

LAND OF ENCHANTAS

*** TEASER SAMPLE ***

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Chapter I

The Morning

The sun was rising, and the glare reflecting from the mirror blinded her. She moved slightly and stared at herself, wondering what the day had in store. She was a pretty girl, but she hid that fact in the way she wore her hair and her style of dress. Her glasses covered her beautiful blue eyes, and her straggly hair was a dull light brown. She was unaware of her hidden beauty. On her dresser was the only grooming item she owned, a brush. She wore faded blue jeans and a brown sweater her grandmother had knit. Saddened and discouraged by her appearance, she turned away and picked up her books from the bed. She walked slowly toward the door of her bedroom, stopped, and glanced back for a few minutes. The room was bare, with only a bookshelf full of romance novels, a bed, and the dresser with the giant mirror. An inexplicable, uneasy feeling came over her, and she wondered if she would ever see it again.

She had been troubled for a few years now. Since the night her parents had died, in fact. Since their bodies had never been found, she had always hoped for their return, but it was only in dreams that she'd seen them. A tear flowed down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away before anyone could see she was crying. She had always been afraid to cry in front of others.

"First day at school," she moaned to herself. "Why do I have to go?"

"Sally, dear!" A southern voice floated up from downstairs. "Yar bus will be here soon and I fixed ya up some breakfast. Hurry it up now, honey. It's gettin' cold and ya don't wanna be late!"

Without a word Sally darted down the stairs to the kitchen and sat at the small table. "Thanks, Grandma. I love pancakes!" she said with a wide grin.

"Well, ya know I like to spoil my favorite granddaughter."

"I'm your only granddaughter." Sally chuckled.

"Well yeah, but yer still my favorite," the old lady said as she turned back to the kitchen sink to clean a glass dish.

Her grandmother had moved from Alabama to take care of Sally after her parents' funeral. She was a short, plump, happy old woman who always found a way to cheer Sally up. The day her grandmother moved in, she threw a birthday party for Sally to lift her spirits. Ever since that day four years ago, Sally and her grandmother had formed an unbreakable bond. But she was fourteen now and growing up, maturing into a beautiful woman as her grandmother would say. Growing up and maturing is never easy for anyone, but it had been especially tough for Sally. She was sure her loneliness exceeded that of any other person in her school by far. She had always thought of running away. That would solve all of her problems at school. It could end the loneliness, and it would definitely end the continuous teasing and taunting she received at school. With no friends but her grandmother, Sally was a very lonely girl. Then again, if she did

run away, her grandmother would be alone. Running away was out of the question; they needed each other.

“Sweetie, I know what y’all are thinkin’. Now don’t ya worry. I don’t think you’ll be treated the same as ya were in that gawd-awful middle school. The kids are maturin’ now, just like you. This is Willington High School! A whole different ball game, ya know? It may be a small town, but there are enough kids in that school to make at least one friend.”

Sally sat at the table, silently looking at her plate.

“Just give ‘em a chance. Make friends! Not for me, but for yourself. Ya need ‘em. Ya know I’m not going to be here forev—” She stopped, suddenly realizing that what she was about to say might bring up some bad memories. “I just wantchya to be happy. And now, since it’s your first day, ya can start over.” She winked at Sally.

Sally blushed and put her head down, pretending to be interested in her pancakes,

“Now, ya listen to me.” Her grandmother tilted Sally’s face toward her, “You are a beautiful young lady, a gorgeous southern belle! Don’t ya let anyone else tell ya otherwise. Anyone would be lucky to have ya as a friend. If they don’t think so, then that’s their loss! Now don’t ya forget that!”

“I know, I know. It’s just that I can’t relate to anyone there. They only care about themselves and their ‘special’ little cliques. I feel like a loner, and I hate school.”

Out of nowhere, a horn sounded. Sally’s grandmother looked out the window above the sink. “Honey, I think ya bus is here. Y’all better get going,” she said, looking at the clock.

Sally gathered her things and hugged her grandmother goodbye.

“I love ya, Sally! Have a good day!” her grandmother yelled through the screened window.

“I love you too.” She ran up the bus steps and grabbed the first seat behind the driver. The doors closed, and the bus drove away.

During the short ride, Sally sat quietly, listening to the other kids talking and goofing around. The motion of the bus sent Sally into a thoughtful state, and she began to daydream. She remembered years ago when the other children would tease her and throw her book bag around. The bus drivers had always helped her, but it never eased her troubled heart or stopped the tears from flowing. Since then, she felt safest sitting behind the driver. As the other children made friends and enemies on the bus, she remained alone with the driver. This driver was a short man with a scruffy beard, and he seemed to be smiling all the time—or maybe that was the shape of his mustache.

The bus came to a complete halt and the doors opened. All of the other kids in the back of the bus rushed forward before Sally had a chance to get up.

When the bus finally emptied, she grabbed her book bag and stepped off the bus. Sally stood for a moment, gazing at the school and the dozens of kids running toward it. Four stories high and a small block in length, the school accommodated hundreds of teens, much more than the middle school. She wondered for a moment where all these students had come from, especially since the town of Willington seemed so small; but how would she know? She never seemed to leave her own house.

Afraid of the unknown, her heart started to race. She was mostly anxious about the other teenagers and how they would treat her. Her extreme bashfulness was her own worst enemy. She walked slowly with her head down, mostly so she didn’t have to meet anyone’s eyes, because then—God forbid— she might have to talk to them. As she walked toward the school, dreading this first day, no one paid attention to her—not even the boy on the bike.

