

RETURN
TO
ENCHANTAS
*** TEASER SAMPLE ***

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Chapter I

Becky

The setting sun gleamed over the pine forest as a young girl sat on the warped wooden steps of her old ramshackle trailer. Even with closed eyes it would be clear that no one bothered with lawn care in this neighborhood. The strong scent of dead wet leaves and fermented rotten apples smelled like neglect. Only half of the trailers in the twenty space park were occupied. Although the girl's trailer suffered from torn siding and a leaky roof it was superior in comparison to the rest.

Becky wasn't just attractive; she was a strikingly beautiful girl with black hair so dark that it glimmered with natural navy-indigo highlights in direct sunlight. Her startling sky-blue eyes mesmerized boys who dared look into them. She wore tight-fitting blue jeans with artfully slashed vents in the thighs and a brand-new black long-sleeved shirt with sequins that sparked like her eyes. The snug top revealed a figure mature for her age. Not one to shy away from make-up, her bold, crimson-traced, lush lips popped wetly into ripe contours. Her eyelashes, winged and shaded with many coats of mascara and artfully applied liner were designed to flutter and flirt with skill. A temptress at heart, Becky enjoyed the

effect she had on the boys at school and didn't feel the need to hide her beauty, making her all the more mysterious and desirable.

Becky counted on precious moments alone, eager for coveted alone time while her dad was away. When he was home, life was uneasy, unproductive, unhappy, and only slightly unpredictable: he was either drunk and short-tempered or drunk and passed out.

Becky took a drag from her cigarette and sipped on a can of warm beer as she thought about what her night entailed. She was going to her brother John's football game, of course. She never missed a game. After that, her night was open. She would most likely hit a party with a of couple friends — as long as she didn't get too wasted before the night started.

Becky thought about the recent changes in her big brother, who was a little over two years older in age, but only one grade ahead of her. She had always looked up to him; attitudes expressed loud and clear in her rebellious antics.

But John had changed. Since school started in the new year, he'd been living that self-improvement cliché 'turning his life around'.

If only her dad would do the same.

John started working for good grades and earning them. He joined the football team. As his attitude changed, he both attracted and found new friends. His old friends, of course, were angry and disgusted. Now Becky hung out with most of them, although it bothered her when they made fun of him behind his back, calling him *traitor*, *preppie*, or *jock*. Mostly she ignored it but every now and then the trash-talking got to be too much and she was drawn into standing up for John. Knocking back-stabbers down to size with a cutting comment, a scolding or a rare and thus unexpected punch was usually her style.

She loved John. She really would do anything for him. The shift was weird; it felt lonely, missing the tough guy that influenced her own cocky, outrageous persona. She wasn't ready

to follow in his most recent footsteps now (or ever), and she'd never admit it publicly, but she was proud of him, all the same.

Becky poured the last of the foamed beer onto the gravel driveway. Standing, she teetered, but quickly regained her balance. Normally she didn't drink alone. But her dad had been gone for five days and yesterday the power company had shut off the electricity. She figured his beer wasn't going to get any colder.

Dad's job at the mill, the town's main way to make a living, tied him up all day. Released from hard labor, he immediately headed downtown to the local pubs. If he ran out of money or was close to passing out he'd often sleep in his old battered truck. Still, there were too many nights to count when John would ride his bike to whatever watering hole his dad was getting wasted at, just to drive his drunken butt home. The bartenders knew who to call. But there hadn't been any late-night calls in more than two weeks — unlike the electricity, their phone bill wasn't past due.

Becky had a feeling that it wasn't just her brother's behavior that had changed. For as long as she could remember, dad's behavior ran in predictable seasonal cycles. For a few weeks he'd stick to going out with friends for a few drinks after work. The friends, he went through a lot of them, would either tire of the routine or tire of him. He'd turn to partying alone, drinking himself into oblivion in one pub or another, trying to buy new friends with cocktails, until he'd run a bar tab so high he would be kicked out and not allowed back in until the debt was paid. Then there would be weeks where he was plopped in the tatty brown fake-leather living-room recliner watching re-runs of old TV Westerns or worse, sporting events that he barely pretended to be interested in — it was all about betting on any game available with the local bookie.

After this phase of his binge drinking, her father would sober up, go back to work and begin the daunting task of slowly paying off his delinquent bills. In a matter of weeks the cycle began again.

This time, however, the cycle was off. He just kept drinking downtown, without showing any desire to lick his wounds at home, gather his strength and begin again the process of getting his life together, financially and medically, prior to the next binge.

