justin. “I don’t even really know him that well. Being alone with him *all night*, would be totally *awkward*, with a capital A.”

“This is a little plusher than I thought, Angela,” Justin says. “Don’t get me wrong. It’s nice. I just thought that ...”

She clamps her hand around mine. “We were going to make popcorn and s’mores and tell scary stories and stuff. *Please.*”

Right. Angela was a Girl Scout. She lives for s’mores and scary stories by firelight. I look back at Justin. He clears his throat. “Well, why don’t you guys come with us?” he asks.

“Really?” she asks. “Okay! That would be cool!”

She scampers off to gather her things as I glare at Justin. He has this way of caving under the slightest amount of pressure. He squeezes my hand. “It’ll be fun,” he whispers.

“But ... Hugo,” I say, since that name alone is an explanation as to why it won’t be.

He doesn’t answer, just takes my sleeping bag from me, as if carrying it is his way of apologizing. Then he leads us out to the backyard. Angela points the way to an old campsite and we set up there. There’s a fire pit, and Justin, the master woodsman, finds a way to get a fire burning within a few minutes. When we lay out our sleeping bags, Angela begins to divvy up the marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate bars.

When I sit down on my bag, my butt thuds painfully against the hard ground and some insect skitters across my nose. Even with the fire burning and my hands in the pockets of my jacket, my fingertips feel numb. I immediately regret being so sweet to Justin. Not only that, but tomorrow we’ll be on the river, instead of getting ready for prom. I was already being nice to him by agreeing to come on this trip. What made me agree to sleep outdoors?

“Scary story time,” Angela says. “I am so going first. I’ve been practicing this one ever since we started planning the trip. It’ll totally freak you out, Ki.”

I stare at her. “Thanks?”

“No, you’ll appreciate this one.”

I think she’s saying this because I’m a horror movie junkie. But that’s indoors, in a well-lit room. Even with Justin to protect me, it’s spooky, and we’ll be sleeping here all night. Outside the circle, the forest is black. The rushing river sounds like eerie whispers. No, no. The river is fine. The sound is relaxing. *The river has no hold over me.*

“Once upon a time,” she begins as I nibble on a marshmallow. She leans forward so that the fire casts strange shadows on her face. “There was this boy.”

“Ooooh. Scary,” Hugo says.

Nobody bothers to laugh or even to look at him, not even Angela, who is too absorbed in her story to notice him. “His name was Jack McCabe. He grew up in a home with his father who was a lumberjack. His father was also a very evil man who blamed Jack for the death of his wife in childbirth. So he would beat Jack every night if he didn’t do everything he was told. He made Jack clean the house, make him meals, tend to the animals, everything. The father would sit there at night, sharpening the blade of his ax on a stone, watching his son. That was all he ever did. *Sleesh ... sleesh ... sleesh.*”

Angela makes a high screeching noise, like nails on a chalkboard. I start to roll my eyes back

stop when a shiver touches my shoulders.

An owl hoots. There's a chill in the air, a breeze blowing off the river. I hug myself tighter. It certainly isn't Angela's attempt at scaring me that's making me quiver. It's just numbingly cold. But I can't stop. I move closer to Justin and pull his arm around me.

"So as he was growing up, Jack did whatever his father told him to do, or else he knew he'd be beaten or even killed. One of the things he had to do every night was go down to the river and fetch water. This river." She points in the general direction of the Dead. "He had to go every night, several times, to fill his bucket with water. It was a worn path, lit only by the moon."

"So ... where was Jill during all this?" Hugo asks.

"I'm trying to tell a story!" Angela says, pouting.

I look up at the moon, the pine needles crisscrossing over it like cat scratches. And then something catches in me. Something familiar. The moon isn't full now, but *then* it was.

*Something happened by the light of the full moon.*

I swallow, but my throat is dry. The sense of déjà vu creeps over me entirely and for a moment I feel like I'm falling. *Get ahold of yourself, Ki!* I shake it away, steady myself again. Justin's broad frame, and try to concentrate on the flames licking at a charred log in the fire pit.

