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Opening extract from

Messenger of Fear

Written by

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EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

I normally dedicate my books to Katherine,
Jake, and Julia. Not this time.

For Julia, Jake, and Katherine.

Because Julia is tired of always being named
last just because she's the youngest.

1

My eyes opened.

I was on my back.

A mist pressed close, all around me, so close that it was more like a blanket than a fog. The mist was the color of yellowed teeth and it moved without a breath of breeze, moved as if it had a will.

The mist swirled slowly, sensuously, and it touched me. I don't mean that it was merely near to me and therefore inevitably touched me; I mean that it *touched* me. It felt my face like a blind person might. It crept up the sleeves of my sweater and down the neckline. It found its insinuating way under rough denim and seeped, almost like a liquid, along bare skin. Fingerless, it touched me. Eyeless, it gazed at me. It heard the beating of my heart and swept in and out of my mouth with each quick and shallow breath.

The mist spoke to me, wordless, soundless, and yet so that I understood, and it said, *Shiver*.

I shivered, and goosebumps rose on the insides of my arms and on my belly, and the mist laughed as silently as it had commanded me.

I called out, "Mom?"

But the mist would have none of that. It took my word, stopped it, flattened it, made a mockery of it, and echoed it back to me.

I felt something prickling and tickling the side of my face and turned my head to see that I was lying in grass of such a color that it could never have known spring. It was the gray-green of bread mold, the color of decayed life. I could see only the nearest stalks, those pressed closest to my face. How had I come to be here? And where was *here*?

I searched my memory. But it was a box of old photos printed on age-curled paper. Here a face. There a place. Not quite real, too faded, too fractured, too far away to be real. Pictures, snatches of conversation,

distorted sounds, and sensory echoes—the soft scraping sound of paper pages turned by an unknown hand, liquid poured from a bottle, the strike of a match, the smell of sulfur, the—

I had the thought then that I was dead.

It was not a certainty to me but an uneasy possibility, a doubt, a guess whose truth I was not willing to test.

Why were my memories so far out of reach? I had a life, didn't I? I was a person. I was a girl. I had a name. Of course I had a name.

Mara.

Yet even that seemed unsteady to me—a fact, perhaps, but a shaky fact. The word *Mara* did not carry with it some flood of emotion. It was a flat thing without depth or shape, just a word.

Mara.

Was that me? Let it be me. Let it be me because I needed a name, I needed something definite to hold on to.

I raised a hand to my face. I watched the fingers appear, swirling through that unnatural mist. I touched

my face and felt tears. I touched my face and *felt*. Both finger and cheek felt and therefore I lived. I lived.

Then, as if discouraged by my discovery, the mist began to clear. It withdrew from me, sliding away from my flesh like a wave retreating into the sea.

I wanted to stand up. I did not want to lie there any longer in the dead gray grass. I wanted to stand and see, and then run, run far from this unsettling nightmare. Running would awaken me, and all of it, all my memory, all that I was would come flooding back. It must.

I was shaking so badly that the simple act of standing erect became a challenge. My limbs did not want to cooperate with each other, and I made a mess of it, rising first onto hands and knees and then stumbling, nearly falling, before finally rising to my full unimposing height.

I was in an open place. It was dark, darker than it had been in the mist, and no starlight, still less moonlight, shone down from above. But it was not complete darkness. Patterns of gray on black, and black

on blacker still, emerged as I looked around me.

There was a building. Had it been there the last time I looked? No light escaped that building. Nothing about that building called to me to approach except for the fact that it was the only object in sight.

I moved one foot, and another. That fact, the fact that I could put one foot in front of another, let me take a deeper breath, a less agitated breath. To move was to live, wasn't it? To move was to choose a path, and that meant I still had some volition, some control. I felt and I moved. Hadn't there been some lesson in class about the definition of life and hadn't it been that . . . sensation, movement, something else . . .

Had there been a class? A school?