John had helped with his bills the previous summer before he lost his job at the Pizza Shop. Football and schoolwork didn't leave time for a job. He didn't have any time for Becky, either. She told herself she really didn't mind; she enjoyed her time alone. She also liked to watch him play football even if she didn't like the game itself.

Becky handled her concerns using the traditional family method. She went inside and grabbed a quick shot of dad's bottom-shelf whiskey then pulled the last warm beer out of the silent fridge. She flopped back down on the steps and took a swig of the bargain-brand brew.

A crisp breeze ruffled her shiny black hair, flattened the lighter flame as she stoked another cigarette, drawing smoke deep into her lungs and coughing slightly. It felt more like summer than fall. She wished she could relive the past summer, between seventh and eighth grade. It had been the best summer yet. The beginning was boring, but her best friend Jessica had introduced her to *high-school-boys* and *high-school-parties*. She'd never understood the fascination for finding a remote field, beach or forest, fueling a large bonfire with wood and tires, drinking, fighting and generally being obnoxious. Her low opinion of the drinking, fighting and generally being obnoxious changed when she got drunk for the first time.

That was the legendary night that she went skinny dipping in Clear Lake, emerging on the beach next to a teacher's house. She, of course, didn't remember, but everyone at the party did. Her nickname for the rest of the summer was *Little Guppy*. Rather than being embarrassed, she enjoyed the kind of attention she never got at home. She was too thick-skinned to let a little teasing bother her.

Becky was surprised her brother never mentioned her summer escapades. If he knew, he never let her know it. She avoided trouble even when the police busted the parties and scattered the panicked teens. Her first raid was hilarious; she found it highly amusing to watch all of her peers scurry into the woods. They looked like a flock of gazelles running from a pride of lions, only not as fast or as gracefully. To her it was uncool to run away. She sat next to the beer keg, nonchalantly sipping her drink. No one ever got in trouble anyway; the police just ordered them to go home. She figured it was their way of avoiding late-night paperwork hassles, and a good way of getting free beer for themselves.

The best summer so far also had some love drama. Becky fell hard for the first time with, of all things, a senior. She knew that if her brother found out she was involved with an older guy he would beat him up, so she was trying to keep the relationship as secretive as possible in certain circles where John might pick up on it.

Carl was a partier, too. Becky thought it quite the achievement that Carl was an upperclassman. All of her other friends were dating freshman or sophomores. She would brag about it every now and again; nothing good or special ever happened to her, so she felt entitled.

She met Carl after the first few parties. Becky, Jessica and a few other girlfriends had decided to compete with each other to find out who could kiss the most guys by the end of summer. Becky was on ten going for eleven when she met Carl at yet another outdoor kegger. She was trying to get a beer but the hand-tap wouldn't work. Carl helped her out. At the time, she believed it was love at first sight. He was so handsome with his long curly light-brown hair; she had a weakness for curly hair, and romantic blue eyes. But by the end of summer Becky saw that it wasn't love at first sight. It was drunken lust at first sip.

The relationship started out as perfectly as a teen love movie. They took long drives in Carl's yellow Mustang through the hilly and mountainous countryside, passing large lakes hidden in thick forests. They ran in the waves at Clear Lake and lay, warmed by the sun, on an old blanket spread on the sand. They even hung out at his house with his parents. She lied about her age; she didn't think they would take too kindly to their almost seventeen year old son dating a thirteen year old eighth-grader, even if she was turning fourteen soon. Make-up, hair, and clothes, along with her womanly figure, helped her look older. Her friends all agreed she could pass for at least seventeen.

Her first love ended on Mid-Summer Blast, a party that coincided with her fourteenth birthday. Becky discovered Carl and her best friend Jessica making out in the Mustang. *Little Guppy* no more, Becky pulled Jessica out by the hair, punching her repeatedly. The partying kids enjoyed the show, many chanting "chick fight, chick fight" as Becky bloodied an unresisting Jessica. The boys cheered themselves silly; the girls tried to jump in, about evenly divided between Becky's or Jessica's side. Eventually some of the boys decided to pull Becky off before she did more damage. Becky, still unmarked and furious, turned on Carl. Like her brother and father, her short-fused temper and fast reflexes made her a feisty scrapper.

Not surprisingly, Jessica and Becky were no longer friends after the incident. Becky debated continuing the kissing competition and decided she didn't want to go back to school with a reputation of being the summer skank, or something worse. She didn't really care what others thought about her, but to keep her "don't mess with me" reputation, she'd have to beat up everyone who'd call her a bad name. By the end of the school year, she wouldn't have any friends because everyone would be too afraid of her.

