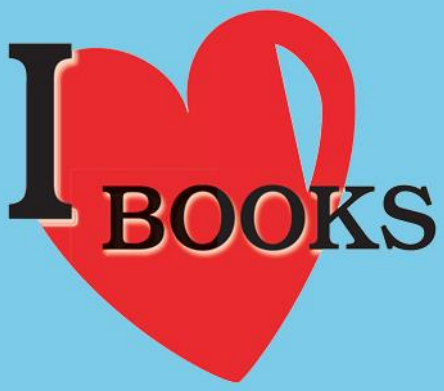


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Opening extract from

The Incredible Adventures of Cinnamon Girl

Written by

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If I drew my life right at this moment, I'd want it to look something like this brilliant comic-book panel from *Wonder Woman: Spirit of Truth*. Wonder Woman is kneeling on the lush hills way above her island home, her eyes closed, all steadfast and resolute. The colour and tone in the art is phenomenal; wicked purple cloud streaks in a wide, pale sky, lashed with warm yellows as the sun sinks on the horizon. With the light glinting off her tiara, and the half-smile on her lips, Wonder Woman is so alive I swear you can see her breathing. The panel is a perfect, paused moment in time – it could be from the end or the beginning of her story. She's kicked all sorts of arse beforehand, and has much more nonsense to face. But this one moment is her reprieve. In this one moment she is content, and home.

It takes wicked skills to capture so much in a single quiet image; a story that's both frozen and full of potential. Only truly great comic-book artists can pull off that kind of storytelling.

I think I'm sort of rubbish at telling stories. It's weird, cos I can talk a lot – a *lot* a lot – but when it comes to my pencils and inks, my stories have this tendency to lose their way. Grady says it's natural with an illustrator's brain; I see imagery in eye-bursting colour, not 'linear narratives', as he once put it. I dunno. I think, in truth, I'm just sucky at piecing together the right details.

If I were to start this story with the most important detail of all? It would probably be something about the end of the world. But honestly, at this point, the apocalypse and whatnot is just a passing footnote.

My story – my perfect, paused moment – begins much earlier than that.

It begins with a house.

And it begins with two boys.



ONE

The house is a single-storey, chipped white weatherboard, and stands on the edge of a dusty road. It's set on stilts, unusual for around here, with a rickety staircase leading to the doors. French windows open on to a verandah, dappled by eucalypts and crammed with tables. In my sketchpad, I've always managed to make the house look adorable, in an *Oklahoma!* meets *Smallville* sort of way. In reality? It kinda looks like it should be harbouring survivalists hoarding Spam and toilet paper and stuff.

But it's beautiful. And it's my favourite place in the universe.

A neon sign, hung above the trellising, reads *Albany's*. That Albany refers to my mum, Angela, but I am an Albany also. On my many school participation awards I'm officially Sarah Jane Albany,

though everyone in Eden Valley – almost all three-hundredish of them – has called me Alba since I was old enough to crawl.

And if I have been Alba since before I could walk, Domenic Grady has been my best friend since eons before then.

No telling if this story would be possible without a boy. Or, in my case, two. But I promise – it isn't what you think.

Grady is beautiful, in that way only a certain type of boy can be. He'd be pissed if he heard me saying this, cos I promised him I'd stop – but he's just so *pretty*. He has peachy skin and big doe-eyes, and the softest curls I've ever seen on a boy. Grady is kind of relevant to this story. I'll get to him in a minute.

Albany's is my mum's bakery. We bake cakes and bread and the most wicked apple strudel this side of Melbourne. Technically the house belongs to Grady's mum, Cleo, but ever since Mr Grady took off when Grady and I were five, Cleo handed the keys over and left us to it. Cleo is Mum's best friend. Hence why Grady was destined to be my bestie since we were, like, foetusi. Behind the converted kitchen is the living space that faces the Palmers' dairy farm, which

has been my home since forever.

Now – before you start thinking that this is the story of some waify, sun-kissed country girl – get this straight. I am so *not* that girl. I have dark hair, and darker eyes, and did you hear me mention that I live in a bakery? Like, literally. I sleep in a fog of cinnamon and vanilla, and spend most mornings elbow-deep in pastries and pie.

And, um – I tend to eat a lot of it. I am OK with this. I've never glued my face on a supermodel's body while weeping into a tub of ice-cream. I have curves, and boobs, and no one I know has a problem with either. There were fourteen people in my year-twelve class, and believe me, if boobs of any kind were waved in their direction, it'd be cause for joy and celebration. Well, for the boys at least. Maybe one of the girls. My boobs are kind of irrelevant to this story.

I'm drifting. I should decide on a relevant detail.

OK. Best friend. Apocalypse.

Stories can have a multitude of false starts. In comic books, the first frames can take you any place, via anyone in the stories' universe. But I guess most stories only start when you place yourself in them, right? Well, mine starts when Domenic Grady bursts

into Albany's one sweltering Sunday, waving his iPad in his hand, and says, "Alba! Have you seen this?"

