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Opening extract from

# Marshmallow Skye

Written by

## Cathy Cassidy

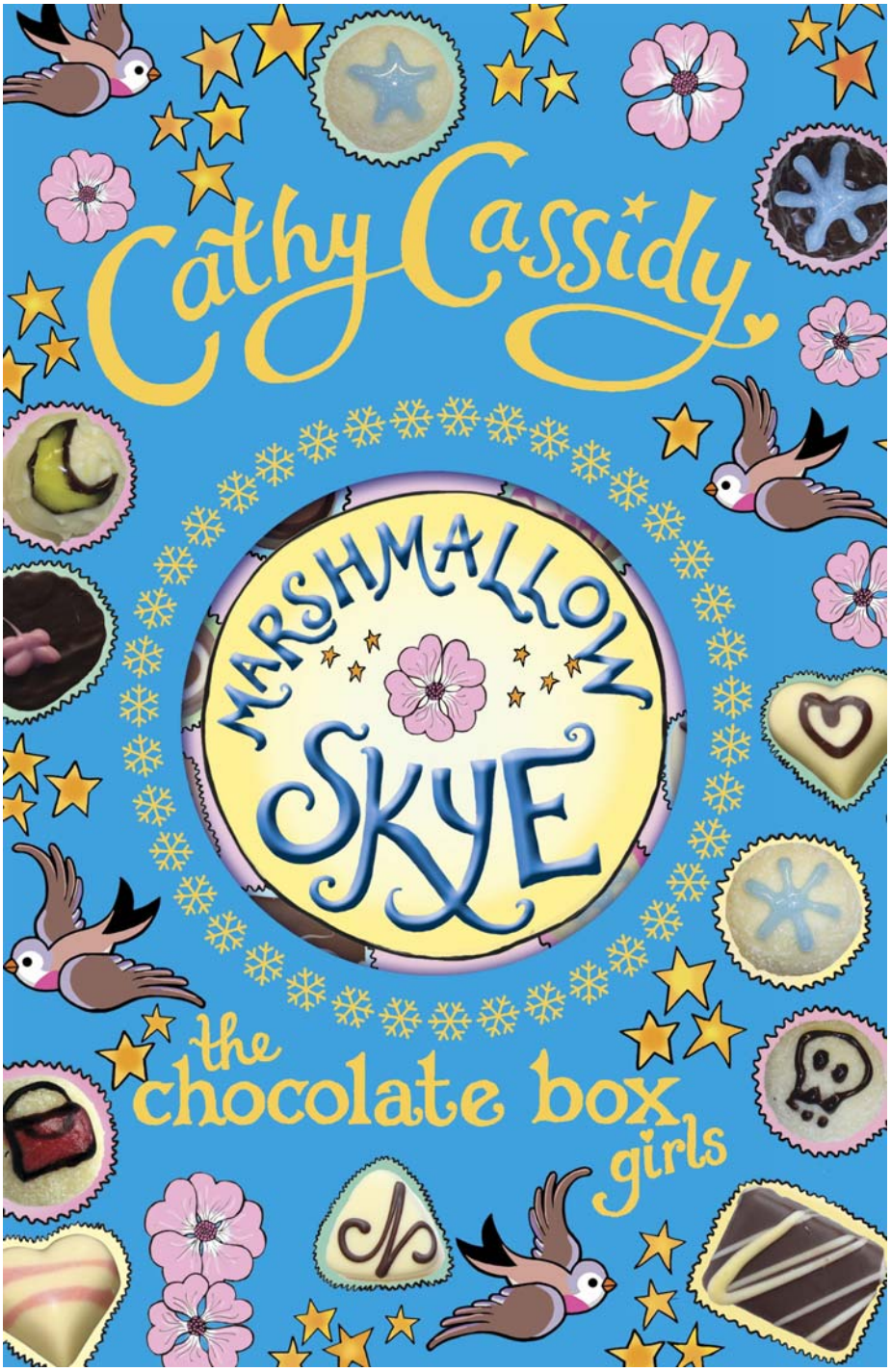
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Cathy Cassidy
MARSHMALLOW
SKYE
the chocolate box girls

## CHAPTER ONE

I don't believe in ghosts.

