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Opening extract from

The Butterfly Clues

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CHAPTER 1

I spot her out of the corner of my eye and freeze. It always happens like this.

My body goes tingly.

Blood thrums in my ears: a low buzz like a faraway swarm of insects, and every cell in my body screams: *save her save her save her.*

There's nothing I can do but obey.

She is perched on top of a tacky altar on the porch of an old house: a marble angel nestled among an otherwise decaying tangle of plastic creatures. Three smooth-shelled blue birds, three squirrels, three raccoons.

Nine altogether—a perfect number.

The cold air feels thick and heavy, like the Pendleton blankets Dad used to bring back from business trips. It smells like them, too—a good wool smell.

I peer through the window, checking for signs of life inside

the house. It looks clear from where I stand. Just my own face reflected in the dusty glass—huge gray-green eyes, flat dark hair—distorted by the warped windowpane, unfamiliar.

I look around and, seeing no one, reach for the angel. The seconds between the reaching and the holding are fast and warm; they vibrate like tiny earthquakes. The whole world falls away, goes quiet, as I move closer, and closer, and closer. Inches. Centimeters. Millimeters. The moment we finally touch is slow, holy, thunderous, the single moment when everything makes sense. The angel safely in my possession, I sprint away toward the part of the sky where the sun has already begun to set, straight into the deep blue, the new weight in my vest pocket jostling with each step.

She's mine now. And I'm hers. And we are each other's.

* * * *

A few houses up the block, I see something change through the panes of a darkened window: a half-stained curtain, settling like it's just been lifted and then quickly dropped.

I clutch at the figurine in my jacket. Has someone seen me?

Now I hear footsteps down the block, and something *feels* different—like the air behind my back is vibrating. Someone is close to me, watching. I can tell.

I turn to confront the footsteps, hands curled into fists, but it's nothing. No one's there. I can hear the angel's thoughts inside my pocket. *You're safe, Lo.*

But this street—the whole neighborhood—is giving me the

creeps. The strange, knotty feeling is spreading into my fingers. I'm not even sure exactly where I am. After school, I've been picking bus lines at random, finding new places to explore.

Mostly I go to other parts of the suburbs, find the high school or the baseball hat store at the mall or a restaurant my brother might have liked. Usually, I end up at some divey pizza place: gaunt, stringy-haired teenagers hanging out of every booth. I order a Coke, maybe, and then I just sit there, listening, waiting for them to mention his name: Oren.

They never have. Not yet.

Lately, though, I've been going farther. I've been finding the city bus lines, getting off at the third stop in, or the ninth, or the twelfth, because these are the numbers that mean I will be safe. These are the numbers that make things right. These are the numbers that will lead me closer to him, to where he's been, to where parts of him might still exist, somehow.

And, today, now, just what I wanted: a sad, strange part of Cleveland, a part of the city I've never seen before.

An abandoned playground sits in the center of the block. Two swings dangle from long metal chains; one of them moves back and forth, just slightly, like someone has recently been swinging on it. But it's got to be nearing eight o'clock on a Thursday night: too late and too cold for playing outside. The gnarled faces of the hobbyhorses, planted jaggedly into the concrete, stare back at me with cold, rusted eyes.

I have a sudden memory: I am on a swing. My brother, Oren, is behind me, pushing me higher, too high. I am laughing—and screaming, too, the full-throat, kid kind of scream, because the

sky was getting so close—I'd never been that close to the sky before.

Now, watching the empty swing set, the knotty feeling spreads into my throat.

I stuff my hands back in my pockets and quickly cross the road.

I'm nearing the bus stop—I know it isn't far, it can't be. But as I round another corner onto Lourraine Street, I suddenly hear a *whoop-whoop* sound. Sirens, drawing closer. My stomach flips. Someone must have seen me take the marble angel. I duck into the alleyway beside an ugly yellow house, noticing that the concrete front lawn and driveway are covered in painted daisies as I try to flatten myself into the shadows. Across the street, a black sedan hunkers, engine buzzing and whirring. *Is someone inside?*

There's a window set into the wall just above me, and I'm filled with an almost insuppressible urge to look through it. *Tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap:* nine times, twice—right hand on right thigh, then left on left.

The sirens keep wailing, even closer now.

As I'm shifting in the darkness, I think I hear a shout, followed by a heavy *thump*. Almost immediately, I'm not sure whether I've only imagined it. My brain is tricky sometimes.

Left hand on right thigh. Nine times before I'm allowed to look.

BANG.

Loud, deafening chaos: shattering glass, exploding outward like water from a burst pipe. My body curls itself into a ball. I hit the pavement, skinning my knees, pressing my head between my

thighs. A heavy *thump thump thump* pulses through my body; a whooshing feeling; skin on fire.

I look up. In the wall right across from me, just a few feet away, something has lodged itself into the brick that wasn't there before.

I squint.

Bullet.

* * * *

The word flutters through my head. A bullet. Which means gun. Which means—shit oh shit holy shit—I almost just *died.*

I sink back against the side of the house, choking. Panting. My right hand goes instinctively into my vest pocket, gripping the angel. My left hand is bleeding. I hadn't even noticed. I put it to my mouth, trying to soothe it. A tiny shard of glass comes out and cuts my tongue. I spit the glass onto the pavement. Blood in my mouth, metallic.

I've got to get out of here. I have to *move*.

BANG. A second time. My legs lift me from the glass-covered alleyway and torpedo me through the streets. I run breathless, panicked. The darkness is thickening around me and most of the streetlamps are cracked and lightless. I almost trip on a homeless man with gray, clouded-over eyes, swaying and moaning and muttering something incoherent to me as I pass; I don't stop or turn or pause. I have to keep running. I can still hear sirens somewhere, behind me now. There are tears streaking my face, and I guess they must be mine.