He weaves through our sweaty customers and hoists himself on a counter stool, dropping his sports bag and grabbing a biscotti from one of the cake stands. Grady has forever been all arms and buzziness and the desire to do five bazillion things at once. If he were a comic-book character, he'd need his own signature entrance sound-effect, like a *Bazoing!* or *Bamf!* or something.

Today he's in his standard uniform: grey jeans, Vans and a navy Threadless T-shirt that says *Zombie Outbreak Response Team* on it. Grady plays basketball on Sundays, catching the bus to Merindale Creek, our closest town, almost a two-hour round trip away. Which means his hair is freshly washed, which means his dark curls would be extra soft atop his lanky frame, if they weren't shoved under a baseball cap.

I'm making Mr and Mrs Palmer their Sunday cappuccinos, and Grady's flusteriness has almost made me upend coffee all over my new swing dress. I hand the coffees to Paulette, our waitress, and I cross my arms and attempt a frown.

"Good morning, Grady. Was there something

you wanted to share?"

"I thought I established that with my dramatic entrance," he says through a mouthful of biscotti. "And don't look at me like that, Alba. You can't pull off cross-face."

I stick my tongue out at him, and he sticks his right back, then he plants his iPad on the counter. "Check this out."

"Grady, is it porn? I've told you I'm not interested in drawing that. No matter how much the Japanese'll pay for it."

Grady snorts. "Please, woman, if I was looking for porn, I think my brother's laptop would rival anything on the interwebs. Except, knowing Anthony, there's probably some home-made stuff on there, too."

Grady shudders. My eyes kinda glaze over at the thought of Anthony's lithe mechanic's body engaging in a badly lit sexcapade, until Grady leans across the countertop and swats my arm.

"Alba! Can you focus? This is potentially very cool. And weird. Check it out." He flicks his long fingers over the screen, and his New York screensaver disappears. A paused YouTube clip is waiting underneath.

Mum bursts through the kitchen doors. She slips a tray on to the counter and shakes a dusting of flour from her ponytail.

"Angie!" Grady says cheerfully, momentarily distracted by scone deliciousness. "You survived dinner last night? I had my doubts."

Mum grimaces. "Barely. If your mum suggests Asian Cooking Month again, maybe steer her in a less … salmonella-esque direction?"

I slide the tray beneath the counter, ignoring the scone-starved customers trying to catch my eye. "Don't be so mean to poor Cleo. It wasn't *that* bad."

Grady laughs. "Sure it wasn't. After a handful of antacid and some Imodium."

The Christmas decorations above the door tinkle as Tommy Ridley enters with a wave. The bakery is buzzing this Sunday, as it always is on weekends before the pubs open. The string of bells bobs in the breeze as Tommy natters to Mr Wasileski in the doorway, and my eyes are drawn to the swirls of colour in the sky outside.

"So you're organising dessert?" I hear Mum say. "Don't let Cleo make anything with ingredients she has to find on the net."

Grady nods, grabby hands reaching for one of my lemon slices. "I'd like to not spend Christmas Day on a stomach pump, if I can help it." He takes a ginormous bite of mooshy lemon. "I have it covered. Don't stress, Angie."

"Stress is my middle name, Domenic," Mum says with a smile. Then the bells tinkle again, and Mum hurries off to hustle Mr Grey on to the verandah before he catches sight of Mr Bridgeman, and their obligatory smackdown over boutique beer ensues. Our two tetchy pub owners do not get along.

Through the open windows, the sky stretches beyond the Wasileskis' service station and my endless fields, the colour of breadcrumbs and sunlight. Summer skies are mind-blowing tones, almost impossible to capture—

"Alba? Now can I *please* show you this important thing I have here on my iPad?"

Maybe acrylic would work, or gouache—

Grady thumps his hands over mine. "*Sarah!* Woman, pay attention! This is potentially earth-shattering stuff here." He waves his fingers in front of my face, the hypno-thing he does whenever I'm being particularly spacey.

I know I'm in trouble. I have been first-named.

I hitch my dishcloth into my apron and flash him my best sparkly smile, which I know works a treat since his frown disappears instantly. "OK, OK! I'm focusing! Very important stuff. Go."

Grady blinks at me. Then he shoves aside a plate of croissants and hauls his butt on to the counter, angling sideways so that we're facing the same direction. He swipes at the iPad again.

The screen fills with the image of a bald guy with one of those glossy black Fu Manchu moustaches. He's sitting on a cheap set, with a nondescript guy beside him. Stuck behind them is a sign in what I think is Comic Sans. The sign reads: *The Original Ned Zebidiah. Prognosticator. Seer. Diviner of Ancient Mysteries.*

And below that in tiny letters: *And Frank.*

"Have you seen this guy?" Grady says. "He has a show on Channel 31. It's on at, like, two in the morning. I watch him when I can't sleep, and he's usually good for a laugh, but this – is beyond cool."

I choose not to comment on the return of Grady's insomnia. It's not something he wants to talk about,