*

In a dark room somewhere else, an alarm buzzed and its annoying sound rode up the walls, getting louder and louder. The smell of cigar smoke surrounded a boy's head as he lay on his pillow. His hair was jet black and hung to the bottom of his earlobes. He awoke slowly and turned his head toward the ceiling trying to snap out of the deep sleep he was in. He fought to open his bloodshot green eyes, blinking, trying to focus. He rubbed them hard and blinked again only to find a tall, older man leaning over his bedside in just an undershirt and grubby boxer shorts. The man had long, dark, greasy hair that reached well down his back, and he was dirty with an unshaven face. His body odor stung the boy's nostrils. He held a beer in one hand and a cigar in the other.

"Wake up!" the man yelled as he kicked the boy. "And turn that damn alarm off! What the heck did you do last night? Get drunk again? You better not have. GET UP, I SAID!"

The boy struggled to sit up as he hit the alarm with his fists.

"Don't you get cocky with me, Johnny! I'll kick your butt right now." The old man backhanded John in the face. "Yeah, try to be a big shot now."

"Dad!" the boy yelled. "Stop!"

"Well, boy, you got school today and it's twenty to eight. School starts at eight o'clock, doesn't it?"

"Figures you wouldn't know. You're usually passed out on the couch by the time I get up for school," he said sarcastically and got out of bed, still wearing the same dirty jeans and old gray shirt he had worn the night before.

"Yeah, right. When was that? You're not going to skip this year like you did last year, are you?" He laughed. "What are you going to tell everyone when you meet them? Hi, my name is Johnny and I'm a sixteen-year-old freshman."

"Shut up, you frickin' drunk." John whipped his hair away from the front of his face.

His father grabbed him abruptly by the arms and said, “Listen to me, boy! You better learn some respect for your old man. I put food on the table for you and your sister and put a roof over your heads.”

His father reeked of alcohol, cigar smoke, and sweat. John almost gagged from the awful odor.

“Take your hands off me, you smelly old fart.” He twisted his body away from his father. John wanted to make him feel as bad as he did, but he knew any harmful words from him wouldn’t affect his father.

A small laugh came from the other room. “I better not hear a peep out of you, Becky Sue!” his father yelled as he let go of the grasp he had on his son. “And I want both of you home after school to get your chores done, is that clear?”

His father finally left the room. John hated mornings like these. He rubbed his eyes, trying to forget what had just happened. He tried to ignore his throbbing headache and turning stomach, consequences from the partying he had done the night before. He turned on his black light, which lit up the few rock band posters hanging from his walls. The posters covered fist holes and old faded wallpaper that was peeling away from the sheetrock. A lava lamp sat on the dresser he never used. Instead, his clothes were scattered all over the floor of his bedroom along with empty cigarette cartons.

He was not ready for the first day of school, but he knew his father was right about one thing; he needed an education. He couldn’t repeat another year of ninth grade.

John took a few moments trying to pick the cleanest clothes from his floor but realized he was already wearing them. Not really caring what others might think of him, he grabbed two full packs of cigarettes, threw on his black leather jacket, and tucked a cigarette behind his ear. He threw on a pair of socks and shoes and stepped outside his room.

John was glad that he had friends he could talk to and hang out with daily, though they were more acquaintances than true friends. Besides, who needs a father when you have friends who care more about you? The stale smell of liquor and smoke became stronger as he staggered past his father, who was now passed out on the couch in the living room of the small, rundown trailer.

John despised his father and blamed him for their mother leaving them. He believed she'd left because of his father's drinking, but the real problems started after she left. Like many typical parents, they fought a lot while they were together. It was nothing out of the ordinary; only the usual *do the dishes* and *stop nagging*. One Saturday morning when John was eleven, he woke up and ran to the kitchen for the routine breakfast his mother made him, but he found that she was gone. He waited for hours, but she never returned. She left no note and took no belongings. Thinking about it now, John knew she must have been very angry to not take her clothes, makeup, or purse. Months later their father started to drink more heavily, unable to cope with his wife's desertion. That was close to five years ago. Only John and his younger sister were left.

His sister had just turned fourteen a month ago, and sadly, their father had forgotten. She was devastated, which broke John's heart, too. They were only two years apart in age, and they depended on each other for everything. John thought a lot about running away and leaving his father, but his sister would never go with him. She loved her school and her friends, even though staying meant she had to continue living with her father. So John stayed in this lousy good-for-nothing life just for her.

"Hey there, sis. Good morning," he said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Yeah, sure sounds like it," she said with her classic sarcasm. Becky Sue also had jet-black hair, but it fell gracefully down to her

shoulders. She wore makeup and glossy red lipstick to make herself feel older and more mature.

“You better watch yourself, sis,” he said softly, referring to her laughing at their father earlier. “I can protect myself from him better than you can, and I might not always be here, you know.”

“Oh, don’t worry, bro. Little do you know, I know how to fight.” she said proudly.

“Hold on.” He looked directly into her light blue eyes, deeply concerned. “Don’t follow in my footsteps. I’m a screw-up. I can admit that, but I don’t ever want to see my little sister turn out like her big brother.”

“What?” She laughed. “Be a drunk like dad?”

“Hey, I’m different than him, all right?”

“Okay, John. We got to go. The bus is here. Are you coming?” she asked, looking out the window.

“No, I’m riding my bike.”

“Well, you better get going, or you’ll be late.” She stepped out the side door.

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t care,” he mumbled softly, knowing she wouldn’t hear him. He grabbed the buttered toast she’d made for him and ran outside. He jumped on his bike and shoved the bread into his mouth, chewing as he rode.

A few blocks away from his house John finished his toast and lit up a cigarette. He had been craving one ever since he’d gotten out of bed. The school was about a cigarette length away—for him at least.

