

*Will the Evil Librarian return  
for a deadly second act?*

SCARLET  
PINEAPPLE  
&  
CITRUS  
OVERLEAF  
BOOKS

**REVENGE  
OF THE  
EVIL  
LIBRARIAN**



**MICHELLE KNUDSEN**



# Revenge of the Evil Librarian

Michelle Knudsen



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# Chapter

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01

Italian class is not what it used to be.

I am thinking this as I watch Signor O'Flannigan list our summer vocabulary words on the board. Signor O'Flannigan is young and enthusiastic and very, very nice. He flashes his sunny smile constantly and never yells at anyone and will talk to you in English outside of class without giving you a hard time about it. He is different from Signor De Luca (may he rest in peace) in pretty much every possible way. Almost everyone loves him.

But almost everyone has no idea what really happened to Signor De Luca. They don't even know he's dead. They especially don't know that the reason he's dead is because he was trying to help us defeat the evil librarian who was taking over the school and bewitching my beloved best friend.

They don't know that he would still be alive right now if Ryan and I had never gone to him for help. Which is something

I keep trying not to think about, but it's not easy. His memory is like a grouchy Italian dagger permanently embedded in my heart.

Today, incidentally, is the next-to-last day of school. (Tomorrow is a half day, consisting only of homeroom and an assembly, and therefore barely exists.) It's cute that Signor O'Flannigan is trying to teach a final class. No one is paying any attention to him.

Annie, the aforementioned beloved best friend, is sitting next to me, not only here and alive but also free from the influence of any demonic love spells. (I know that generally goes without saying about people, but Annie is a special case.) She is doodling in her notebook and daydreaming about her not-very-secret love interest. Okay, no, I can't actually read her mind, but it's a pretty safe bet. She's drawing little hearts and flowers and various intertwined versions of the initials A and W. (His name is William. He's in third-period statistics with her, and she talks about him a lot. A LOT. It's adorable.)

One row over and two rows up from where I am sitting, the lovely Ryan Halsey is also here and alive. He is also now my boyfriend (!!!) which perhaps I may have neglected to mention thus far. He is not very subtly playing a game on his phone. I forgive him for doing this instead of messaging me sexy messages or turning around to give me affectionate looks or using this time to write me a sonnet or something because I am a really awesome girlfriend.

I am observing the people I love in this room and feeling so relieved that at least most of us are still here and alive and none of us are consorts to horrible demons for all eternity. I know

I maybe seem to be fixated on the whole still-here-and-alive thing, but it was a big question for a while there in the fall. We all almost died. *Everyone in the whole school* almost died.

Annie was the only one in danger of becoming a demon consort, though. Well, other than Aaron, but he is old and does not go to our school and is not someone I care about. Plus, he *wanted* to be a demon consort, so there really wasn't a downside for him. Oh, and Danielle, but that was very sudden and brief and hardly counts. Plus I don't really like her all that much. Although I'm still glad she wasn't killed or made a demon consort.

It is possible that, out of context, none of this makes any sense at all.

Let us review:

During the fall semester, a ridiculously attractive but also very, very evil demon (Mr. Gabriel) set up shop in our high school as the new librarian and tried to steal away my best friend to be his demonic child bride. He killed some teachers, including poor Signor De Luca and our super-nice principal, and sucked out parts of a lot of kids' souls or life forces or whatever, but in the end I totally vanquished him. Well, with some help. Some very welcome help, like from Ryan, and some less-welcome-but-still-necessary help, like from the demoness who temporarily posed as our replacement Italian teacher.

The help from the demoness was tricky because it required me to make a promise to return to the demon world twice more at times of her choosing. Because it turns out I have some innate demon resistance that she can borrow to use against other demons if I let her. (The rather insulting technical term

for the kind of human I am is *super-roach*. Or at least that's the rough translation of the unpronounceable demon word.) It's kind of complicated, I guess. But the short version is that I let her borrow my resistance the first time to help her become queen of the demons, and in return she gave me some (highly questionable) magic items that (nevertheless) helped me to kick Mr. Gabriel's evil ass and save Annie from him forever.

No one else actually knows about the thing where I have to return twice more to the demon world. Except the demoness, obviously. And the aforementioned Aaron, who used to be the guy who ran the esoteric bookstore and who later, sort of thanks to me, achieved his (highly questionable) life-long dream of becoming the demoness's consort and going to live with her in demony bliss until the end of time. He doesn't count. The people who do count — Annie, Ryan, Leticia, Diane — have no idea. Actually Leticia and Diane have no clue about any of the demon stuff at all. They just thought I was going through the usual tech-week stress during the time leading up to our *Sweeney Todd* fall musical production. Which I was, of course. There was just also a lot of extra stress involving multiple demons and Annie going temporarily crazy and many complicated and confusing feelings regarding Ryan, who confessed his growing affection for me right before I stabbed him with a magic protractor so I could get sucked into a vortex to the underworld.

But! All the stuff with Ryan worked out in the end. Did I mention that he is now my boyfriend? Also, he has forgiven me for said stabbing and for almost dying in order to save Annie. And for some lying that happened, since we agreed no

more lying from now on. And so no more lying. Except about the two-more-trips-to-the-demon-world thing. But that's an old lie, not a new one, and so the rule does not apply.