Becky was heartbroken for the first week or so. The bloody lips and black eyes on her ex-best friend and ex-boyfriend may have made her feel better for a moment, but it didn't alleviate the sadness or stop the tears from flowing. John noticed her crying a few times at night. He would ask who the guy was that hurt her and threaten to beat him up. Becky would smile, knowing that was how John showed his love; protecting his little sister. She would always tell him to forget it and that she'd already taken care of it. John usually laughed lovingly and they'd each have a beer. She really enjoyed those bonding moments with John and kind of missed them too. It was always her and John taking care of each other.

Coincidentally, she had heard that Carl and John had been butting heads ever since John was bumped to the varsity football team. She wondered if the summer fiascos had anything to do with it.

Becky moved on, in her own way, but never found another serious boyfriend. Not because she couldn't, but because she wanted to be independent and not need someone by her side to be happy. There were many boys who flirted with her since the breakup. She loved the attention and flirted back just like any normal girl would, but she refused to date anyone who was immature. Her standards were very high, which made her realize that since she was in eighth grade; she'd be single until college. Becky's ideal guy was someone who was cute, but not all into himself, a quirky sense of humor, and not a cheating lowlife like Carl. Until the day came where that guy walked into her life, she'd keep to herself and do what she enjoyed doing.

Since the breakup and her new outlook on boys, Becky found a new thrill; shoplifting. Becky found herself stealing from stores more and more. She had done it a few times in the past year, but never made a habit of it. Over the past few months, she had gotten pretty good too. She'd steal anything: shoes, clothes, cigarettes,

liquor, and food. Shoes, clothes, and food were a necessity because her father never bought new clothes or kept the trailer stocked with anything to eat. The cigarettes and booze she took were for her and her friends on the weekends. John hinted that he knew what she was up to. He'd joke around, saying "nice new shirt" or "it's my birthday soon; you want to *buy* me some new clothes?" He would never rat her out, especially when he knew they were going through some troubled times.

Becky was not a bad girl. After all, she did very well in school. She had the best grades in her class and she had a very high IQ. She hid that fact because she was sure her classmates would treat her differently and probably even cheat off her if they knew. Her teachers loved her as a student, but Becky didn't want them to discover her other side, her rebellious side. If the teachers knew about her partying, stealing and other mischief, they might not respect her for her intelligence. It was quite an accomplishment to keep her secrets from everyone. Becky knew all too well the fallout of stereotyping. Her brother was a great example.

John was once a good kid, but then got caught doing some things that were socially unacceptable. Becky knew that if you did something wrong and people heard about it, that was what they would remember about you, forever. Even if you did a million good things, that one bad thing would brand you for life. Even with this in mind, she could not stop her unruly ways. She was just having too much fun.

Becky took another drag of her cigarette and a big swig of beer, grimacing at the taste of the bitter, unrefreshing liquid. A police car cruised slowly up the drive. Its flashers were off but she still felt an impending threat. They were looking for her. She knew it. She tossed the half-empty beer can under the trailer and stamped out her cigarette as an officer pulled up and parked. He walked toward her with a purposeful stride.

Becky tensed. He could be here for her, her brother or her father. A few days ago she and a couple of friends had stolen what they could from a block of unlocked cars at the mall, netting a carton of cigarettes and more than one hundred dollars.

“Hello there,” the officer said in a deep, scratchy, authoritative voice.

“Hi,” Becky replied, her attempt to be cocky minimized by her inability to make eye contact. “Can I help you?”

“I hope so,” the officer stepped closer. “I’m Sergeant Greg. I’m an old friend of your dad’s. Jim’s your father, right?”

Becky nodded.

“Would you happen to know where he is?”

Becky couldn’t help herself. Cops got her snippy up. “Well if you were such a good friend, wouldn’t you know where he is?”

“I never said I was a good friend. I’m an old friend. We used to work together a long time ago.”

Becky could tell she was ticking him off. It was a dangerous time to be a smart mouth, considering the beer on her breath and the lingering stench of cigarettes.

“Umm, I haven’t seen him for a while,” she said, making an excuse for her rudeness. “Sorry for being short with you. Not knowing where my dad is worries me.” *Good one Becky*, she thought to herself. “Did you try all the pubs? Bar-hopping seems to be his only hobby.”

“I just came from them before I came here.”

“Ha,” Becky snorted. “You do know him well then.”

“Well, if you see him,” Greg handed her a card, “Could you have him call me right away?”

“Sure,” Becky’s unease, that feeling she’d had all afternoon that something was more wrong than usual, accelerated. “Is everything all right?”

“I hope so, there was a hit-and-run the other night,” Sergeant Greg’s expression turned even more serious, watching her for a reaction. “Your dad’s truck may have been spotted.”