The wind was at his back, which made going up the hills easier. As he rode, he thought about school and what he could do differently to make sure he passed this time around. That, of course, was if his father didn’t make him stay home to help with chores around the house or give him rides to local pubs because he was too drunk to drive himself.

He looked at his cigarette and noticed he only had a few drags left, which was good because the school was only a block away. He turned the corner toward the school and pedaled as fast as he could, weaving through the kids who were walking to class. Skimming shirts and backpacks from side to side, he was on a roll until he looked up and saw a straggly brown-haired girl in his path. The sudden awful noise of a bicycle hitting a girl was heard around the schoolyard. Everyone turned to see what had happened.

“What is your problem?” John yelled as he lay on the ground tangled in his bike. “Don’t you have enough sense to watch where you’re going?”

“I’m—I’m—I’m sorry,” she stuttered in fear. “I didn’t see anyone.”

“That’s because you should look up when you walk. I was on a roll, dodging every—”

“What the heck is going on here? What’s your problem?” a voice came from the crowd.

*

The door opened slowly, and steam poured out of the bathroom. A silhouette of a boy could be seen as he emerged from the doorway. He was built for his age. Stretching his arms above his head and wearing only a towel, he sauntered down the hallway toward his bedroom. He had an air of confidence about him—the kind of person most people admired and envied.

When he reached his bedroom, he shut the door and put on his boxer shorts, then started his daily stretches with jumping jacks, concentrating hard on his counts. He looked at the clock and it read 7:40 a.m. “I’ve got time,” he mumbled to himself. He walked to the mirror and combed his short blonde hair. His eyes were blue like the sky and sparkled when he smiled. He almost winked at himself as he looked in the mirror, but stopped short and began his morning exercises.

He was not conceited, only sure of himself. He knew who he was and what he wanted from life. His room was filled with football and basketball posters, and there was a bookshelf full of trophies and medals for each of his accomplishments over the years. He loved athletics and participated in all the sports his school could offer. Football was starting, and he was excited to start his first season. Freshman football wasn't as big a deal as varsity, but he was proud to play and be a Willington Panther.

He took school much more seriously than most of his friends. They didn't care too much about getting good grades, but Ryan was the type of person who studied and did his homework. He finished every assignment and never got less than a B-plus. After school he would do fun things like play football, lacrosse, basketball, run track, go out on dates or just hang out with friends. He wasn't much into the partying scene like some of his friends, but he did go once in a while. His older brother would always throw parties at their house whenever their parents went on trips, a frequent occurrence in the past few months.

He finished his exercises, grabbed his backpack from the floor and put it on. He started toward the door when suddenly he remembered he only had his boxers on. He slapped his forehead, chuckling to himself. He opened the closet picking his favorite white and blue football jersey and a pair of jeans. He put them on with his usual slow manner and slipped on socks and shoes. As he walked down the stairs, he noticed a light and a noise coming from the kitchen. Curious, he turned the corner and found his older brother making lunch.

"Hey, Ryan. Good morning," his brother said with a smile as he cut a sandwich in half. He too was blonde and well built, wearing a buttoned-up blue shirt and khaki pants. He was a star football player who had broken almost every record at Willington High. It made Ryan want to try that much harder so he could beat his brother's records.

“Morning, Ben.” He leaned on the breakfast bar in the middle of the kitchen. “Hey, do you think you could give me a ride to school today? I mean . . . now that we go to the same school and all.”

“Not a problem. When’s the last time I said no to my little bro?” he said as he shoved some chips into a bag. Ryan had always looked up to his brother; they had always been best friends. They had to be—they only had each other. “I made lunch for you too. Would you like an apple?”

“No thanks. Do you know where mom and dad are?”

“Phhh, where do you think?”

“Work?”

“No, they’re on another trip.”

“What? Where this time?” Ryan shook his head. They had already been on three long trips this year. “They just came back a few days ago.”

“Florida Keys, I think. I can’t believe they trust us after what happened last time.”

“Well, they deserved it. They’re always gone. They never have time for us anymore or even think about asking us if we’d like to go.”

“I doubt they’d want us to miss our first day back at school, Ryan.”

“I guess.” He sighed. “Whatever, I don’t care.”

“So yeah, I’m having some people over tonight so -”

“Like who?”

“Sarah and Tonya.” He smiled. “Just don’t come home till later, okay?”

“All right.” Ryan stretched his arms. “I have practice after school anyway.”

“Oh shoot, it’s 7:55, we’re gonna be late!”

They picked up their stuff and ran to the car.

Ben pulled the blue, two-door convertible Corvette out of the driveway, the tires squealed as they sped off down the road.

Ryan thought hard about what it would be like to run away, if only to spite his parents. He had many friends in school and he loved football, so there was no real reason to leave. He only wanted his parents to see that they were neglecting him. He chuckled to himself knowing that it wouldn't matter if he did run away, because they wouldn't know he was gone anyway.

Moments later they arrived at the school, a large, four-story brick building with a few strategically scattered maple trees in front. He looked up to the top of the building and read the large engraved letters right below the balcony of the principal's office: WILLINGTON HIGH SCHOOL. The Corvette stopped and Ryan got out. He turned to say thanks for the ride, but Ben had already driven off to find a parking spot. As he scoped the schoolyard, Ryan heard a boy yelling and someone crying. He looked to see where the noise was coming from and noticed a crowd of people gathering in front of the school. He ran over and saw a boy, a bike and a girl lying on the ground. As the boy yelled at her, Ryan's eyes narrowed in anger.