Of course, no doubt. So why couldn't I see it in my mind? Why, when I asked myself that question, was the only image like a stock photo, filled with unfamiliar, too-bright, too-pretty faces?

Was I dead?

Never mind, Mara, I told myself, trying to accept

that name as the truth. Never mind, *Mara*, you can feel and you can move. You can choose. *Mara*.

I could go in a different direction. I could choose not to walk to that building, that outline of black against black, that shadow within shadow. My feet made sounds like sandpaper as they brushed the brittle grass.

The structure was taller than a house, narrow and long. There was a suggestion of high windows ending in pointed arches. And a suggestion, too, of a strong, heavily timbered door, and above that door, atop the building, a sort of tower.

A steeple.

It was a church. That knowledge should have reassured me, but instead it drove a spike of cold terror into my belly, for I knew one thing: this church was no place of comfort and peace. There was a sullen, silent hostility to this structure. It was not calling me into God's presence; it was warning me to go away.

Yet at the same time I could now feel the door drawing me to it. It had a strange gravity, a force

perhaps unknown to science that pulled me toward it not by magnetism but by acting on my fear, turning my fear into a vortex. I had to know what was inside that church. I had to know, though I feared the knowing.

You fear me, come to me, the church seemed to whisper to my heart. *Your terror demands an answer. Come.*

Come.

And flee.

I reached the door. There was a brass doorknob, strangely shaped, as though it was a carved figure. A head, perhaps. I touched it and my curious fingers could make nothing of the curves and ridges, though I thought I might almost make out the outlines of a face.

I turned the knob and it moved easily. I pushed open the door. An answer was close now, I felt, some piece of knowledge that I both dreaded and desired.

I stepped across the threshold and glanced up, sensing something overhead, and where I thought I would see rafters, there was the sickly mist again, a shapeless carrion feeder greedily awaiting my death.

I moved down the aisle, like a bride slow-walking between rows of family and admirers. There was no altar or cross or other symbol. There was only an oblong box set upon a low stone so that the top of the box would be just lower than my breast if I were to stand close.

It was a *coffin*.

Something told me it was not empty.

I was sure that I would see a familiar face in that coffin. I was sure I would see myself. But why would I be lying in a church that was no church?

Cold fingers of horror squeezed my heart, wrung the blood from it, and left me gasping for air. Each inhalation was a sniffle, each exhalation a shudder. My fingernails pressed into my palms, and the pain of it was proof that I was alive, or something like alive, and yet I knew, I knew what I would see in that coffin.

I took another step.

Another.

And I looked down to see a face.

I stared in confusion. This was not me. Could not

be me. I could not bring the image of my own face to mind, yet I knew this was not me.

Maybe she had been fifteen years old, maybe a year older; it is not easy to judge the age of a dead face. My age, perhaps?

That she was dead was not in doubt.

"Her name was Samantha Early."

A voice!

I spun around, raising my hands—already formed into aching fists. Adrenaline chased away the lethargy of dread as instinct took over.

He was a boy or young man. He stood a dozen feet away and did not move toward me or flinch at my upraised fists.

He was tall and thin. His face was pale as a ghost, pale almost to translucence, and made all the whiter by the long black hair that framed it.

He wore a black coat that fell to mid-calf over an iron-gray buttoned shirt. His pants were black, and his shoes seemed to be tall boots of black leather, though

they were dusty. The buttons of his coat were silver but not brightly polished. Each was a tiny skull, no bigger than a hazelnut.

On his right hand was a silver ring in a shape I could only vaguely make out. It looked like a warrior, a woman, gripping a sword.

The other ring, the one on his left hand, was a face contorted in unimaginable terror. A young face, and in between nervous glances it seemed to change, as though the face was animated, alive.

I had as well the impression of tattoos at wrist and neck, from the few visible patches of skin.

His eyes were the only color in that monochromatic picture. They were blue. They were a blue I had never seen before in any human eye. His eyes were the turquoise of the Mediterranean, like something from a travel poster of a Greek island.