Hugo smiles smugly and pretends to zip his lip as Angela continues. "Anyway, one night as he's walking to fetch water, he sees a girl on the other side of the river. She's crying. He thinks it must be a ghost, as it disappears right away. But then he sees her again, calling to him, always crying and calling to him from the other side of the river. So he follows her. And then he loses sight of her, fetches the water, and goes back home. Every night, he sees the crying girl and follows her, trying to find out what she is, why she is so sad, but every night she disappears, and every night he ends up spending more time outside. His father decides something is going on and so he follows him one night. And as Jack is walking down the path after the girl he hears it. *Sleesh ... sleesh ... sleesh.* His father sharpening his ax."

The shivers again. But why? It's a stupid story. And Angela's voice is way too perky and cute to pull it off.

*But the moon. That full moon.* I can see it now.

And now I can hear the sound of the bucket swinging in Jack's hand. I hear a body moving through the brush, and the footsteps trudging down that worn path to the river. To the Dead.

*Sleesh ... sleesh ... sleesh.*

Now my entire body is alive with tingles. That sound. That slicing sound. I've heard it before. Somewhere.

It's not just coming from Angela. It's everywhere, all around the woods, *echoing in my head.*

*He looks up. The blade is silver, glistening in the moonlight slashing down through the leaves....*

"He looks around but doesn't see anyone, so he runs to get the water."

*Why? Why did you ... I did everything you asked of me.*

Angela pauses for dramatic effect and then whispers, "The last thing he saw was the black end of the ax—"

"Stop!" I say, jumping to my feet. The three of them stare up at me. Hugo has a satisfied expression on his face, like a wuss. I point to a crumpled plastic bag by Angela's feet. "Um, mean, are there any more marshmallows?"

Amused, she kicks the bag over to me. Like she knows she scared the crap out of me. But she didn't. She wouldn't have, except ... "Sure," she says. "Knock yourself out."

I grab a handful and snuggle closer to Justin. "That was a lame story," Hugo says. "I give you a C for creativity."

Angela says, "What? It's not creative. It really happened! I read about it in an old book called *Ghost Stories of the Rivers* or something. Jack McCabe supposedly still haunts the river where he died, with the crying girl he was following that night."

Their laughs, dulled by the sound of an ax being sharpened, echo in my head. I try to clamp my hands over my ears but it doesn't help. Justin says something that I can't hear and Angela nods. "It's an old legend from around these parts. They say that when you're about to die, the dead will call to you from the other side of the river. And then when your time is up ... they come to take you away."

Hugo says, "I've heard that. Kind of like Charon and the river Styx."

"Exactly," Angela answers.

I try to find some moisture in my mouth but it feels like sandpaper. "Um. Can we do something more fun? Maybe sing songs? Fall face-first into the fire?"

"No, wait," Justin says, oblivious to me. Maybe it's a good thing that he doesn't notice what a scaredy-cat I am, because it means I'm playing it off well. But then he says, "I have a good story. One that we told in fifth-grade camp."

"Fifth-grade camp stories are never good," Hugo says with his annoying laugh, only this time it doesn't sound so annoying. In fact, I think I want to kiss him.

"True," I agree, maybe a little too readily.

"This one is classic," Justin says. "Trust me."

"But I thought we could talk a little about the rafting trip tomorrow. You know, so I'm prepared," I say.

Justin squints at me. I know what he's thinking. I haven't wanted to talk about rafting at all, when it's been his favorite topic of conversation for the past three months. So why this sudden intense interest?

"I *am* a little nervous," I tell him. Which is the truth. Plus, it hides the bigger truth: that something really weird just happened. When Angela was telling her story, I could hear all the sounds in my head: the blade being sharpened, the rusty pail swinging as the boy walked. I could see the ax. Well, maybe not *the* ax, but an ax. But worse than that, I could see the boy lying on the ground, gasping for breath as the blood coursed over his lips, asking, "Why?" *He did everything you asked of me*, he'd choked out before his chest went still. Angela hadn't said anything like that in telling her story. She didn't have to. And yet I knew. It was like I'd been there.