"What the heck is going on here? What's your problem?" Ryan asked loudly enough for the boy to hear. He moved toward the center of the circle, pushing others aside. The boy stood up, and they met with their faces only inches apart. They were evenly matched in height and build, but there was quite a contrast in the way they were dressed. Ryan had a white and blue jersey on, and the other boy wore a black leather jacket.

"What do you mean 'what's my problem here?'" John said with a cocky attitude. "What's yours? And why are you sticking your nose in my business?"

"Look, I'm not stupid," he replied with a similar arrogant attitude. "You hit her with your bike, and you're blaming her. You're the jerk that should slow down."

John grabbed Ryan by his collar and pulled him closer. “Look, you son of a—” He stopped and looked deep into Ryan’s eyes. “No one calls me a jerk. I should kick your butt right now!”

The crowd began to chant, “Fight, fight, fight!” The sound of the screaming crowd reminded Ryan of a basketball game. Ryan knocked John’s hands away and pushed him to the ground. John got up quickly and swung at Ryan, who ducked and tackled John to the ground.

The two wrestled for a few seconds until the bell rang in the schoolyard. All the kids ran into the building, leaving only the two guys and the girl. *Not a good way to start the school year*, Ryan thought as he pushed away from John.

“This isn’t over, jockstrap!” John picked his bike up from the ground and walked angrily up the stairs. As he pushed his bike along, he realized it had a flat tire. Muttering to himself, he tossed it furiously on the rack and walked into the school.

“Sorry about that,” Ryan said to the girl. “He’s just rude and obnoxious.”

“It’s okay. I’m used to it,” she said, sounding very sad. “You know, not being noticed, or if I am, getting yelled at for it.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, grabbing her hand to help her up. “What class do you have first hour?”

“History I think.” She smiled.

“I’ll walk you in. How’s that sound? What’s your name?”

“Thanks. Sally.”

“I’m Ryan.”

As they walked, she looked at him, and it suddenly registered for the first time that he *was* Ryan—the boy she’d had a crush on for many years. Now he was her knight in shining armor. She smiled and blushed as they walked together through the doors of the school.

*

It was 7:50 a.m. and the light in the basement was still on from the night before. A tall, gangly boy sat in a chair leaning over a desk with one hand on each side of his forehead. He wore glasses and had brown, curly hair that was neatly cut. The glasses weren't prescription; he only wore them when he was reading or in deep thought. "One more ingredient," he mumbled in frustration. "I wish I could remember!"

His bedroom was a huge laboratory located in the basement of his house. The lab was filled with different components, concoctions, and beakers of the type found in science classrooms at school. That was where he got most of his stuff, after all, though if asked, he would claim that it was all 'borrowed'. Open chemistry, physics, and engineering books were scattered around his bed. All of his shelves were empty.

He wore a neatly ironed, buttoned-up blue flannel shirt and a pair of khakis. His mother bought his clothes, so he had no say in what he wore. His mother was lenient, which countered his step-father's very strict ways. He was a smart boy, but he hated school. Since it was his only escape from home, he thought school was all about having fun, like pulling pranks on the teachers and his peers. He was a joker, a trickster you might say. He never took things seriously, and he didn't have many friends, but he didn't mind. He was content being by himself with his hobbies and prank-pulling.

"Mel!" a voiced hollered from upstairs. "Are you still awake? Have you been up all night?"

"Yes, Ma! I'm awake and I've been up all night," he replied in annoyance. "I'm still working. Please don't bother me!"

"Well, I'm sorry, but school starts soon and I've got some breakfast for you," she said as she poked her head around the corner from the top of the stairs.

"Just a minute." Mel shivered at the thought of his mother's atrocious cooking. The random mixtures of ingredients she would use were awful. Just a few days ago she had made a *tuna fish and*

mustard meatloaf deluxe dinner and a *peaches-and-peanut-butter pie for dessert*. She seemed to embrace her own laws of cooking and created her own variety of dishes.

“Oh, yeah!” he exclaimed suddenly, remembering his final ingredient, and quickly ran up the stairs to the kitchen. He threw open one of the cupboards and grabbed a bottle. His mother watched with a puzzled look on her face as he ran back downstairs to his lab. He took a small beaker of green liquid and poured the new ingredient into it, then shook the beaker for a few seconds and set it down so it would settle. He took the cap off the beaker and inhaled. “Whew! Wow, that’s the smell I’m looking for. The smell of an old-fashioned outhouse!” He chuckled. “I’m going to call it Stinkoffs.” He twisted the cap back on the beaker and waited a few more minutes. He made five more containers of the mixture, then stuffed them all safely into his book bag. “I can’t wait!” Laughing, he picked up his bag and ran upstairs.

When he reached the top of the stairs, his stepfather was in the doorway preparing to yell. “Mel, hurry it up, you have—oh, there you are. Come on, you’re going to be late. Your mother made you a bite to eat.”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” Mel grumbled as he slowly made his way past his stepfather and went into the kitchen. He sat on his favorite chair at the table and inspected his food, then turned to shoot his mom a disgusted look. “Umm, Mom, what’s this?”

“Oh, don’t worry. You’ll like it. Just try it. It’s my special sauerkraut pancakes.” She smiled.

“Well, I’m going to be late for school, so could you put it in a bag for me? I’ll eat it sometime later at school.” He handed her the plate.

“Mel, I hope you don’t get into trouble in this school like you did over the past few years,” she said with a firm voice. “I know you love to joke around all the time, but this is high school, and it’s time to get serious about your schoolwork.”

“Yeah, I know, but I hate school so much. I’ll go crazy if I don’t find a way to have fun.”

“Well at least bring your books home so your father thinks you’re studying. He’s very worried about you and wants you to go to college.”

“Fred is not my father. Besides, he doesn’t just want me to go to college; he wants me out of the house.”