I wanted to ask him where I was, but that would have made me seem vulnerable. It would have invited him to take some advantage of me. Better to be tough,

if tough was something I could pull off. So instead I asked the question that was inevitable.

"Who are you?"

He looked at me and I had to force myself not to turn away. He looked at me and I felt quite exposed suddenly, as if his eyes were seeing the things I showed no one. I fought an urge to squirm, but still my shoulders hunched forward, and my eyes lowered, and my lips pressed tightly and my lungs labored to take in breath so that my nostrils flared.

All of it was beyond my ability to control.

"Her name was Samantha Early. It is a terribly apt name. Dead too early is young Samantha Early."

Was I supposed to laugh? Was that some effort at a joke? But nothing about him suggested humor.

"Tell me who you are," I said. My voice sounded pitifully thin. If there was any threat in that voice, then it was a laughable one.

"That's not the question you want answered first," he said.

He had a strange voice. It was as if his mouth was pressed close against my ear so that I could hear every shade of every word, the inhalation and exhalation, the play of tongue against teeth, teeth against lips, lips softly percussing the *b* and *p* sounds.

I recoiled a bit from that voice, not from fear but from a sense that its intimacy was somehow inappropriate.

"Are you reading my mind?" I asked.

There was the slightest narrowing of his eyes, and if not a smile, there was a softening of the stern lines of his mouth.

He did not answer. Instead he said, "Samantha Early. Aged sixteen. Dead by her own hand."

With that he laid his pale fingers softly, reverently on her cheek and then rolled her head to the side so that I could see.

"Oh, God!" I cried. It was a hole, just large enough that a little finger could have been stuck into it. The hole was in her temple, and it was the color of ancient

rust. Around the hole, an elongated oval of scorched skin and crisped hair.

It was the most terrible thing I had ever seen in my life.

I looked then at her face. She was not pretty; her chin was too big, too meaty. Her nose was perhaps too forceful, and there were dark circles under her eyes. I felt, seeing this face, that she had endured pain. It was a sad face, though how can a face in death ever be happy?

I was so intent on her face that I failed at first to notice that the light all around me had changed.

I looked up and saw that the church was gone. The coffin, that terrible object, that reproach against life itself, grew transparent.

And then, the pale flesh of the dead girl began to regain some aspects of life. It grew pink. And I was certain I detected the movement of her eyes beneath their lids.

I cried out, "She's alive!"

And just then, as though my exclamation was a

signal, she sat up. She sat up and now, dreamlike, the coffin was no longer there. Feeling wildly unstable, I put my hand out as though to steady myself, but there was nothing within my reach but the shoulder of the boy in black.

My fingers closed around his bicep, which flexed at my touch. It was reassuring in its solidity. He was real, not some figment.

He shook his head and did not meet my eyes. "I am not to be touched."

It wasn't anger but a soft-spoken warning. It was said with what might have been regret but with absolute conviction.

I pulled my hand away and mumbled an apology, but I was less concerned about him than I was consumed with the horror of looking directly into the dead girl's eyes. She had risen to her feet. She stood. The hole still a testament to brutality, bloody, only now, now, oh . . . oh . . . It was *bleeding*. Wet and viscous, the blood drained from the hole in her head as the blood seemed to drain

from my own limbs. Little globules of something more solid slid down the trail of blood, bits of her brain forced outward as the bullet had forced its way inward.

Her eyes were brown and empty, her face blank, her blond hair fidgeted in a slight breeze, and the blood ran down her cheek and down her neck and pooled at the hollow of her throat.

I wanted to say that we needed to call 911. I wanted to say that we must help. But the boy in black stood perfectly still, looking at me and not at the girl, the girl dead or living or whatever unholy cross between the two that defined Samantha Early.

Dead too early.

"The question you want answered," the boy in black said as though no time had passed, "is whether *you* are dead."

I licked my lips nervously. My throat burned as though I'd been days without a drink of water. "Yes," I said to him.