Okay—enough about all the demon stuff. I don't want to dwell on bad things. The bad things are over now. Now is the time of happiness and joy across the land.

Exhibit A: Annie is not a demon bride! Also, she is alive and well and beginning to have a non-demony real-life love connection with an actual human boy.

Exhibit B: Ryan Halsey is my boyfriend!

Exhibit C: In exactly eight days, I will be getting on a bus with Ryan to go to Allengate, the theater camp he has been attending nearly every summer of his entire life. This is because (a) he got his parents to talk to my parents about how great the camp is and (b) thanks to Mr. Henry's glowing recommendation and my set-design notes and sketches for *Sweeney Todd*, I was accepted into the camp's highly competitive set-design track, which means I will get to be set designer on one of the shows going up during each three-week session. I will be there for three sessions, and so that is three entire shows I get to design sets for, and I am incredibly excited about this. They even have mock Tony awards at the end of each session, and I am going to win all of the set-design awards, because that is the kind of goal I like to have.

And while I am designing sets and winning awards, I will get to spend the *whole summer* with Ryan. Up in the woods somewhere. And I will get to watch him be amazing in whatever shows he gets into while I am being amazing designing

the sets for whatever shows I get assigned to, which will maybe hopefully even be the *same* shows, and it is going to be the best summer ever in the history of summers.

When the bell rings, Signor O'Flannigan calls out some kind of have-a-good-summer-but-also-keep-practicing-your-Italian nonsense, but I'm not listening because (a) that's just silly, and (b) I'm too busy watching Ryan slide out of his chair and turn and walk toward me. It's rather a breathtaking sight. Even after all this time.

It's funny; in some ways I feel like I've known him forever, and in other ways he is still a big beautiful frustrating mystery. He's the only one who really understands (almost) everything that happened. We have shared experiences that no one else can even begin to imagine. And we've only gotten closer since then, even without the threat of horrible death to accelerate our connection. But I can still never tell what he's thinking. And he still makes me feel ridiculous and light-headed a lot of the time. Like right now. I've watched him get out of his chair at the end of Italian approximately forty-six times this semester, and you'd think I'd be over it, but I'm not. He is both strong and graceful, like a leopard or a ninja, and he kind of slides up and out and turns in one lovely fluid motion. And then he gives me one of those lopsided half smiles, and I have learned to remain sitting until after that part.

Once the smiling happens and I've adjusted, I can get up, too. And then he comes right up to me, which, I know, is normal, because he's my boyfriend and everything, but there is still a tiny part of the old Cyn lurking in the back of my brain



who can't help shrieking with excitement that Ryan Halsey is standing RIGHT THERE. I tell the old Cyn to get a grip, but she just can't.

"Last Italian class of the year," Ryan says, shaking his head in mock sadness. "Are you sad? Do you need a hug?"

"I'm devastated. Please hug me."

He does. My legs forget to hold me up for second, but it's okay because I know he's got me. No matter what.

"See ya later, lovebirds," Annie says, squeezing past us. This is her current favorite thing to call us. She has penned multiple drawings of Ryan and me as lovestruck ornithurae. I have some of them in my room. Others had to be destroyed, because, my God, that girl has an obscene imagination.

"See you at lunch," I say from against Ryan's shoulder.

"See you tonight," Ryan says to her, turning both of us awkwardly around because he's still hugging me. "Are you bringing William?"

I punch him as well as I can while still in the hug because he has been warned that the whole William thing is a very new and delicate situation. Annie glances away. "I—maybe. I haven't asked him yet. But yeah, maybe. I mean, that would probably be fun, right?"

"Ask him," I command, snaking a hand free to point at her. "You promised."

"Okay, okay," she says, backing toward the door. Then she flashes me a quick smile. "Probably." And then she's gone.

Reluctantly, I say to Ryan, "If you don't let me go, I'm never going to make it to English on time."

"It's the last day. No one will care."

"And you'll be late for Schwartzman. *He'll care.*"

"Hmm."

"And I will see you later."

"But that's later. I like now." He squeezes me a little tighter. See? These are the things that make me love him.

"I like now, too," I say, trying and failing to get free. And not really minding, obviously. But he really will get in trouble if he's late. Even on the last day. "But . . ."

Finally he sighs, which, on the inhale, presses his lovely chest momentarily even tighter against mine, then lets me go.

"Oh, all right." He gives me a steely look. "I want more of that later."

"If I must."

"You must."

"Okay, then." I feel myself grinning in that ludicrous helpless way I do when I look at him for too long. It's such a relief not to have to try to hide it. He grins back, which only makes me grin more, and so I push past him and out the door before we get stuck in some kind of endless grinning wormhole that no one can ever escape.

I'm still grinning when I get to my next class, even though I'm a few seconds after the bell. And even when I finally get my face to stop, the grinning continues on the inside. I know, I know: I'm ridiculous. Whatever. There's nothing I can do about it, and, honestly, I'm just too happy to care.

At lunch, Leticia and Diane and Annie are already at our usual table when I arrive.

Leticia begins to sing the Miss America song as I approach.