“That’s not true.”

“What if I don’t want to go to college? Why can’t I make my own choices?”

“Sorry,” a deep voice said from the hallway. “You don’t have a choice.”

Mel’s stepfather walked in from the other room wearing a dark suit. “If it was my choice, I’d get you out of this house as soon as possible,” he laughed. “I’d send you off to military school. Besides, you are going to graduate from college! You’re not going to be some low-life loser working at a fast food restaurant or a bowling alley for the rest of your life. I know you’re smart. Why do you waste your talent?”

“What if I wanted to work at those places? Have you ever thought of that?”

His stepfather leaned toward Mel, getting closer and closer to his face. Putting his right index finger on Mel’s chest, he said firmly, “Listen here, son. As long as you don’t live here until you’re thirty, you can do anything you want. But while you live under my roof, I’m going to do everything possible to make sure you amount to something in your life—whether you like it or not.” He put his arm around his wife and continued, “Besides, I have a good job and a wonderful family, and that’s what I want for you.”

Fred left the room abruptly, going outside and making a lot of noise on the way. They heard the car start, and he drove off.

“Wow, I sure pissed him off.” A feeling of satisfaction came over him. Mel always thought about running away. He had become

tired and annoyed with the same routine, especially his mother's odd cooking and, of course, his stepfather's lecturing. He was always on Mel's back about something from chores, to homework, to becoming the next famous scientist who cured cancer. Then again, Mel's twisted humor got the best of him as he enjoyed the thought of living at home till a ripe old age just to irritate his stepfather. He got much pleasure from other people's misery, particularly his stepfather's.

"Well, you just need to understand that he only wants the best for you." Mel's mother put her hand on his shoulder. "He just wants to see you try as hard as he did and succeed in life."

"Yeah, right. I could never do that. The way he tries to motivate me makes me want to screw off even more. I don't want to be like him."

"Well I want you to be yourself, okay, Mel? Let's get going. I think you're late as it is."

They both got up and went outside to the car. As they drove off, Mel wondered about his stepfather and what had made him become a hard-core workaholic.

Mel glanced at the clock; it read 8:05.

"Here's a note for being late." His mother smiled as she handed him a piece of paper.

"Thanks," he said, and then asked, "Hey, Mom, did Fred ever have fun in high school, or was he a workaholic like he is now?"

"Well, don't tell him I said this, but your stepfather was a complete goof-off in high school," she said with a laugh. "But I think he wants you to succeed where he didn't. That's why he's so strict."

"Oh," he said, turning his head to stare out the window. Watching the buildings and trees go by, he thought about the times he and his stepfather had gone to the fair when he was younger. He remembered the fun they'd had and the rides they'd gone on. As he daydreamed, he saw a vision of his stepfather smiling; he couldn't

remember the last time he had seen that. His stepfather always worked late now, and it seemed that his job had taken over his life. He sure didn't want to end up like his stepfather. It would be awful to lose the spirit inside you.

As they turned the corner he looked up. The schoolyard was empty. Everyone else was in class by now. His mom stopped in front of the entrance and he climbed out.

"Have a good day, I love you," she said, leaning over so she could see his face.

"Yeah, I will," he said while shutting the door behind him. Mel turned and looked up at all the windows of the school and thought about how large they were. Maybe he could try and get a desk by the window so he could daydream and ponder fun and exciting adventures while sitting in mundane classes. As he reached the door, he glanced back. His mother was still sitting in the car as it idled. *Waiting to make sure I don't skip school*, he thought. He turned back toward the school, took a deep breath and walked in.

The lockers in this school were a bit larger than the ones Mel was used to. Amazed at how much wider the hallways were, he walked down the corridor, glancing into each room to see if he recognized anyone. He pulled out his class schedule. As he turned a corner, a running girl collided with him, and books went everywhere as she tumbled to the floor. Feeling guilty, he looked down and saw a young brown-haired girl wearing an old brown sweater.

"I'm so sorry." He tried to help her up. "I guess I wasn't looking."

"It's okay, it's okay. It's not the first time this has happened to me today," she said in an irritated voice as she picked up her glasses.

"Someone bumped into you already?" He chuckled. "Not a great start to the first day of school."

“Not at all. I was hit by a bike!” She picked up her books. “Well at least you weren’t a jerk about it like the other guy.”

“What do you mean?” He bent over to help pick up her books.

“You know, I don’t even remember, and I’m not having a good day as it is,” she said, walking away abruptly. “So could you just leave me alone? I need to go to class.”

“Hey, my name is Mel, and I’m really sorry!” Mel hollered after her.

Sally looked down at the ground while she walked. She thought about how her day was going, and was about ready to cry. Any other person would have talked back to that rude boy, but she wasn’t that type of person. She was the type of person who was kind to everyone, even those who were not kind to her. But at this moment she was considering changing her values and principles just to protect herself. Her day was not going well at all, except of course when she’d spoken to the man of her dreams. She’d had a crush on Ryan since she was a little girl. He was a blond-haired, blue-eyed, handsome guy, whom she remembered watching on the playground during recess in fifth grade. She’d always been afraid to talk to him because he was so popular. But today she felt unbelievably comfortable doing just that. Maybe it was because Ryan was the only guy who’d ever stuck up for her. Maybe things would change for her this year like her grandmother said. She didn’t want to get her hopes up too much, though.

As she finally stepped toward the classroom doorway, she paused and took a deep breath to relax. Her eyes began to water, and she wrinkled her nose as she smelled the worse stench ever. “Oh, gross! What is that?” She blocked her nose. The odor was beginning to make her feel queasy. She grabbed her sweater and took a whiff, discovering the culprit—a splattered green stain on her sweater. Mel had apparently accidentally spilled a small amount of his concoction on her during their collision.