"You live," he said. "She does not."

2

"We have to help her."

"She is past help," the boy in black said.

"She's standing, she's . . . Can you hear me?" I addressed this to Samantha, knowing how foolish it was, knowing that my words would fall into the inconceivably vast chasm that separates the living and the dead.

No flicker of recognition in those brown eyes, no sudden cock of the head. I was inaudible and invisible to her.

Then she began to move, to walk. But backward. Away from us but backward, not awkward but with normal grace. As though she had always walked backward. Backward across what was now a suburban street. A car came around the corner, not fast, the driver seeming to check for addresses as he drove. If he saw

Samantha, he gave no sign of it. I was sure, too, that he did not see me or the boy in black.

The car moved forward normally. Across the street a dog raced along its enclosure, moving forward as well, seeing the car but not us. Only Samantha was in rewind, only she moved backward to the sidewalk, to the flagstone-paved path, to a front door that opened for her. Now it was opened *by* her but all in reverse. It was a disturbing effect, part of what I was now sure had to be a strangely elaborate dream. Dreams could play with cause and effect. Dreams could show you bullet wounds and staring girls and people walking backward. Dreams could move you from black-hearted un-church to sunlit suburbia without effort.

"A dream," I whispered. I looked again at the boy. He had heard me, I was sure of that, but his expression was grim, focused on Samantha.

The door of the house closed and should have blocked her from our view, but we were now inside that house, though we had passed through no door. We

were in a hallway, at the foot of steps leading upward.

There were framed photos on the wall beside the steps: a family, parents, a little boy and Samantha. And other pictures that must have been grandparents and aunts and cousins. I saw them all as, without thinking about it, I began to ascend those steps. Even as Samantha walked backward up them.

She disappeared around the corner at the top, but the boy in black and I arrived at her room before she did. By what means we came there, I could not say, except that that's how dreams are.

I felt sick in my stomach, the nausea of dread, because now I was sure that I knew what terrible event I would soon witness.

And oh, God in heaven, if there is one, oh, God, it was happening, happening before my eyes. Samantha sat on the edge of her bed. The gun was in her lap. Tears flowed, sobs wracked her, her shoulders heaved as if something inside her was trying to escape, as if life itself wanted to force her to her feet, force her to

leave this place, this room, that gun.

"No," I said.

She was no longer moving backward.

"No," I said again.

She raised the gun to her mouth. Put the barrel in her mouth. Grimaced at the taste of steel and oil. But she couldn't turn her wrist far enough to reach the trigger and yet keep the barrel resolutely pointed toward the roof of her mouth.

She pulled it out.

She sobbed again and spoke a small whimper, a sound so terrible, so hopeless, and then she placed the barrel against the side of her head, which now no longer showed the wound, the wound that was coming if she didn't—

BANG!

The noise was so much louder than in movies. I felt as if I'd been struck physically. I felt that sound in my bones and my teeth, in my heart.

Samantha's head jerked.

Her hand fell away, limp and blood-spattered.

Blood sprayed from the hole for a moment, then slowed to an insidious, vile pulsation.

She remained seated for a terribly long time as the gun fell and the blood poured and then, at last, she fell onto her side, smeared red over the pastel floral print of her comforter, and rolled to the floor, a heap on the carpet.

The gunshot rang in my ears. On and on.

"I don't like this dream," I said, gritting my teeth, shaking my head, fighting the panic that rose in me.

The boy in black said nothing. He just looked, and when I turned to him for explanation, I saw a grim mien, anger, disgust. Simmering rage. His pale lips trembled. A muscle in his jaw twitched.

He crossed abruptly—his first sudden movement—to the desk in the corner of the room. There was a laptop computer open to Facebook. There were schoolbooks, a notebook, a Disney World cup holding pencils, a dozen colorful erasers in various

shapes, a tube of acne medicine, a Valentine's card curled with age, a photograph of Samantha and two other girls at a beach, laughing.

