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Opening extract from

Level 2 – The Memory Chronicles book one

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Published by

Usborne Publishing Ltd

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First published in the UK in 2013 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. www.usborne.com

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Published by arrangement with Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020, USA.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781409546740 JFMAMJJAS ND/12 01293/1

Printed in Reading, Berkshire, UK.

CHAPTER 1

I'LL SLEEP WHEN I'M DEAD. I used to say it a lot. When my dad suggested I turn off the torch I thought I so expertly hid under my covers. That time youth pastor Joe told us to pipe down at the church lock-in. The balmy summer night I convinced Autumn to sneak out after midnight so we could dance in Nidda Park, arms outstretched to the stars. But then I died.

And now I can't sleep. Except, that is, when I access my memories of sleeping. You wouldn't believe how many times I've combed through the seventeen years and 364 days of my life, searching for those rare uninterrupted, nightmare-free stretches of slumber. Because sleep is my

only real break from this endless reel of memories, both mine and those I've rented.

Naturally, I've compiled a top ten. Most of the list includes Neil, though I often revisit a memory of being cradled on my dad's chest as a baby. It makes me feel like nothing bad could ever happen to me.

His lullaby envelops me in such warmth, I can almost forget I'm trapped here in this pristine hive with a bunch of other drones. All female, all my age, all from the US, all who died in accidents in the early twenty-first century. And all so addicted to their personal memory chambers, they barely ever venture out.

Not that I'm not. Addicted, I mean. It's just that everything's hazy when I'm out of my memory chamber. I don't even remember how I got here. And though I do retain names and faces and relevant details of my fellow inmates, I never seem to be able to hold on to much else. At most, there are snatches of my conversations with Beckah and Virginia, but these fade in and out of my consciousness like barely remembered dreams. The three of us are the only ones who spend time in the communal area at the centre of the hive. And sometimes, before we are compelled to heed the siren call of our chambers, we sit awkwardly on the polished, blinding white floor that matches the colour and texture of every surface in our godforsaken prison. We muse about what this place might be, if this is all we have to

look forward to for the rest of eternity, and about how strange it is not to have to eat or drink, or sweat or pee.

But we rarely talk about our deaths. We don't remember much about them after all this time anyway. We try to keep it light, inconsequential. I suggest "movie nights", where the three of us pull up memories of the same film in our chambers and then get together to discuss the details until our thoughts are too cloudy to continue. Virginia never gives up in her attempts to teach us back handsprings and complicated lifts, but I don't mind because my body, entirely numb in this afterlife, doesn't feel the pain of always crashing solidly to the floor. Beckah prefers to chat about books and where on the network to find the best quality memory editions of her favourites.

That's what I plan to do now, to search again for a precise memory version of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Back in high school it was one I skimmed, which means accessing my own memory wouldn't do much good. I've discovered it's one a lot of people skim, despite its relative brevity, because I've yet to find a deep, meaningful reading of it, and I've accessed at least two hundred copies by now.

But before I embark on my search, I decide to say hi to Neil.

I lie down in my airy chamber and fit my hands into the grooves at my sides, feeling a slight zing and a rush of endorphins as my skin connects. Above me the hologram

interface lights up, and I use my index finger to scroll through my memory folders until I find one of my favourite memories of Neil. I push play, and I'm there.

Ward, Felicia. Memory #32105
Tags: Ohio, Neil, Hiking, Youth group, Favourite
Number of Views: 100,235
Owner Rating: 5 stars
User Rating: Not shared

It's one of those gorgeous spring evenings I can never get enough of, when the trees burst with fresh, impossibly green leaves and the air is fragrant with promise. I am nearing the end of a day-long hike with the girls from the church youth group, and I nod from time to time as if I'm listening to the chatter around me. The talking barely registers because my head swirls with impressions of last night. Of how close I sat to Neil in the back of the van on the way up here. How casually, and without looking at me, he shifted the coat on his lap until it spilled over onto mine. And then how, without missing a beat, he trailed his fingers down my forearm and let them rest on my wrist, as if to take my pulse. How awareness of my surroundings faded as I zoned in on the slightest movement of his hand inching forwards, slowly, tantalizingly. How my skin tingled and my own hand ached to touch him back.

And I am going to see him again soon. Very soon.

"Felicia?" Savannah snaps her perfectly manicured fingers in my face. "Don't you think I'd make a perfect Esther? Pastor Joe says I'm too blonde." She huffs, shaking her head so her long golden waves shimmer in the fading sunlight. "He says Esther should be played by someone with dark hair. Like you. But no one really knows what Esther looked like. It's all conjecture."