I give her a quizzical look as I sit down, and she shrugs. "It just felt right. I went with it. I'm sure there was some Sondheim song or other I could have chosen, but you know I don't know crap about musical theater."

"True," I say. "I don't mind being sung the Miss America song. Does this mean I have to devote my reign to bringing about world peace?"

"Or ending world hunger," Diane says.

"Or reversing climate change," Annie puts in.

"I'm exhausted already. I'm just going to eat my lunch."

"Good idea," Leticia says. She looks down and contemplates her own lunch. I look, too, and then put my sandwich down without taking a bite.

"What is that?" I ask.

Diane leans in. "I is only eating things that are green this week."

"Oh," Annie and I say in unison.

Leticia's lunch consists of sliced green peppers, a spinach salad with edamame and asparagus, a tiny (green) Tupperware container of guacamole, and some green Jell-O. None of us says a word as, after a minute, she goes for the Jell-O first.

"Anyway," Diane says finally, "do you guys want to come over before the party later? We can all leave from my house together."

"Sure," Annie says. "I can never get ready at my house without one of the siblings trying to 'help' me."

"Good," Leticia says to Annie. "Maybe our combined forces can prevent her from wearing something utterly inappropriate."

"You can try," Diane says, winking at L. She looks at me. "Cyn?"

"Absolutely. I need to get my Annie and Leticia and Diane time in before I leave for camp."

Annie pouts. "I still can't believe you're leaving for the whole summer. The *whole summer*. Who does that?"

"Future Broadway backstage megastars, that's who," Leticia says. She reaches over and pats Annie's hand. "Don't worry. We'll keep you company. If you're not too busy with sweet, sweet William."

Annie turns a highly amusing shade of scarlet. "Will you guys quit it? He's not—I'm not—"

"Yeah, yeah," I say. "Did you ask him yet?"

"About tonight?" Diane asks in alarm. "You mean you didn't ask him already?"

"No," Annie moans. "I can't. I want him to come, but I can't just walk up to him and say, 'Hey, want to come to a party with me?'"

"Yes, you can!" Diane and Leticia and I insist together.

Suddenly Diane looks up and then uses both feet to kick all of us under the table. We all turn to follow her gaze.

William is walking toward us. Leticia and Diane smile brightly at him. Annie seems to be trying to melt into the floor.

I watch him approach. William is super cute in a very slightly nerdy kind of way. Hipster glasses, plaid shirt, dark skin, and light-brown eyes. But he's got a little bit of a swagger, and there's something in his smile that is definitely not

textbook angel. Like he's ninety percent sweetness and light and ten percent the opposite, but in all the best ways.

I think he's perfect for Annie.

I think she thinks so, too. Which is why she's so terrified.

"Hi, there," Leticia says when he reaches our table.

"Hey," William says, looking around to address all of us. Then he looks at Annie. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Annie nods and gets up without making a sound, following him over to the side of the cafeteria.

We stare shamelessly.

"Can you hear anything?" I ask.

"Nope," Diane says. "Too far. And my lipreading sucks."

"Their body language is good," Leticia says. "See how he's leaning in? I wish Annie would uncross her arms, though. It sends the wrong signal. Ooh! Uncrossed! Good girl. Now touch his hand. Touch it! Touch it!"

Diane lays her hand on L's arm. "I don't think she can actually hear you, honey."

"I know. I'm trying to send messages to her unconscious. It worked with the arms uncrossing."

We continue to watch them. He smiles, she smiles, *he* touches *her* hand, and then he walks away. Annie watches him go, a beatific smile still on her face.

Finally she comes back to us and sits down.

"Well?" Leticia says. "What happened?"

Annie's smile gets even bigger. She's having trouble looking at us. "He asked me to go to the party tonight. I didn't even know he was friends with Sarah."



“Yay!” Leticia shouts, loud enough for people at neighboring tables to look over. We all shush her.

“Yay,” she says more quietly. “Although I still wish you’d asked him first. You need to take charge of your own destiny, girl!”

“Okay, okay,” I say. “One step at a time. The important thing is that Annie is going to the party with William.”

“Yes,” Diane agrees. “Is he going to pick you up? Did you tell him to come to my house? Do you know what you’re going to wear?”

“Do you own any eye shadow?” Leticia asks.

Annie looks at me helplessly. I put a protective arm around her. “No more questions, please. All will be revealed in the fullness of time. For now, everyone eats her lunch and is happy. Except you, L. I know you can’t possibly be happy while eating that lunch.”

“Shut up. It’s a thing I read about. It’s supposed to be super healthy.”

“Green Jell-O?” Diane asks.

“Did you not hear me say shut up? What are you eating, dead fish in thick, slimy, white, disgusting sauce? Again?”

Annie puts her head on my shoulder as L&D continue their not-an-actual-argument, sounding even more like an old married couple than they used to. Their longtime best-friendship transformed into something more over the past few months, which surprised nobody, although I suspect there are more than a few disappointed teenage boys scattered about as collateral damage.

I pet Annie's soft brown curls. "It's going to be okay," I tell her. "He likes you. You like him. This is good. I promise."