There was a piece of paper, held down at the four corners by tiny glass figures of fancifully colored ponies. The paper had been torn from the notebook.

The boy in black looked down at the paper and said nothing. He looked at it for far longer than it could have taken to read the few words written there in blue ink. I knew, for I, too, read the words.

I love you all. I am so sorry. But I can't anymore.
—Sam

I found that I could not look up from the words. I felt that if I looked away, I must look at the dead girl, and I didn't want to see her. She had still lived when she had written these words.

Then I realized that he was looking at me.

"Why is this happening?" I asked him.

He touched the note reverently with one finger.

"Why am I here?" I asked with sudden vehemence.

"The same reason we are all here," the boy said. "To learn."

But I had lost patience with cryptic answers. "Hey. Enough. If this is a dream, then I don't have to put up with you!"

"Mara," he said, though I had never told him my name. "This is not a dream."

"Then what is it, huh?" My voice was ragged. I was sick through and through, sick with what I had just witnessed, sick with what I feared about myself. "What is it and what are you?"

"I am . . ." he began, then hesitated, considered, and again showed that slight lessening in the grim lines of his face. "I am the messenger."

"Messenger? What's your message, showing me this poor dead girl? I never wanted to see that. I don't want it in my head. Is that your message? Showing me this?"

"My message?" He seemed almost surprised by the

question. "My message? My message is that a price must be paid. A price paid with terror."

I reached to grab him angrily, but he moved easily out of range. I had wanted to grab him by the throat, though I had instead reached for his arm. It was not that I blamed him for what I was now enduring, it was rather that I simply needed to hurt someone, something, because of what I had seen, and what I had felt since waking to find myself in the mist. It was like an acid inside of me, churning and burning me from the inside.

I wanted to kick something, to shout, to throw things, to scream and then to cry.

To save that poor girl.

To wipe the memory from my mind.

"You're the messenger?" I asked in a shrill, nasty, mocking voice. "And your message is to be afraid?"

He was unmoved by my emotion . . . No, that's not quite right. It was more accurate to say that he was not taken aback. He was not unmoved, he was . . . pleased. Reassured?

"Yes, Mara," he said with a sense of finality, as though now we could begin to understand each other, though I yet understood nothing. "I am the messenger. The Messenger of Fear."

It would be a long time before I came to know him by any other name.

Calmer now, having released some of my boiling anger and worry, I turned my unwilling eyes back to Samantha Early. Her life's blood was running out, soaking into the carpet.

"Why did she do it?" I asked.

"We will see," Messenger said.

3

Samantha Early looks at the clothes hanging in her closet. She clenches her fists. The veins on her forearms stand out. Her body seems to vibrate with tension.

I see this. It is happening. I can neither look away nor remain indifferent. Messenger has shown me the outcome, so I cannot tell myself that all I am witnessing is teen angst.

By means I can neither explain nor ignore, I know her thoughts. I know what she feels as she gazes, frightened, frightened by nothing but a closetful of clothing.

What will not draw ridicule? That is the question she asks herself. She dresses defensively: What will avoid giving anyone an excuse to ridicule? It should have been easy, getting dressed. It should have been as simple as what top goes with which jeans or shorts or skirt, no, no, not skirt.

No, not skirt. She remembers that day when she tripped in a skirt, when she'd sprawled out across the hallway, finger still stuck in the loop of her locker's combo lock, books strewn out into the path of oncoming students, who stepped aside indifferently or made a show of it, made a thing of it and laughed.

Spazmantha.

Not even original, that. She had first heard Spazmantha when she was eleven.

It shouldn't bother her. She knows that. Her mother has told her that. Her shrink has told her that. Actually, the shrink said, "You have bigger issues than that to concern yourself with."

How do I know this? How am I seeing this? This dream is a very strange movie in which I watch Samantha and watch her thoughts at the same time.