“I thought my day couldn’t get any worse.” She shook her head, imagining everyone’s faces and how disgusted they were going to be when she walked by them, but at that moment she didn’t care anymore. Her day officially couldn’t get any worse. Could it? At least she would be prepared for the looks of disgust when people caught a whiff of her.

The door opened then, and a brown-haired, slender woman asked in a kind voice, “Hello there. Are you here for Hist— Oh, what is that god-awful smell?” The stench permeated into the room, and all the kids covered their mouths and noses in disgust. “Is that you, dear?”

Sally looked up and watched the woman’s face turn green with nauseated horror.

“It wasn’t me. I don’t know what it is!”

“Go home and shower!” a kid from the classroom exclaimed.

“Wow, that girl stinks!” another kid yelled.

With tears of embarrassment, Sally turned and ran down the hall toward the main doors. Once outside and in the front courtyard, she muttered to herself, “This is the worst day of my life! I need to go home.” She began running down the street.

Chapter II

The Well

A classroom door flung open, and a boy with long black hair stormed into the hallway.

“Go to the principal’s office right now!” a gray-haired man with a long beard yelled from the doorway as he pointed down the hall.

“Oh no, not the principal’s office!” John mocked the teacher. He knew he was in trouble, but he didn’t care. “I’m so scared now. What will I do?”

“You’d better be scared. I don’t think Mr. Wilson will be as lenient with you this year as he was last year.” The teacher’s eyes burrowed into John.

“Yeah right Mr. *Millnerd!*” he said with his usual cocky attitude.

“You will not make a mockery of my name, John.” Mr. Miller clenched his teeth. “Or my class, for that matter.”

“Phhh, like I care about either.”

“I didn’t think you did, since you’re repeating the class,” he replied, walking back to the front of the room. “I don’t want the same thing that happened last year to happen this year, John. You have potential. Why don’t you just try?”

“Because I think school is bull! And I think Mr. Wilson can kiss my—” John wasn’t able to finish, because the teacher slammed the door in his face.

As John walked down the hall, he kicked the floor, rubbing the bottom of his shoe and swinging it up into the air. “Darn it!” he mumbled to himself. Every year he seemed to get into the same confrontations with teachers. He would always be the wisecracker and get into trouble. *Why do I do this to myself?* he thought. *Maybe I just hate rules. Maybe that’s why I hate my dad so much. No, I hate him because he’s an arrogant jerk.* John was always afraid he’d turn out just like him.

He skulked aimlessly down the hall, avoiding the principal’s office, rubbing his fingers across the lockers and making a squeaky noise. The sound echoed down the hallway.

As he roamed the second floor, John put his hands in his front pockets and felt his pack of cigarettes, sparking an urge to smoke. He walked into the closest restroom and was hit with the most repulsive stench he had ever smelled in his life. He rubbed his eyes, which burned from the vapors. The restroom walls were painted white and a couple of windows were on the far wall. There was only one sink with a large mirror on the left; the toilet stalls were to the right. The smell that hung in the stale air of the room was really horrible.

Covering his nose, gagging from the pungent odor, John hurried over to one of the windows and yanked it open. A crisp fall breeze filled the space as he gazed out over the back courtyard of the school.

Leaning against the window screen, John took a few gasps of air. He looked back and said in a loud whisper, “Is there anyone

else in here?" He listened for a few seconds, and unsurprisingly, no one answered. He couldn't imagine anyone wanting to stay in here for long. He sat on the window ledge and lit up a cigarette. The first drag coaxed a smile from him as a sense of calm ran through his body.

John was walking toward the toilets when one of the stall doors burst open. His heart skipped a beat as he expected to come face to face with a teacher. A tall, lanky boy with brown curly hair came out instead, stopping when he noticed John.

"Well, hey there," the boy said politely. "I'm surprised you can stand the smell."

"I can't, but I really needed a cigarette," John replied, puzzled. "So if you don't mind, I'd like to be left alone."

"I'll leave in a minute." The boy chuckled and went back into the stall. "I have to finish up first."

"Gross!" John cringed. "What the heck did you eat?"

"No, no, no." The boy giggled and flushed. He walked back out holding a green vial in his hand. "I invented my own stink bomb, and I'm putting it everywhere in the school. Bathrooms first."

"Nice!" John was impressed. "I wish I'd thought of that."

"Yeah, I'm pretty proud of it." The boy marched to another stall and dumped a few drops on the floor. "I'm hoping they'll call off classes once I've strategically sprinkled the school."

"Good idea. I hope it works." John took another drag from his cigarette. "I can't stand it here much longer today."

"Me neither, obviously," Mel said with mischievous grin.

"My name is John," he said as he tossed his cigarette into the toilet.

"I'm Mel." He put out his hand.

"Well, nice to meet you." John smiled. "I think it's brilliant of you to think of this."

The bell suddenly rang, and they both stepped out of the bathroom.

“Do you have a place to sit during lunch?” Mel asked.

“I wasn’t really planning on going. Why?”

“I may need help with the rest of this stuff. You interested?”

John grabbed the bottle from Mel and said with a menacing smile, “I’m a step ahead of you.”

“Great.” Mel smiled. “I have to stop at a few places first.” He was surprised; he’d had no idea that this prank would actually result in finding a new friend.

They both laughed and quickly parted ways.

*

Meanwhile, outside the school, Sally stepped out of a car and shut the door. She bent over, facing the car window as it rolled down.

“Grandma, I wish I could die,” she lamented.