"All right," Justin says. "It's Class Four and Five rapids, meaning it's pretty fierce. But you'll have a blast. Believe me."

I suck in a shot of cold air. I'm not really in the mood for anything *fierce* right now. I want a teddy bear.

He massages my knee. "It's nothing to be nervous about. Like I said, more people—"

"I know, I know. More people get injured going bowling than they do on white-water rafting trips," I say.

"Right. And Ange and I have been on this river a hundred times. We know what to expect."

“Smooth sailing,” Ange says. “Totally.”

It’s true, Angela’s and Justin’s parents have brought them up here, together, at least once a year since they were in preschool. If any two people know the river inside and out, it’s them. Of course, them knowing the river isn’t going to save me if I do something stupid, like lose my balance, which is a pretty frequent occurrence. “But what if I fall out of the raft or something?” I ask. “Does that happen?”

He nods. “Sure it does. Sometimes. Rarely. I’ve been on the river a thousand times and can count on one hand the number of times I’ve fallen out. It won’t happen to you.”

“But if it does?”

“You’ll have on your life jacket. And I’ll keep you safe,” he says, voice firm. “Don’t worry.”

I nod, because I believe him. Justin doesn’t say anything he doesn’t mean. He’s a simple guy, which is probably the reason I like him so much. Too many of my friends are in relationships with guys who say one thing and do another. And he’s completely protective of me, always. One day he’ll be a Maine State Police officer, I know. Most people stiffen when they pass a police vehicle because they’re afraid of getting a ticket, but he stiffens because he wants to look responsible in case the future officer in charge of hiring is in that police car and might remember Justin five years from now when he interviews for the job.

Just when I think that my efforts to change the subject have worked, Angela pipes up.

“So, Justin. About that story from fifth-grade camp. I want to hear it,” she says. I no longer love her. She leans forward. “Go ahead.”

I pull my blanket around my body as he begins. I’m hoping I can tune him out. Hoping that he won’t choose now to prove that he has the creativity to be a good storyteller. But it’s almost as if I’m wearing headphones and his voice is being piped right into my ear. And his voice, which is always kind of soothing, drops to this low, breathy whisper that I’ve never known him to possess. “Once there was this kid named Trey Vance. He was walking home from school. He wasn’t a very big kid, smaller than me ... maybe Hugo’s size, just average. He was taking the shortcut through the woods and there he saw two boys with their backs turned to him. He knew they were older kids from his school who had given him trouble before, so he meant to walk past them quietly. But they turned and saw him, and they suddenly looked all nervous. A few days later the body of a young girl was found at the same location he’d seen the boys, and Trey realized that the older kids must have killed her.”

The wind picks up, finding its way to my neckline. I pull the blanket around me and suddenly it’s clear to me. *They’ll get him when he goes fishing.*

I don’t know how, but suddenly the thought is so clear to me. So obvious, like it’s happening right in front of me, right now. I see him tying string to a pole, and beyond him, a lush forest, a tree branch bends. Someone is watching him. But he is turned away. A lock of dirty-blond hair falls in his eyes and he sweeps it behind his ear, unaware.

Somehow, for some reason, I know more than even *he* does.

“For a few days,” Justin goes on, “Trey wrestled with what he’d seen, wondering if he should go to the police. But one of the boys, it turns out, saw Trey as he was running away. So one day Trey was walking to the river, completely unsuspecting.”

When Justin mentions the river, suddenly I see the kid at the edge of the pier, in his dirty jeans, with his stick fishing pole. *That’s the one. Get him.* I open my mouth, wanting to scream to him, to tell him to watch out. He doesn’t know they’re behind him. He won’t know until



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