The shrink's bigger issue was obsessive–compulsive disorder. OCD for short. Everyone threw that term around like it was nothing, like it was cute, OCD. "Yeah, I'm a little OCD? Hah hah." It wasn't cute,

and Samantha did not have a little of it.

Samantha goes to the bathroom and washes her hands. She uses Cetaphil soap because it's mild, but she uses a brush as well, a wooden-handled bristle brush. First, the hot water. Then the Cetaphil, taking care that every single square inch of her hands—and for purposes of her compulsion, her hands end at the first crease in her wrist—is covered. Then the brush. She brushes hard. Then she rinses.

And that's one.

I watch as Samantha begins the process all over again. The Messenger stands behind her. Samantha sees neither of us. This isn't happening, this has *already* happened. The Samantha movie is in a flashback.

"Can she hear us?" I ask, but the answer is obvious: Samantha can neither see nor hear us. She is washing her hands, has already washed her hands, done all this already. I'm seeing it, here, in my present, but it's in the past.

I can smell the soap. I feel the steam rising from the

too-hot water. When I step to one side, I can see myself and Messenger in the mirror.

He's taller than I am. He's white, I'm Asian. He's . . . beautiful? I'm . . . pretty? Maybe that, maybe pretty, but not beautiful. I'm not sure many girls could call themselves beautiful while sharing a mirror with Messenger.

There's something about him that seems unnatural. He's a marble statue brought to life, unreal. Isn't he? He can't be real, not really real, if for no other reason than no one dresses that way. And yet there is a weight to him, like a distortion of gravity, a bending of light, as if he was made of the stuff of collapsed stars.

I force my gaze from him and back to a more distressing vision: Samantha Early begins a third round of washing. Her hands are obviously spotless—she could perform open heart surgery without wearing gloves—yet, caught in the compulsion, she washes her hands a fourth time. The backs of her hands are bright-pink now, like sliced ham, with fingertips so raw that the cuticles are tearing away in tiny shreds. She wields

the brush with a ferocity that is necessary to her, energy that she must expend, pain that she must endure.

On the fifth washing little drops of blood ooze from the cuticle of her ring finger.

"Can't she stop?" I ask.

"If she fails to wash her hands seven times, her family will die," Messenger says.

"What?" I snap. "That's crazy."

"Compulsion is very like insanity," Messenger says.

He is not indifferent, that's the thing. His too-near voice that seems always to be whispering in my ear is held to a standard of cool detachment, but his eyes and his mouth and his forehead and the way he swallows all speak of reflected pain.

He understands. He feels. I'm convinced of that at least. There's a humanity to him. He's not entirely cold and beautiful and strange—there's something of flesh and blood there as well. That reassures me. He may be only a figment of a dream I'll forget upon waking, but still I am relieved.

It *is* still a dream. What else could it be? I wake in a field with a mist covering me, and then, all of this?

Wait, had I fallen asleep? I try to recall, I strain to dredge some memory out of my foggy brain. But again it is as if all I can see of my waking life is a sort of clip-art version, a stock photo version with generic people acting generically, none of it possessing the detail and grain of reality.

Samantha begins her sixth round.

"Is this why—"

"Many things are *why*," Messenger says. "But this is for our deeper understanding."

Why do we need to understand? I want to ask him that, I want to demand an answer to that, because there has to be some very good reason why my subconscious mind would lay these sad images before me like a fortune teller laying out her tarot cards. But all of Messenger's answers were vague, and after all, was there a point in asking why within a dream? Eventually I would wake up, and then I could consider the meaning of it all. Calmly,

coolly, with the sick sadness of it all pushed aside and relabeled as nothing more than random imagery conjured from an overtired mind.

We were no longer in Samantha's bathroom. We were at a school. But not my high school; of that I was sure. Almost.

A banner on the wall of the corridor read CARLSBAD HIGH SCHOOL—GO SPARTANS. The colors were maroon and gold. The colors at my school were . . .

What were they? I was sure I was in high school, and sure that this was not it. Why couldn't I remember my school colors?