“Y’all know I don’t want that, dear.” She smiled.

“Well, I want something. I want a break from everyone. I hate school, I hate people, and I hate my life. I don’t want to be here anymore.”

“Oh, hon, ya don’t want that. There might be troubled times in ya life, but remember there is always good in everything.”

“Like what? What was good about today?”

“Well you’re building moral fiber by not becoming like the people who hurt ya.”

“But I don’t do anything. Why is this happening to me? Do I really have that much bad luck?”

“Don’t worry, child. Good things will happen. I can feel it.”

“Yeah, right. I don’t care; I just wish I could disappear.”

“Hey, hey there. Ya know, I can already see you changing, Sally.”

“How?”

“You’re strong. Strong like your parents, dear.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, I don’t know anyone else who would want to go back to school after an incident like you had today.”

“I want to get ahead in my schoolwork.”

“I’m sure you do. That’s what makes you so special. Now off you go before you’re late for your next class.”

“It’s lunchtime, Grandma. I won’t be late.”

“Well ya still don’t want to be late for that.” She chuckled.

“Okay, Grandma. I love you.”

“I love you too, sweetie. Remember to watch your step.” She drove away.

Sally smiled as she walked back to the school. Her memories of her parents were vague, but hearing good things about them always made her happy. The more she heard what great people they were, the more she tried to be a great person, too. With a confident stride, she walked directly to the lunchroom.

*

The cafeteria was packed with a long line for lunch. John and Mel stood for a few moments waiting for plates and then hurried over to the lunch line. They took turns discretely stepping out of the queue for brief moments to dabble drops of the liquid around the room. Minutes before, they’d finished placing the Stinkoffs around the rest of the building. Now there wasn’t a stench-free spot to be found.

“All right,” Mel whispered as he flashed an empty bottle. “That should do it.”

“Awesome.” John handed Mel a full plate. “Let’s find a place to sit.”

The room was full, and they hesitated for a few moments looking for the best place to view the coming mayhem. Most of the tables were lined up parallel the wall, with a few in the middle of the room.

As they walked toward an open table, they looked around anxiously for others to start smelling it. They giggled, hands over

mouths, trying not to look conspicuous as everyone else sat at their tables, talking amongst themselves, oblivious to what was about to happen.

“Any minute now,” Mel said, focusing on the crowd.

*

Sally walked into the lunchroom and grabbed a plate. As she stood in line, she noticed kids holding their noses and pointing at her. Confused, she took a part of her new sweater, lifted it to her nose, and inhaled. There was no awful stench. As the seconds went by, more and more students covered their noses and mouths. A lot of them were murmuring and pointing at Sally. She frantically sniffed her body but didn't smell a thing. She pushed her glasses up on her nose and held her head up, trying to maintain confidence.

She went and got her food and went to a table. The muttering of the students grew louder and louder until it began to sound like a sports arena. Now everyone was staring at her, and a lot of people dashed out of the cafeteria. She could not take this again, especially from the entire student body. All of her peers would call her names for the next four years of high school. This day was not getting any better. Tears flowed down her cheeks again as she restrained herself from racing out of the lunchroom. Suddenly, a foot came out of nowhere. Her plate flew straight up into the air, and green beans scattered across the floor. Sally put her hands out as she tumbled face first. She was on the floor when she turned around to see what she had tripped on, and the remainder of her meal was dumped on her head, covering her hair in potatoes and gravy. Stunned, she wiped some of the gravy off her glasses and noticed a tall boy with long, dark hair standing over her. Everyone in the lunchroom started to laugh, though most were in tears from the stink bomb. Sally sat in total disbelief.

“That's what you get for giving my bike a flat tire!” the boy yelled.

As she focused, she realized it was the guy from the morning who had hit her with his bike. She noticed that beside him sat the boy who'd bumped into her earlier that morning. "I'm sorry about your bike," she said in a trembling whisper.

"I don't care. All you had to do was watch where you were going," John said firmly. "I want five dollars for my tire you whiny little—"

All of a sudden John was pushed onto the floor. He slid a few feet, and his head slammed onto the wood surface with a thud.

"What in the heck is your problem?" asked the boy who now stood over John.

John shook his head and looked up as he sat trying to catch his breath and collect his wits. His blurred vision cleared, and he recognized the same kid from the morning confrontation. "You again!" he said, getting to his feet quickly. John marched up to the other boy and stood in front of him until they were chest to chest. "I should have kicked your butt earlier when I had the chance!"

"Yeah, right." Ryan chuckled. "You wish!"

While the two argued, everyone else piled out of the lunchroom. No one could stand the awful stench of Mel's Stinkoffs.

Suddenly a fire alarm blared and the principal's voice poured out of the public address system loudspeakers. "Students and faculty, due to a sewage leak, school will be cancelled for the rest of the day."

Sally had not moved from the floor. She was still crying. Ryan moved to help her up, but John shoved him aside. "We're not done yet, buddy!"

"What now?" Ryan shook his head. "Can't you see she's been through enough?"

"Why should I care?" John pushed him.

"Hey, why don't you all cool it?" Mel said firmly, separating them both by the length of his dangly arms.

“I don’t think so, Mel,” John said, but he walked away anyway. “This isn’t over, jockstrap!”

Mel hurried after him and Ryan reached for Sally. “Looks like you could use a hand.”

Sally smiled as she wiped her wet eyes and cheeks as she glanced around the empty lunchroom. The Stinkoff smell didn’t faze them, at least for the moment. Ryan grabbed extra napkins to aid Sally’s hasty cleaning job. Although she was sticky, she was able to mop off most of the food.