"Okay," she says. "I trust you. You'd know if he was a . . . you know. Right?"

"Right," I say. It is not the first time she has asked me this question. One of the almost certainly unintentional gifts the evil librarian left me with was the ongoing ability to see if someone is a demon in disguise. Demons, to my enhanced eyes, have a glowing red halo kind of thing above their heads. William is entirely halo free.

I haven't seen any red halos since I returned from rescuing Annie from the demon world.

And that is the way I would like it to stay forever, please.

Except for those two return trips, I guess, since that would be hard to pull off. But I am still not thinking about those. It could be years before the demoness calls on me again. It could be never if she forgets that humans only live for like eighty to a hundred years, if we're lucky. Sometimes at night, when I can't sleep, I comfort myself with the idea that I'll probably be dead long before she thinks to call in her remaining favors.

Later, we go to Sarah Patel's annual end-of-the-school-year party. (Earlier, we went to Diane's, and Annie let us tell her what to wear and also let us put just a little extra eye makeup on her, and Diane did not let us tell her what to wear, and when William came to pick Annie up, we refrained from shouting lewd suggestions out the window at them.)

And now I am snuggled on a couch with Ryan, nestled

under his nicely muscled upper arm, watching the party go on around us. Everyone is slightly manic with pre-summer energy. The seniors are talking about where they're going to college, and the few freshmen Sarah invited are mostly haunting the fringes of the room, not really knowing how to act or whom to talk to. The sophomores and juniors are more relaxed; most of us have done this before, and it's nice to not be nervous about being young and new and also not be distracted by being about to graduate and start whole new lives in possibly faraway places.

But it is the start of my last week before camp, which has me nervous in all kinds of other ways. I've never gone away for the summer before. I'm excited, of course, but also I know I'll miss Diane and Leticia and especially Annie. They promised to write and send care packages, but that will not be the same as actually getting to see them and talk to them. This is one of those camps where you have to surrender your cell phone when you get there, and laptops and tablets are not allowed. I guess that's so we can get the "full summer camp" experience, like they did in the old days, or whatever. But it means I won't even be able to talk to Annie on the phone. I'm sure once I'm there I'll get caught up in the shows and everything else, and it won't be so bad. Ryan loves this place like crazy, and that alone makes it something worth experiencing. And the idea of spending the whole summer immersed in musical theater is like some kind of magical dream. I know it will be great. It will.

But I keep feeling more and more uneasy.

All night long, I keep thinking I see something out of the

corner of my eye, only to turn my head to find nothing out of the ordinary. Just people having a good time at a party.

I catch a glimpse of Annie and William, who have not left each other's side for a second all night as far as I can tell, sitting on the floor in a corner, their heads close together as they talk.

I see Leticia and Diane dancing together through the door into the next room, laughing and holding hands.

I see random other people from my classes, some theater kids, some of Ryan's friends whom I've met over the past few months, some kids I only know vaguely from the hallways or study hall or wherever else. The few strangers don't seem at all out of place; just other kids that I never happened to have a class with or pass often enough in the hall to recognize. Nothing is wrong. Everything is fine. But I can't stop turning my head trying to see . . . something.

"Why are you all twitchy?" Ryan asks, his question tickling my ear as he leans close to be heard over the music. I am tempted to pretend not to hear him so he will lean even closer, but I'm too distracted by . . . whatever keeps distracting me.

"I don't know. Something . . . feels weird. I keep thinking I see something."

I feel his body tense where I'm leaning against it. "See what?" Just like me, there is some part of him that will always be waiting for another demon to appear.

Always.

I shake my head, frustrated. "I don't know." I look at him and smile weakly. "It's probably nothing. It's definitely

nothing. I'm just having end-of-the-year hallucinations or something."

"Oh, right. Those. Of course."

"It doesn't matter." I try to make this true. "Whatever it is, it's nothing. I'm probably just tired. And excited. Only one more week before camp!"

"Okay," Ryan says. "But you'll tell me if . . . you know."

"Of course!" I elbow him for asking such a stupid question. Even though I suppose he has some tiny justification for wanting to remind me of the rules of disclosure. "But it's not anything like that."

"Okay." He smiles at me, and that helps a lot to make me forget whatever else might be going on in the room.

"Okay," I say, smiling back.

Then he pulls me closer and kisses me, and the rest of the room no longer has any significance whatsoever.

*This is good, Old Cyn reminds me from somewhere in the back of my brain. Everything is good. Everyone is alive and happy and good and this is going to be the best summer ever. Theater camp! All summer! Ryan Halsey is your BOYFRIEND!*

*Yes, I know. Now shut up. I'm busy.*

I focus my attention back on the kissing.

*Oh my God* the kissing.

I will never get tired of this.

It is going to be the best summer ever.



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# Chapter

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02

The best summer ever begins ridiculously early.

My alarm screams at me from the darkness, and I feel around for the snooze button.

“Cyn?” my mom calls from somewhere in the ridiculous early darkness. Like she was lurking outside my room just waiting for this signal. “You up?”

“Uhhh,” I groan in response. Why does the stupid bus have to leave so early?

She heartlessly flips on my light, forcing me to burrow more deeply into my covers. “Let’s go,” she says. “Ryan’s parents will be here in an hour.”