Dreamland was a strange world where cause and effect could be reversed, where one could move effortlessly from place to place. Where gaunt, beautiful boys with intimate voices and eerily blue eyes could wear skulls for buttons. Yes to all of that, but if this was a dream, shouldn't I be able to recall my school colors? Or my name?

Mara? Mara *what*? I felt the knife's edge of panic

again. If I stopped believing this was a very lucid dream, if I started for even a moment to believe this was real, I would have to be afraid, and I feared that moment when I might be forced to cross the line into a more personal terror.

Samantha's hands were pink and torn, but they were very clean as she walked down the hallway, thinking to herself that there was more to life than this place, that she would be out of this place soon.

"I know what she's thinking," I said, walking behind Samantha with Messenger just a pace behind me.

"Yes," Messenger said, and that voice carried notes of warning coiled within the single syllable.

Samantha had spotted someone in the crowd ahead of her. I knew the name: Kayla. Kayla McKenna. K-Mack, some people called her, and it was like a brand name. It meant more than this one tall, willowy blond girl alone; K-Mack meant a group. K-Mack meant a power within the school. A force.

Kayla was more than pretty. Kayla had large brown

eyes framed by absurdly long lashes. She had perfect cheekbones. Her every movement was graceful and assured. She was dressed impeccably. Her hair tumbled, liquid, like honey, like something out of a shampoo commercial. Her skin was flawless, untouched by blemish.

Samantha instinctively put a hand to her face, traced her finger over the bump that had begun to emerge just beside her nose, a zit in the making.

Having touched it once, Samantha had to touch it twice more. Three times touch. Or something awful would happen, something unspeakable.

Kayla was surrounded by people. Three girls and two boys. Certainty and smugness oozed from them all, but they were planets circling Kayla's sun.

"Stop touching it, Samantha," Kayla said. She had an interesting way of inflecting, Kayla did. The "touch" part of "touching" was punched with a humorous uplift. Like the word itself was funny.

Samantha's hand froze in place. Kayla had disrupted

the count, and now she would have to do it again. Three times.

"It's just a zit," Samantha said, and touched it.

"Yeah, I didn't think it was a unicorn," Kayla said. The emphasis on "didn't", with the same comical uplift. "Oh, my God, you're *touch*ing it again. Stop *touch*ing it! You're making me sick, honestly. No offense."

The way she spoke was an invitation to a conspiracy —it invited all to see the humor, all to see that she was just joking, just having fun. Her eyes mocked, but was there anything to point to as proof that she was aware of the effect on Samantha?

"No offense," Samantha echoed, and smiled a sickly smile and strained with all her will to keep her hands at her sides, not to touch.

All of them were looking at her now, the K-Mack crowd, staring at her, expectant, waiting on the signal to laugh at her.

"How's your . . . um . . . book coming?" Kayla asked. The word "book" got the uplift this time, in a way that

clearly cast doubt on the possibility that there was such a book.

"Okay, I guess. I have to get to class."

"Aren't you done writing it? You said in Mr. Briede's class you were done."

Samantha fought down a wave of anxiety. Mark Briede was the teacher who had most encouraged her to write. But she didn't want to talk about the book, or think about the book, or think of how she wanted to touch her face. She had to begin the count again, had to make it three times. The book was just stupid. She would probably just be a huge failure—what were the odds of some sixteen-year-old girl publishing anything?

And if she did? She had revealed bits of herself in the story. One of the characters would be blindingly obvious as herself, as a prettier, cooler Samantha, an aspirational Samantha. She would make herself even more of a target, she would have painted a bullseye on herself . . . No, a targeting map, like the military

used. *Strike here and here and here to inflict maximum damage.*

"I'll see you guys later," Samantha said, and fled, touching her bump. Touching it. Touching it again. Relief.

I looked at Kayla rather than Samantha now.

"Is she doing it on purpose? Does she know she's being cruel?"

"Is that important?" Messenger asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Listen to her thoughts," Messenger said.