"Black wig," I manage to get out, my face flushing as I remember the intensity of Neil's gaze on me last night as we got out of the van, the last time I saw him before the girls and guys split off to our separate cabins.

"Are you getting sick?" Savannah recoils, and immediately reaches into her pink bag for her bottle of hand sanitizer. My nostrils fill with molecules of artificial peach. She doesn't wait for my answer but moves away from me, catching up with some of the others, leaving me trailing behind.

I pick up my pace when I see the lights of our cabins through the trees. My heart starts pounding, and I stuff my hands into the pockets of my hoodie. I look up, and I see him. He's at the edge of the fire pit, joking around with Pastor Joe and Andy as they light kindling, trying to get a fire going.

Neil looks up and sees me too. His blue eyes twinkle. His smile is so luminous and pure, it's like he's been saving

it up his whole life just for me. Andy pokes him in the side with a twig and whispers something into Neil's ear that makes him blush. Neil punches him lightly on the arm, and Andy shakes his head, snapping the twig in half.

"Hi," I say when Neil approaches. My giddiness at being this close to him again bubbles up in my throat, and I giggle. I want to hug him. Really hug him. But not here. Not in front of Pastor Joe and Andy.

"Hey!" He reaches out and tugs playfully on the strings of my hoodie. "Want to go for a walk?"

I giggle again. "It's not like we haven't been walking all day." The guys group went hiking too but took a different trail. A more challenging trail.

"Oh." Neil blushes, his smile faltering, and he runs one of his hands through his brown curls. "You must be exhausted."

I am. I'm also parched, and sweaty. My shoes are covered in mud. "I'm okay." I sigh. I'd love to change outfits. "But maybe I'll go in and grab another bottle of water at least."

"No need." Neil's smile is back to full force. He leads me over to where he has stashed his backpack next to a tree, and he bends down to pull out a bottle of water. As I take it from him, my fingers brush against his, and the sensory memory of last night pulses through my body.

I lift the bottle up to my lips and watch how his gaze

follows and lingers. He swallows, and I swallow. Our eyes meet.

I look away sharply, over at the fire pit, where the kindling is burning now and Pastor Joe gestures for Andy to give him one of the bigger logs. This is a mistake. I shouldn't be here, shouldn't encourage Neil's interest in me, no matter how much I want to. He's too good. And he deserves better.

"Maybe we should go help with the fire," I mumble. My eyes are stinging, and I squeeze them shut to keep angry tears from escaping. It's all so unfair. He probably thinks I'm like him, without a care in the world. But that couldn't be further from the truth.

I feel Neil's hand on my cheek as he turns my head back to face him. "Hey, what's wrong?"

I look up at him and am overwhelmed by the concern shining in his eyes. All the feelings I've been pushing down for the past months well up inside me. A couple of hot tears trickle down my face, and my nose starts to itch.

Neil takes my hand, deliberately this time, not caring who sees, and leads me into the darkening forest. We pick through the underbrush slowly, side by side, and with each step I feel better. Stronger. Safer. Finally I stop. Neil stops too and faces me. Even though he's only inches away, I can barely make out his outline. But I feel his warmth, hear his raspy breathing.

"Um, Neil, do you have a torch?" I whisper.

His breath tickles my ear. "A Boy Scout is always prepared." He takes my other hand and guides it down to the lower pocket of his shorts. "In there." His tone is innocent despite the bold gesture.

I'm a little taken aback, but I fumble around in his pocket and pull out a mini Maglite. I turn it on, and without letting go of Neil's hand, I twirl in a circle so beams of light bounce off the surrounding trees.

"We should go," I say. Then I turn the torch off and slip it back into Neil's pocket.

I step closer to him, and recklessness takes over. I reach up and touch his lower lip lightly with my finger, and I close my eyes—

A siren blares. Glass shards cut my face. Intense pain hammers me everywhere at once. One, two, three beats, and then I jerk my hands out of the grooves. I'm back in my memory chamber, almost surprised to see I'm unharmed.

Something's wrong. That's not at all how the night ended.

Voices buzz all around me, an unusual sound. I sit up to look over the ledge to investigate. The other drones are all doing the same.

"Did you feel that?" Virginia calls out. A chorus of yeses

responds, and everyone makes their way down from their memory chambers, to meet in the middle.

I head over to where Virginia stands, and Beckah joins us.

"What just happened?" Beckah asks, shaking. She has a haunted look on her face, a look I see echoed on all the other faces.

A girl named Amber is pointing at something behind me. "Omigod!" she shrieks, excited. "There's a boy coming in through a door!"

Impossible. We haven't seen any boys here. Ever. I spin around, and my mouth drops open. Because I know this boy. And he's calling my name.