I crawl half conscious to the shower. The hot water and the aggressively energetic scent of my tangerine bodywash work their magic, and wakefulness slowly descends upon me. I am washed and clothed and downstairs with my enormous duffel

in time to grab an English muffin and some orange juice before we hear the horn outside.

“Have a great summer, sweetie,” my dad says, getting up from the table to envelop me in a giant dad hug. We already said our real good-byes last night, but ever since the “chemical leak” at the school in the fall, he has been making an effort to hug me a lot. I don’t mind, really.

“Don’t forget to write,” my mom says with a not-quite-ironic smile. She hugged me last night, too, but I think that was enough for both of us. We’re not really huggers. Of each other, I mean.

I smile back at her. “I won’t.”

And then Ryan is at the door, offering to carry my duffel because he is awesome and it is freaking heavy. He is smiley and excited. Like a puppy. A tall, sexy puppy. I try to shake off my lingering grouchiness at the early hour for his sake.

In the backseat of the car, I lean my head on his shoulder and half listen to the radio and his parents’ occasional conversation. It’s not only this early morning that’s got me so tired; I’ve been exhausted all week. Some of it is because of many late nights with Annie and Leticia and Diane, but some of it is because of the relentless baseless uneasiness that still hasn’t gone away. I still keep looking around for . . . something. It happens all the time when I’m awake, and my sleep is filled with demony nightmares that I can’t quite remember when I wake up. I’m sure it’s just anxiety about leaving my friends for the summer manifesting in wonky ways. It has to be. I focus on believing that once we get up there I’ll be able to relax and have a good time.

Ryan gets his own parental hugs when they drop us off at the bus stop. They don't leave, exactly, but they go park in a spot in the parking lot and stay in the car and pretend not to be there, like all the other parents. There are a bunch of kids already waiting. Ryan knows nearly all of them, and he introduces me as his girlfriend to everyone, which cheers me up immensely.

"You waking up finally?" he asks after all the introductions are over, giving me a little squeeze.

"Yes, sorry. It's just been a weirdly long week. And I haven't been sleeping so great."

He kisses the top of my head. "It's going to be a great summer. You'll see."

I squeeze him back. "I know."

The bus arrives, and we all stack our duffels in the storage compartment and then climb aboard. The bus makes a few more stops and then heads for the hills. Chatter on the bus ranges from catching up on the past year to speculation about what the shows will be this summer.

"They're way overdue for *Candide*," a guy Ryan introduced as Craig says for about the fifth time. He's sitting across the aisle from us.

"Craig, you are the *only one* who likes *Candide*," someone calls from another seat. "None of us are going to hope for that with you."

Craig seems undeterred. "It's a great show. You just don't know how to appreciate it properly."

"What do you have against *Candide*?" I ask Ryan.

"Oh, nothing," he says back. "Craig's just been obsessed

with that show since birth, and so we like to give him a hard time about it. Some day they really will do *Candide*, and we'll all be happy for him."

Not everyone is there for musical theater; there are straight plays as well, although I don't pay as much attention to the speculation on those. But no one seems to have any real information — it's all guesses and rumors and wishes. They'll announce the list tonight. And then tomorrow are auditions, and by the end of the day, everyone will know what show they're in. The audition equivalent for the set designers happened when we sent in our applications, but we won't find out the shows and our assignments until the same time everyone else does.

At some point I must doze off, because suddenly Ryan is shaking me gently awake. "Come on, sleepyhead. We're here!"

We stand and file off the bus. Through the windows I can see a crowd of other campers waiting to see who disembarks. Ryan jumps down ahead of me, and before he has taken three steps, someone streaks out of the crowd and tackles him to the ground. For a second my heart stops, but then I see that he is laughing, and I relax. Someone he knows. Obviously. Besides, I'm pretty sure a full-body tackle in broad daylight in front of scores of witnesses isn't most demons' style.

And then I see that the tackler is a tall, pretty, blond girl who has completely wrapped herself around him in her enthusiasm, and I stop relaxing.

Someone gives me a polite nudge from behind. I step off the bus and walk over to where some girl is sitting on top of my boyfriend.

“Hi!” I say brightly.

Ryan disentangles himself, climbs back to his feet, and smiles at me. “Cyn, this is Jules. She’s been coming here as long as I have, so we’ve known each other pretty much forever.” Then he turns to the girl. “Jules, this is my girlfriend, Cyn.”

For the briefest moment, her smile seems to falter just a tiny bit. But then she reaches out to shake my hand. “Hi, Cyn! Welcome to paradise. You’re going to love it, I promise.”

“That’s what Ryan keeps telling me.”

“Well, he’s right. What bunk are you in? Do you know yet?”

I look at Ryan helplessly, and he comes to my rescue. “Those people with the clipboards have the bunk info. They’ll tell you where to go.” He pulls my duffel from the storage compartment onto the ground and then hefts his own onto his shoulder. “Go on and get settled. I’ll see you at the big gathering before dinner tonight.”

Then he kisses me on my head again (it’s less charming this time) and walks off. With Jules.