And I heard them. Kayla's thoughts. As clearly as if she was speaking. In fact, when I looked, I saw her lips moving. She was speaking but not to the others around her. It was more as if I'd given her a truth serum that caused her to explain herself honestly.

"I don't like Samantha. She's very smart, but so am I. And I'm prettier by a mile and also much more popular. I pick on her because she's weak. It's that simple. She's obviously got problems, so anything I say can make her freak out."

It was bizarre the way Kayla spoke, unsettling even by dream standards. She wasn't looking at me—she wasn't looking at anyone—she was just voicing her thoughts, like I'd thrown a switch just by wondering about her. She was Richard the Third in Shakespeare's play, pausing for a moment to enlighten the audience as to motive and malice.

"Why shouldn't I pick on Samantha? It's fun for me and entertaining for my friends. It reminds my friends to be a little afraid of me, and that's useful. It reminds them that they could be next if they disappoint me. Besides, I can't stand that she—"

She stopped just like that, in mid-thought.

I laughed. Not because it was funny but because it had the ring of truth and I had not often heard truth spoken so bluntly and so utterly without self-justification.

I turned my laughing face to Messenger, who was watching me, waiting for my reaction. Judging me, I thought.

"If this is a dream, why aren't we at *my* school?" I asked him. "I should dream about places I know. This place probably isn't real."

He must have heard the uncertainty in my voice. I did.

"Okay, that's enough," I said sharply. "I want answers. I want to know what this is." The panic came quick and strong, all at once, catching me by surprise. "This is real, isn't it? This is real. Oh, God, this is real. This is real!"

"Bravo! Well done. She's not nearly as thick as you were, Messenger." A female voice. Not Kayla. Not Samantha, who was all the way down the hall now and entering a classroom.

Kayla's little group broke up as the bell rang with startling urgency, and, just like it was at my school when the bell rang, the hallway emptied out fast, the last stragglers rushing away with backpacks swinging.

The girl who had spoken, well, maybe she was a girl physically and chronologically but surely not

psychologically. No girl could have carried herself this way. A woman, then. A young woman to look at but with no hint of youthful innocence.

She was as pale as Messenger and, like him, dressed in black. But this girl/woman had a great deal less clothing in total. She wore a thing that was a cross between a bustier and a leather jacket. Cutouts revealed her shoulders, the neckline plunged to her breastbone, and the whole garment was cut to a severe point in front, forming a V that hid her navel but left the sides of her waist and her lower back bare. She wore black tights that seemed more liquid than fabric and swirled with black-on-black patterns that shifted and changed. Her boots went to her knees and were notably strange for suggesting that her feet were unnaturally small.

That detail bothered me, held my attention for a moment, as I could not see how she could stand on such tiny feet, particularly given the height of the heels.

If Kayla was the blond sun, this . . . this person . . . was midnight. Her eyes were black and large, as if the

pupils had expanded to consume all the iris. She had extravagant lashes and black hair, but it was her lips that drew my fascinated gaze. They were green. Not tinged with green, not a sickly green, but a flamboyant, defiant green. The green of jade. They matched a pendant around her neck that was an ornate object of jade and onyx, green and black, suggesting a face, a lewd, leering face.

There were other touches of green and black—earrings, a snake-pattern bracelet around her left wrist, fasteners down the front of her boots. And a ring on her left hand whose intricate design I could not make out.

Had Kayla seen this creature striding down the halls of her school, she would have curled into a little ball. For while Kayla was beautiful, and I liked to believe that I was at least pretty, this female creature had the beauty of cold, distant stars and silvery moonlight.

She was hypnotizing. Merely by existing, she redefined my ideas of beauty, for this was not mere

physical perfection, this was seduction; this was the primordial, essential, eternal avatar of female sensuality walking nonchalantly down the empty hallway of a suburban high school.

She made me feel shrunken and small and ugly.

Her name was . . .

"Oriax," Messenger said.