“Oh no,” she said, wide-eyed. “Is anyone hurt?”

“Not too bad,” Greg sighed. “Luckily it’s just a broken leg. The victim will heal, but of course he wants to press charges.”

Becky buttoned her lip. Her dad probably did it. Usually when he screwed up bad or was hiding from whoever he owed, he’d retreat for a few days, drinking his problems away at a secluded hunting camp. If this was like the other times, he’d come back pretending nothing had happened. She and John always knew better.

“I want to get to him before anyone else,” Greg broke the silence. “The sheriff wants to put him in jail. She has it out for your father.”

“Doesn’t everybody?” Becky mumbled to herself.

“Well, I’d better go. Aren’t you going to your brother’s game tonight? I heard he’s doing real well this year. I never knew he played football. You know, he’s the talk of the town, right?”

Becky gave him a big smile. She was so proud of her brother. “Yeah, I’m going, I just need to get ready.”

“Better hurry. It’s already started.”

“Are you sure?” Becky glanced at the clock inside the window, but realized – again – that it wasn’t working. “Crap! I didn’t realize what time it was.”

“If you leave now, you’ll be there for the second half.” Sergeant Greg nodded goodbye.

Becky lifted her foot to check the condition of her cigarette, demolished, to her dismay. Cursing out loud again she rooted through the crumpled-foil lined pack. Empty. She bit her lip, debating. She could go to the store and steal a pack, but the easiest store to steal from was on the other side of town. It was too late to

ride John's bike there and still make it in time to watch the end of the game.

Then she remembered. She rushed into the trailer headed for John's room. It hadn't changed that much since the beginning of the school year; clothes were still scattered over the floor. The only obvious improvement was the unknown rock band posters covering the holes he'd previously punched in the walls.

Becky started digging, rummaging through his drawers, closet, under the bed. No cigarettes, darn it! He'd quit a little over a month ago. How could she have forgotten? He'd been the crabbiest person alive for at least two weeks. Disappointed that he hadn't overlooked at least a stray butt with a couple of puffs left in it, she sulkily walked right over the piles of clothes before brightening again as she moved to the living room closet. There it was. John's old black leather jacket. She dug through two pockets with no luck. But in the inside vest pocket her searching fingers clasped around a cool metal circlet. She pulled it out, closely examining the plain, gray metal bracelet. She was about to put it on when she noticed a rectangle, like a cigarette-pack box, in the other interior pocket. She smiled victoriously.

"Thank God," she said aloud, easing the jacket off its hanger and extracting the miraculously unopened cigarette pack. She went deeper into the pocket for his Zippo lighter. Becky tossed the bracelet aside and slid into the jacket. She surveyed herself in the smudgy full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. Other than the too-long arms, the jacket fit. "Not bad," she said, examining her bad-girl look from all angles.

Outside the cracked window she could see the sun had almost set, long evening shadows overtaking the bright afternoon. The lights would have kicked on over the football field. She needed to hurry to catch the second half.

She checked her make-up, applied more lipstick, sleeked a dime-sized dollop of argan oil over the shiny curtains of hair

framing her face. She blew a mocking kiss to her image. “Here we go, girl.”

Standing on the threshold, considering whether to lock the door or not in case dad came home, she took in the battered trailer and another mood passed through her like skidding, shredding, fast-moving clouds on a windy day. Tears welled. She was ashamed of where she lived. What a dump. What a life. It wasn’t the first time she’d thought about running far, far away from her drunken father’s cruddy trailer. She would find somewhere where she and John could find something better. Her brother was doing it, but she couldn’t start fresh here.

Before those useless, cry-baby emotions could really kick in and wreck her make-up, she took a long swallow of the cheapest and easiest medicine she knew, her father’s half-empty whiskey bottle. She had found it lying neglected next to the peeling-laminate end-table which was next to ugly stained pea-green couch. She wrinkled her nose and shuddered, both hating and savoring the hot, harsh burning liquid as it moved down her throat all the way into her belly. Even with an alcohol buzz she skillfully rode John’s bicycle, pedaling as fast as she could with a cigarette in her hand.

“Homecoming victory, here we come,” she declared. “Go John!”

Chapter II

Homecoming

The roar of Panther fans hungry for Homecoming victory echoed and hummed on the field below. The game had been a pushing-and-shoving match on both sides. Neither team was able to gain more than a seven-point lead over the course of the game. With ten seconds left the Panthers were losing to the Bloomsfield Bears twenty-one to sixteen.

Ryan led his exhausted teammates to another huddle.

“All right guys,” he huffed, drawing in deep lungfuls of oxygen. “We have time for one more play and we *need* a touchdown to win.”