I make myself stop watching them walking away together and try to figure out what I’m supposed to do now. Other kids are swarming around me, grabbing duffels, hugging friends, squealing and shouting. There are a few other confused-looking idiots like me, too. I turn in place, trying to locate these alleged clipboard-holding entities. As I scan the crowd, I suddenly see a flash of red.

Demon-halo red.

This time my heart stops for more than a second. Everything seems to stop. I am alone in the universe with my horrible fear, trying to see where the demon is.



But now it's gone.

I stare around more wildly, but I don't see it again.

*Probably because it was just your imagination, moron*, my brain tells me. My brain is still grouchy and tired, apparently.

Was it my imagination? That would be nice to believe. *I am* still tired. And disoriented. And annoyed at the whole Jules thing even though I'm sure she is a perfectly nice person and there's nothing at all to be worried about there even though she has apparently been Ryan's summer BFF for practically his entire life and he never actually mentioned her until today. Not one time in all his gushing about camp over the past few months. Not one time ever.

I finally spot a college-age-looking girl holding a clipboard and drag my duffel in that direction. It was my imagination. I'm going to go with that. Because why would there be demons at camp? There would not be. That's just ridiculous.

"Name?"

"Cynthia Rothschild."

The girl flips through her pages. "You are in . . . bunk six." She looks me up and down. "First time?"

I love that it's so obvious.

"Yes."

She smiles reassuringly. "I know it seems crazy right now, and it's weird when almost everyone else knows one another already, but you'll pick it up fast. And there's another new girl in your bunk — her name's Susan."

"Thanks," I say with real gratefulness. It hadn't even occurred to me that everyone else in my whole bunk might already be lifelong friends. In fact, I hadn't really given much

thought to whom I might be living with. All of my thought had been focused on Ryan and musical theater. Which are both totally thought-worthy, of course. But I probably should have left a little for all the other details of camp.

I manage to get my duffel into some semblance of a fireman's carry and trudge off in the direction she indicated.

The campus is pretty much as expected. I mean I'd seen pictures and stuff, and I had a general image in my head of square wooden cabin things for the bunks, which are basically what they are. The boys and girls are housed on opposite sides of the campus, to prevent after-hours fraternizing, although of course that happens anyway, according to Ryan. There's a lake somewhere that I can't see from here, and a lot of trees, and a cluster of buildings in the middle, and few farther-off buildings in various directions that I assume are the performance spaces. All of the bunks have helpful numbers painted on them, and I locate number 6 without too much trouble.

Inside, it's kind of rustic but not dirty or anything. There are five sets of bunk beds and two regular beds, and several of them are already claimed by piles of stuff. Six girls are standing in the center of the room, chattering excitedly. They all turn to look at me when I walk in.

"Um. Hi," I say to the room in general.

"Hey," they respond nearly in unison. One of the girls adds, "You can take any bunk you want that doesn't already have stuff on it."

"Thanks." After a quick survey of what's available, I settle on one of the bottom bunks at the far end. I am fully aware that some part of me is probably choosing that because it's

most like a cave that I can hide in, but I don't care. Besides, I can't change my mind now. I'd look stupid.

The girl who told me to take any bunk I wanted walks over. "I'm Hana. There's shelves and stuff that we all kind of share along the wall that you can use for your things, and you can keep some bathroom stuff on the counter in there if you want. There's room."

"Thanks," I say again. "I'm Cyn."

She nods and indicates the other girls, who are still talking, "That's Amina, Lisa R., Lisa P., Sasha, and Caroline," she says, pointing at each one. "Hey, guys, this is Cyn," she adds, a little louder.

There is a chorus of "Hi, Cyn" and some repetitions of names, and then another couple of girls walk in and everyone erupts into excited squeals. I focus on unpacking and making my bed.

By the time the announcement comes over the loudspeaker to gather at Hines Hall (the center building/gymnasium, where a lot of social activities happen), the rest of the girls have arrived. I am introduced to all of them but only remember one or two of their names. Susan turns out to be a painfully shy girl who won't speak much but nevertheless seems to want to attach herself to me as the only other new person. I follow Hana and the others out with my silent new appendage looking fearfully around beside me.

The noise and movement is almost overwhelming when we first enter the packed hall. I search for Ryan (not for anything else, certainly not for flashes of demony red) and find him after a minute in the middle of a group that, of course,

also contains Jules. I consider trying to shake Susan, but that seems unnecessarily cruel, so I just let her tag along with me. The other girls from our bunk have melted into the crowd, looking for more old friends.

Jules sees me first and points me out to Ryan. He turns and gives me a delicious Ryan-smile that instantly makes me feel better about being new and clueless and everything else. Well, almost everything else. I think about maybe telling him about the halo. But then I remember that I already decided it was only my imagination, and he seems so happy right now, and I really don't want to ruin it.

I am introduced to about ten more new people whose names I instantly forget. I introduce Susan in turn, who mumbles hello and tries to burrow more deeply into my side. I must draw the line at this, because right now the only person I want touching me is Ryan. Luckily, just then the camp director steps up to the front of the room, and everyone begins settling down on the floor. Ryan pulls me down to sit with him, and I snuggle between his legs, leaning back against his chest. Susan seems to realize at last that she is not actually connected to my body in any literal sense and sits down a few inches away. Some of Ryan's friends attempt to be friendly to her, which is really nice of them.