I do believe in creaky floorboards and sudden cool draughts and eerie howling sounds when the wind whistles through the eaves, because when you live in a big, old house like Tanglewood, those things are part of the deal.

We came to live here back when my littlest sister Coco was a toddler, because Grandad died very young and our Grandma Kate was getting married again, to a Frenchman called Jules. They were going to live in France, but Grandma Kate didn't want to sell Tanglewood, the family house . . . so we moved in. We went from a cramped flat in London to a big Victorian house just a stone's throw from the beach, and we thought we'd landed in heaven.

Some people think it's a bit spooky – and I guess I can see why. The house actually looks like it could be haunted. Ivy clings to the soft red brick and the windows are tall and arched and criss-crossed with lead, the kind of windows where you might expect to see a face watching you, a pale, sad-eyed shadow from the past. The sort of thing you read about in books, stories where the clock strikes twelve and you wake up to mystery and intrigue and people in rustling dresses who walk right through you as if you're not there at all.

I used to wish for something like that to happen to me. I wanted to step into the past, see it for myself. I've grown up listening to ghost stories, spent summers with my sisters hunting for spooky visions and ghostly apparitions . . . but I have never seen a single one.

The only ghosts I believe in now are the Halloween variety, small and sticky-faced and dressed in white sheeting, clutching a plastic bag full of toffee apples and penny chews.

'Skye! Summer!' my sister Coco yells, sticking her head round the door. 'Aren't you two ready yet? Cherry's downstairs waiting and I've been ready for ages too, and if we don't get a move on we'll miss the party! Hurry *up*!'

'Relax,' Summer says, scooshing her perfect hair with a blast of lacquer. 'We've got tons of time, Coco. It doesn't start until seven! Go duck for apples or something!'

'Skye, tell her!' my little sister wails. 'Make her hurry up!'

It is hard to take Coco seriously, though, because she has painted her face green, blacked out some of her teeth and spiked up her hair with neon gel. She is wearing a tweedy old jacket that belongs to Mum's boyfriend, Paddy, and I think she is supposed to be Frankenstein's Monster.

'Ten minutes,' I promise. 'We'll be down soon!'

Coco rolls her eyes and stomps off down the stairs.

Summer laughs. 'She is sooo impatient!'

'Just excited,' I tell my twin. 'We used to be like that, remember?'

'We're still like that, Skye,' Summer says, smoothing down her raggedy white dress. 'Just don't tell Coco! I love Halloween, don't you? It's just so cool . . . like being a kid again!'

I smile. 'I know, right?'

And Summer does know, of course . . . she knows me better than anyone else in the world. She knows how I feel about a whole bunch of things, because most of the time she feels the same.

And dressing up . . . well, that's one thing we both love.

I lean in towards the mirror, pick up a brush. I am not as good with hair and make-up as my twin, but I love the magic, the moment when you glance up and see, just for a split second, a whole different person.

The girl in the mirror is pale and ghostly, a shadow girl. There are ink-dark smudges beneath her wide blue eyes, as if she hasn't slept for a week, and her hair is tangled and wild, twined with fronds of ivy and black velvet ribbon.

She looks like a girl from long ago, a girl with a story, a secret. She's the kind of girl who could make you believe in ghosts.

'Awesome,' I say, grinning, and the ghost girl grins too.

'You look gorgeous,' Summer says, as I turn away from the mirror. 'Think you'll hook up with some cute vampire boy at the party?'

'Vampire boys are a pain in the neck,' I say. Summer laughs, but the truth is that we are still at the stage of dreaming about boys in books, boys in movies, boys in bands. Neither of us has a boyfriend. I like it that way, and I think Summer does too.