Sally’s mind was whirling a mile a minute. *It’s Ryan! What do I do?* she thought. *He is so cute and so popular. I’m so nervous. What am I saying? He has no interest in me. No one likes me... except my grandmother. But what am I going to do? Ask him over to watch movies with my grandma and me? No, that’s ridiculous. Wait, Sally; calm down. He’s a nice guy. You should know. He helped you out twice today. But that doesn’t mean he likes me. He probably was just trying to impress someone else. It wouldn’t take much for him to look good. He is so cute. He’s got dreamy blue eyes. Am I saying that out loud? Oh, no. What if he hears me? He’ll think I’m a goof. Okay, Sally, you’ve got to say something quick. You can’t let him get away.* She inhaled deeply.

“Ryan, thank you so much for everything.”

“No problem. That guy is a jerk anyway. Since school is cancelled, would you like me to walk you home?”

“I’d like that.”

They chatted as they walked outside. The wind was blowing hard, and the air was a little colder than usual for September. The trees swayed back and forth; the leaves ruffled as they blew down the street, making a loud noise that sounded like a rattlesnake.

“Wow, it’s pretty windy.” Ryan said, looking up at the trees.

“Yeah, it reminds me of this one time I—”

“Hey, jockstrap!” a voice came from down the street, interrupting them. “Wanna finish this, or are you too much of a wimp?”

Ryan and Sally saw John and Mel making their way up the street.

“John, don’t hit the girl this time,” Mel said, stepping in front of John as they made their way toward the other two.

“Don’t worry; it’s between me and this guy right here.” He pointed at Ryan.

“I don’t want to fight you,” Ryan said as he tried to turn away. “It’s not worth it.”

John pulled Ryan toward him. “Boo-hoo. Sounds like something a wimp would say.”

“No.” Ryan laughed. “Sounds like something someone with common sense would say. Unfortunately, you lost that during your fourth freshman year.”

John punched Ryan in the face, and Ryan fell to the ground.

“Will you two stop it?” Sally cried.

“Yeah, she’s right!” said Mel. “The street isn’t safe for a fight. Let’s go over there.”

Ryan got up, and the four of them walked to the field Mel had pointed out, Sally protesting the whole way. Large pine trees surrounded the property, forming a natural fence. The grass was waist high, but they could see the road from where they were in the middle of the field. Cars zipped past, but no one noticed them.

“All right, this is perfect!” Mel crossed his arms.

Not too far away from the other three, Sally backed up and bumped her heel on something. Glancing behind her, she saw a large well. It was round, made of old stones. It wasn’t very tall, only reaching her knees. She sat on the stone lip comfortably to watch the fight.

Ryan and John circled one another, opponents eyeing each other intently. For a couple of minutes they both seemed hesitant.

Then John ran to Ryan, grabbing his head and trapping it in a headlock. He punched Ryan several times and hit him on the top of the head, trying to knock him out.

Ryan wiggled out of John's grip and twisted his arm up and over to grab John's chin. He pulled back with all of his might and John flew back to the ground. Then Ryan punched John in the face. John counteracted and punched Ryan when he wasn't expecting it. His fist landed on Ryan's neck and Ryan couldn't breathe for a few seconds.

Mel prowled around the two as they fought. Cheering them on and acting as their referee. "Wait, John. Let him breathe."

As the two boys wrestled, Mel was accidentally shoved to the ground. John and Ryan jumped on each other like two wild cats fighting for food. They rolled on the ground, simultaneously throwing punches at each other. Ryan was on top of John, banging his head against the ground. John took his right foot and kicked Ryan in the back of his head. John turned over on top of Ryan and started to punch him in the face. Ryan threw him off and gasped for breath.

John didn't mind because he was winded, too. "I have got to quit smoking," he panted.

"Just stop. This is so ridiculous!" Sally shouted from the edge of the well. "This is all my fault. Why me?"

Mel stood up and approached her slowly, "Hey, you won't understand this, but guys don't usually talk about things. I guess you can say we're more physical. So just sit back. It'll be done in a matter of minutes. I promise." He turned back to watch the fight.

Mel was blocking Sally's view. Frustrated, she stood up. As she peeked around Mel, she noticed a gray and white rabbit hopping a few feet in front of them.

"Hey, look! A bunny!" she shouted, happy to be distracted from the violence.

The rabbit sat down in front of Sally and Mel and curiously tilted its head with its floppy ears down.

“Well I’ll be.” Mel bent down closer to the rabbit.

The rabbit tilted its head the other way in wonder, seemingly unaware of the fisticuffs going on behind it.

At that moment Ryan stood up and ran at John. He grabbed him by his waist and picked him up as he had learned in football training and ran—with John in his arms—directly toward Mel and Sally when he tripped over the inquisitive rabbit.

Mel and Sally had no time to move out of the way. Ryan and John crashed into Mel, who fell on top of Sally. The foursome toppled like dominoes.

Sally screamed as she fell back, wrapping her arms around Mel’s neck, and they plummeted into the well. Mel grabbed at John’s upper body, gripping him firmly as a counterbalance, but momentum was not in his favor. He pulled John and Ryan into the void with him.

As the quartet descended, howling and hollering into the abyss of the well, the rabbit, shaken but unharmed from the encounter, slowly hopped away across the field, oblivious to the turmoil happening behind him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Corey M. LaBissoniere is a resident of Houghton, Michigan in the northwest part of Michigan's Upper Peninsula on the shores of Lake Superior. He is a graduate of Houghton High School, Gogebic Community College and Michigan Technological University. When he is not writing, he works as an Adoption Specialist at a local Agency, enjoys a good game of billiards with his father, delights in extreme sports, likes outdoor activities, loves to travel, and appreciates a good story.

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