The camp director's name is Steven. He is cheered loudly by everyone in the room, so I assume he is generally well liked. Unless everyone is just excited that he is about to announce the shows and are just cheering for that. I ask Ryan.

"Both," he says. "He's a pretty decent guy, but mostly right now everyone is thinking about the show list."

Steven says some general welcome-y stuff and then gets down to business. He clearly knows his audience.

“All right. I know what you’re all waiting for, so I’m going to shut up now and turn this over to the directors, who will each come up and announce their shows. We’ll start with Upper Camp first.”

The hush that falls over the crowd is nearly frightening in its total and complete perfection. And at that moment I suddenly realize: all of these people love theater. I am in a room filled with people who love it as much as I do. Somehow it didn’t quite hit me until this second. Right now, no one here can think about anything other than wanting to know what the shows are. Ryan tightens his arms around me, and I finally let myself relax and really appreciate the fact that I am here.

And then the first director, a twentyish guy with multiple visible piercings, steps forward and after a dramatic pause shouts out, “*West Side Story!*” and everyone goes nuts, and I love every single person in the room almost more than I can stand.

The other Upper Camp directors (all college students enrolled in various theater programs, Ryan explains) come up one by one, and the crowd continues to be nearly as enthusiastic for each one (which is only fair; it’s hard to top *West Side Story*.) The other musicals are *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, *Brigadoon*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, and *Aftermass*, which is the brand-new original musical written by one of the campers for the contest they hold every year.

The straight plays (not that I *really* care) are *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the female version of *The Odd Couple*.

Ryan is beside himself about *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

"Oh, my God," he says. He says it several times. "Oh my God oh my God oh my God."

This is a side of him I have not previously seen. He actually cannot sit still; he is wiggling around in excitement, drumming his feet against the floor and rocking me from side to side.

I turn around to look at him. "*Scarlet Pimpernel*? Really?"

He stares at me. "Do you not know that one? It's amazing. One of my favorites. I mean my favorite favorites. I mean like of all time."

"It didn't last long on Broadway."

"That's because people are idiots. The music is amazing."

"What part would you want?"

He looks at me like this is the most ridiculous question ever. "Chauvelin! I've always wanted to play him."

I can only look back at him. "*Really*?"

"Yes!" It is clear that he cannot quite believe I am even questioning this.

"I had to read that book in English last year. Isn't he a horrible, disgusting old man with no redeeming qualities whatsoever?"

Ryan sighs in exasperation. "That's the book. The show is different. Chauvelin is awesome. 'Falcon in the Dive' is one of the best songs in the entire history of musical theater."

"Um. Okay."

"I'm serious."

"Okay! I believe you."



Just then Jules scoots over and ruffles Ryan's hair like he's her five-year-old brother. "I know someone must be excited about *The Scarlet Pimpernel*!"

Why does she know this about him when I don't?

Ryan grins at her, and she grins back. I don't want to watch that going on, so I lean over toward Susan. "What do you think of the show list?" I ask her.

She shrugs. "They're good."

"Are you here for backstage?" I ask her. Hoping not, because I would kind of rather not have her on whatever show I'm working on.

She shakes her head. "Orchestra. Violin."

"Oh!" Good. "I didn't realize. That's great!"

She shrugs again. "Yeah. I've never played for theater before, though. My parents thought it would be good for me."

Huh. "Oh. Well, they're probably right. I mean, you like theater, right?"

She shrugs again. "It's okay."

I would like to leave this conversation now. I peek back at Ryan and Jules to make sure the grinning has stopped. Then I make myself ask, "Which show are you hoping for, Jules?"

"Oh, *Scarlet Pimpernel* for me, too. I want Marguerite."

Of course.

"Well, um, break a leg tomorrow!"

"Thanks!" She flashes me a beautiful smile. I am starting to hate her just a little.

The directors go on to announce the Middle and Lower Camp shows, but we pay less attention, since those are for the younger kids and we won't get to see them, anyway. Some of

Ryan's friends have siblings in those shows, though, so there are a few excited reactions to several of the selections, even so.

Finally, the gathering breaks up into a slow migration to the dining hall, where I am introduced to the magic of camp food (not so bad, really). I sit with Ryan and his friends, and Susan, and try to remember more names. All the singers are talking about audition songs. Susan mostly just looks down at her food.

"What show are you hoping for, Cyn?" Ryan asks suddenly. "I just realized you never said."

I'd been thinking about this. Part of me wants to be involved in whatever show Ryan is in, because then I'll get to see him more. But a larger part of me, the part that's not just thinking with its romance-y parts, wants the original show. Because it's totally new. I'd get to design the set from scratch without trying to match or not match or consider at all whatever previous set designs have been used. I know the chances of some camper-written show being good enough to continue on to Broadway someday are, let us say, pretty slim . . . but even so, I'd be the first one to ever design a set for it. Even if I'm also the last.

"I want the new show," I tell him. "You know I'd love to do whatever show you're in —"

He cuts me off, shaking his head. "No, you need to do the best thing for you — that's what this is all about. And we'll still see each other plenty, no matter what shows we're in. I think that would be great. I hope you get it."