Besides, if you saw the boys at Exmoor Park Middle School, you would understand. They are childish and annoying and definitely not crush material, like Alfie Anderson, the class clown, who still thinks it's funny to flick chips around the canteen and set off stink bombs in the corridor.

Classy.

Summer is perched on the edge of her bed, stroking silver sparkles along her cheekbones, painting her lips to match. Our dresses are the same, skirts made from frayed, layered strips of net, chiffon and torn-up sheets, stitched hastily on to old white vest tops.

On Summer, this looks effortlessly beautiful. But when I look back at the mirror I can see that I was fooling myself – on me, it just looks slightly crazy and deranged. I am not a ghost girl, just a kid playing dress-up, and not quite as well as my sister.

I guess that is the story of my life.

Summer and I are identical twins. Mum actually has a scan from when she was pregnant, where the two of us are curled up together inside her, like kittens. It looks as if we are holding hands. The picture is fuzzy and grey, like a TV screen when the signal is lousy and everything looks crackly and broken up, but still, it's the most amazing image.

Summer came into the world first, a whole four minutes ahead of me, dazzling, daring, determined to shine. I followed after, pink-faced and howling.

They washed us and dried us and wrapped us in matching blankets and placed us in Mum's arms, and what was the first thing we did? You got it. We held hands.

That's the way it has always been, really. We were like two sides of the same coin, mirror-image kids, each a perfect reflection of the other.

Right from the start, we each knew what the other one was thinking. We finished each other's sentences, went everywhere together, shared hopes and dreams as well as toys and food and clothes and friends. We were each other's best friend. No – more than that. We *were* each other.

'Aren't they gorgeous?' people would say. 'Aren't they the sweetest things you ever saw in your life?'

And Summer would squeeze my hand and tilt her head to one side, and I'd do the same, and we'd laugh and run away from the adults, back to our own little world.

For the longest time, I didn't know just where Summer ended and I began. I looked at her to know what I was feeling, and if she was smiling, I smiled too. If she

was crying, I'd wipe away her tears and put my arms around her, and wait for the ache inside to fade.

It sounds cheesy, but if she was hurting, I hurt too.

I thought it would be that way forever, but that's not the way it's working out.

We both went to ballet class back then – we were ballet crazy. We had pink ballet bags with little pink ballet pumps and pink scrunchies, books full of ballet stories, and a whole box at home filled with tutus and fairy wings and wands. Looking back, I think I always liked the dressing up bit more than the actual dancing, but it took me a while to see that I was only crazy about ballet because Summer was. I saw her passion for dance, and I thought I felt it too . . . but really I was just a mirror girl, reflecting my twin.

I started to get fed up with ballet exams where Summer won distinctions and I struggled to scrape a pass; fed up with dance shows where Summer had a leading role while I was hidden away at the back of the chorus. She had a talent for dance, I didn't . . . and bit by bit, it was chipping away at my confidence. After one of these shows where everyone came up and told Summer how brilliant she was, I finally found the courage to admit that I didn't want to go to ballet any more. It was the year that Dad moved out and everything was changing. Changing one more thing didn't seem like such a big deal, to me at least.

Summer didn't get it, though. 'You can't stop, Skye!' she argued. 'It's because you're upset about Dad leaving, isn't it? You love ballet!'

'No,' I told her. 'And this has nothing to do with Dad. *You* love ballet, Summer. Not *me*.'

Summer looked at me with her face all crumpled and confused, as if she didn't understand the whole idea of *you* and *me*. Well, I was just getting to grips with it myself. Up until then, it had always been *us*.

Lately, I have been wondering if that whole dancing thing might just have been the start of it. Sometimes, when you change one thing, the whole pattern falls apart, shattered, like the little pieces in a kaleidoscope. I guess I shook things up between my twin and me, and three years on we are still waiting for the dust to settle.

I turn back to the mirror, and for a moment I see the ghost girl again, all wild hair and sad, haunted eyes, lips parted as though she is trying to tell me something.

Then she is gone.