“It’s impossible, kid,” a large line-backer gasped, hunched over, hands on his knees. He turned his head from the huddle and spit. “Their line is solid. No openings.”

“I know, Tank,” Ryan smiled. “But I’ve got an idea.”

“Well, I hope you’re calling in a miracle,” another player said, panting. His face was dripping with blood.

“Oh yeah. That’s what it is. A miracle. And now we’re gonna pray.” Ryan dropped to one knee, looking up to make contact with

every pair of eyes he could reach. “So, Coach wants us to run it through the middle, but I know it won’t work on that brick wall.”

“I hear ya!” Tank hollered, sounding interested in spite of his deeply pessimistic attitude.

“Ryan, I don’t feel comfortable going against the coach’s orders,” another player stuttered.

“You don’t feel comfortable?” Ryan mimicked. “Where are we, in gym class? Come on man, what’s Coach gonna do? Bench us?” He smirked. “This is our last game, our last play, *our* Homecoming. Let’s win it for us!”

“You heard him,” John chimed in. “Sometimes the rules don’t get you where you need to be. Let’s take this to the end zone!”

His battle cry was pierced by the referee’s whistle. A yellow flag hit the ground.

“Crap. Delay of game,” John mustered the strength to maintain momentum, pulling from deep inside to portray calm even as he heard a furious coach throwing a tantrum on the sidelines. The outburst was more colorful than the half-time show. The ruckus featured wildly inventive cussing as well as a thrown clipboard that unfortunately hit an injured player smack in the forehead.

“Okay. Let’s do this.” Ryan snapped back to the job at hand. “We’re setting up in ‘I’ formation. After I say down, I will move into shotgun. Smiddy and Shooter will move to each side of me. I will hand it off to Smiddy. Smiddy, you run left and reverse it to Blake. Blake I want you to run back to the right and line; I want you guys to screen him until he gets about ten yards. Blake, then I want you to lateral it back to me and then,” he stares into John’s tired but determined eyes. “I want you to run fast and as hard as you can and I’ll Hail-Mary it to you.”

“Why does the scrub get the touchdown?” Carl whined.

“Drop it, Carl,” Ryan sighed. “In fact, that’s what you’re best at. Now who’s ready to win this game?”

“Thanks Ryan,” John whispered. “I’ve been waiting all season for you to say that.”

“Thank me if this works.” Ryan stiffened and put his arm out, “All right. Let’s do this. Ready...”

“GO PANTHERS,” the huddle clapped hard before breaking into position.

Sweat and blood dripped from their limbs. Their breath steamed in the cold night, bodies burning with exertion even as the temperature on the field dropped.

Ryan looked right, then left. Slowly squatting, he set the magic in motion:

“DOWN!”

The players were swift, certain in their positioning as Ryan took a few steps back into a shotgun position.

“SET...” Ryan glanced around. He saw Coach Klein and the secondary coaches freaking out. The offensive coach was pulling what little hair he had left. A grin bloomed and widened behind his facemask. The Panthers were at that very moment putting the F-U-N back in football. He yelled so hard he could feel the pressure behind his eyes.

“HIKE!”

The moment the ball left the line everything moved into fast forward. Bodies banged and tripped as Ryan handed off the ball to Smiddy. Ryan headed to the right of the line to wait for the lateral from Blake.

The once-thunderous crowd became silent, anxious, waiting.

Blake grabbed the ball from Smiddy.

The Bears’ sideline began yelling “REVERSE! REVERSE!” trying to get their teammates’ attention.

The Bears altered positions and clumsily slipped on the field as they responded to the unexpected play. Blake broke a quick tackle and got behind the screen of Panther linemen. He made a quick shuffle to his right until he met a line of Bears ready to

annihilate him. He passed the ball backward to Ryan. It was almost too high to catch, but Ryan managed to grab it.

He looked for John down the field. He was wide open.

“PASS! PASS! PASS!” the Bear’s sideline chanted, trying to warn their teammates of the trick play, but it was too late. Thanks to the confusion, the safety and cornerbacks had already left John alone.

Such an easy throw; a gift, Ryan wasted a few precious seconds second-guessing himself with the normal human doubtful questions: *Can I throw it that far? What if I lose control?*

Finally, murmuring one of his favorite football prayers: “No guts no glory,” Ryan wound up and let the ball glide gracefully off his fingertips. No more than a second later, he was tackled and slammed to the ground. But in that moment before the stadium lights blinded him and his head smacked the ground, knocking him out cold, his eyes fixated on the ball sailing through the air like an unstoppable force of nature. The glory of that perfect pass would stay with him long after the bruises healed. It was embedded in his soul for eternity.

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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