"Thanks." I smile at him. "And I hope you get what's his name."

“Chauvelin!”

“Right. That guy.”

“It’s getting very hard not to break up with you right now.”

“Okay, okay. I am sure I will come around to appreciating *The Scarlet Pimpernel* once I see how awesome it is.”

“You better.”

“I will!”

“Hmph.”

Usually there is some kind of evening activity after dinner (Ryan explains), but tonight is left open so that everyone can just catch up with friends and get settled or practice audition songs or whatever else they want to do. Ryan grabs my hand and pulls me toward one of the doors. “Come with me, young lady.”

I call a hurried good-bye to Susan, who looks slightly terrified to be left alone, but I am not going to feel bad about it, because (a) it is not my job to walk her through every step of her camp experience, and (b) it will be good for her to practice standing on her own two feet, and (c) I appear to be about to have some actual alone time with Ryan, and I’m sorry, but that trumps keeping the new girl company by, like, a million.

We emerge into the darkness and he leads me toward the boys’ side of camp. Girls are not technically allowed in the boys’ cabins, so I wait outside while Ryan runs into his bunk to “get something.” It’s a little chilly now that the sun’s down but not really uncomfortable. It smells good here — like, well, nature. Trees and rocks and dirt and fresh air and all of that good stuff. I look up and am startled by the number of stars I can see scattered across the sky.

Ryan comes back out and takes my hand again.

“What did you get? And where are we going?”

His eyes smile at me in the dark. “You’ll see.”

He leads me up a long path toward one of the performance spaces. I haven’t learned all their names yet. It’s one of the larger ones, and it sits dark and silent in the middle of all the nature. We duck in through one of the openings along the side and walk back to the last row of seats. Instead of actually sitting in the seats, though, Ryan sits down on the floor behind the last row, in a small aisle tucked between the seats and the back far wall of the building. There is just enough starlight coming in through the open windows to see by. I sit too and look at him expectantly.

From his pocket he produces an elderly but apparently still functional mp3 player and two pairs of earbuds.

“Hey, that’s contraband!”

“No, it’s not, Hawaii Five-Oh. We’re allowed to have music. They just don’t want everyone on their phones or computers all the time.” He hands me one of the sets of earbuds, and I see that he’s already got a splitter plugged into his device.

“Oh, thank God,” I say. “I mean, I brought one, too, but I thought I was going to have to sneak it under the covers at night or something.”

“Nope. No sneaking required.”

“What are we listening to?”

“We are going to address this incomprehensible issue of you never having heard *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.”

“The whole thing? Won’t that keep us out past curfew? I don’t want to get kicked out my first night.”

He laughs. "Trust me, it takes a lot more than that to get kicked out. But no, not the whole thing. Just a few songs. The best ones. Starting with the best one of all." He cues up "Falcon in the Dive."

It begins with some weird talk-singing and I give him the side-eye, but he shakes his head at me. "Just keep listening."

So I do.

I can hear instantly that the voice part is right for him. And as the song continues, I can tell that Chauvelin is like a lot of the parts he's drawn to: a person driven to some deeply felt goal that may or may not be understandable to anyone else around him. I barely remember the plot of the book and have no idea whether it's remotely the same in the musical, but that doesn't even matter right now. The song is full of passion and longing and desire, rising and falling and soaring with the emotion of the singer (Terrence Mann; I'd know his voice anywhere), and it gives me very delightful chills to think of Ryan singing it.

When the song ends, he pauses the playback before another song can start, and looks at me. "So?"

His eyes are fixed on mine, and I'm shocked to realize he's nervous. Nervous I won't like it? Nervous I won't see what he loves so much about it? That I won't understand?

"It's beautiful," I say. And I mean it. I had no idea. I can't believe I've never heard the music from this show before.

"There's more," he says, looking down to cue up another song. "I won't make you listen to the whole thing, I swear, just a few more. Some of Marguerite's songs are gorgeous, and there's this trio . . ." He trails off, scrolling.

I ignore the part about Marguerite, which would only make me think of Jules, and instead just lean forward and kiss his sweet, gorgeous face. He turns toward me, and I kiss him again, this time on the mouth.

“What was that for?” he asks afterward.

“Nothing,” I say. “Just felt like it.”

He smiles and returns to finding the next song. I sit back against the wall and watch him. Loving that he’s so excited. About musical theater! I mean, I know this about him, obviously, but I don’t usually take the time to reflect and appreciate it. None of my really close friends have ever been into theater the way I am. They come to shows to support me, and they’re excited for me when happy theater-y things happen, but being excited *for* me is not quite the same as being excited *with* me.

Ryan’s excitement is both purely his own and something super important that he wants to share with me. I *love* that we can be excited about this stuff together. And I really do love seeing him so happy. He’s the sexiest happy puppy ever.

*And he’s your boyfriend!* Old Cyn whisper-shouts from the back of my brain.

Yes, I know. Shut up.

But yeah, he is.

He catches me grinning before I can stop.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just . . . happy.”

He smiles back at me in the starlight.

“Yeah. Me, too.”

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