

CLARE C. MARSHALL



# DREAMS IN HER HEAD



BOOK TWO OF THE **SPARKSTONE** SAGA



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BOOK TWO  
THE SPARKSTONE SAGA

*Dreams In Her Head*

Book Two of the Sparkstone Saga

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# PART ONE



*A dream is a window, dear scribe. One only needs to  
crawl far enough inside to advance into another world.*

—J.G.C., from *Campbell's Multiple Verses*

# PROLOGUE



If there is one thing I am sure of in this moment, it is this: there is a door somewhere nearby, and soon, Sunni will ask me to open it.

Tonight we are not in Rogers Hall at Sparkstone University. That is usually where the dreams take place. Tonight, Sunni and I stroll through a labyrinth of bookshelves in an impossibly large room. Above us is a glass ceiling that glows supernaturally green, as if we are in the City of Oz.

Sunni walks behind me, and I steal a glance at her. In the back of my mind, a small voice whispers that she is not really Sunni. Sunni is dead, and her body has been dissected to further the Collective's technological research, to advance its evil agenda, whatever it may be. Yet tonight, she is a phoenix stepping from fiery ashes, reborn. The light filtering in from the ceiling, although green, bathes Sunni's blonde curls in orange and red hues and creates colourful shadows on her white T-shirt and pants.

She thumbs the rows of books on the wooden shelves as we pass. "So many worlds."

Her Texan twang echoes through the large library, and pink and green ribbons flow from her lips and intertwine like a double helix. They are physical manifestations of my synesthesia, because that is possible here.

*We're still at Sparkstone, aren't we.* I don't have to open my mouth to talk here. Telepathy is much easier, much faster. I understand why our friend Wil prefers it. I wish I had that power in real life.

"Yes, still at Sparkstone. Deep underground, though," Sunni tells me. I don't know why Sunni doesn't speak with her mind. She probably could if she wanted to, but I prefer her acting as she was when she was alive.

She lets her hand fall lazily to her side. As it falls, I notice for the first time that the shelves have words carved into them. Squinting, I focus my razor-sharp vision until the words become clear: *Saturday, September 13. Saturday, September 13.* It repeats everywhere.

"That's the day this place gets torn down," Sunni says. "They don't need it no more."

*They* meaning the Collective, the alien organization that runs Sparkstone University and god knows what else on Earth.

*Why don't they need it?*

"Oh, they're getting ready for phase four or five, I reckon."

*And what does that mean?*

Instead of answering, Sunni wraps her hand around my wrist and pulls us to a standstill. The aisle of shelving we're walking down seems to stretch like an elastic band. I'm in the middle of the *Vertigo* effect you see in movies—things look as if they're moving away, even though they're not. Wings flutter somewhere in the distance. No, not

wings. It's the sound of a thousand pages flipping all at once.

"Duck," Sunni whispers.

I do, but she doesn't let go. Dozens of bookshelves are ripped from the floor, but I do not feel the breeze as they fly over our heads and crash somewhere behind us. A tornado of books rises before us and dissipates just as quickly to make room for a new resident: a giant pale-blue eye.

As the eye flickers in an invisible socket, scanning what's left of the library at supernatural speed, it creates gusts of wind that almost knock me off my feet. Sunni remains steadfast, unmoving in the face of this faceless eye, returning its unblinking stare without fear.

*What is that?* I ask her.

"Campbell," she replies simply.

The word lights up my brain. Joseph G. Campbell is whom I'm searching for, whom Sunni was searching for, before the Collective killed her. He has something to do with its agenda—whether he works for the Collective or against it, I'm not sure. His powers seem to be far-reaching, and he himself seems always just out of reach.

As I stare into the abnormally large eye of the one who could help or harm me, Sunni places a firm hand on my lower back and pushes me closer. "Go through."

I frown, and in this place, my face is heavy—possibly because I am actually frowning in the real world. *What? Why? How?*

"Go through, Ingrid."

*It's an eye. How do I go—?*

The question is answered when streams of white light slice through the large black pupil—a vertical

cut, then two horizontal cuts at ninety-degree angles—creating a door.

Sunni's voice grows louder, more ethereal. "Open the door, Ingrid."

I turn to face her, but Sunni is gone. She has morphed into our greatest enemy: Jadore. The humanoid reptilian seductress stands before me, staring at me with reflective black eyes, her dark dress rippling around her legs. Her teeth are sharp points, and blood drips from her mouth, as if she's just fed on someone. Sunni, probably, as Jadore was the one who ended Sunni's life in the real world.

The small voice in the back of my mind whispers that this isn't real, that Jadore would never show her true face anywhere at Sparkstone in the light of day. But the voice also whispers that I am safe in my bed on the third floor of Rita House, and while this is true, I know that I will never be safe again.

The wind whistles and blows stronger as Jadore tackles me to the floor. She rakes her sharp nails across the top of my head and tries to dig through my hair, through my skull. She wants my brain. I resist but she's so strong. I'm not like my new friends—I can't control the power I have, not yet. It's too soon.

Powerful searing light blasts over us. The door in the pupil. It's opening wider. But I can't get near it, not with Jadore on top of me. She has cracked my skull and is reaching inside my head. Obscuring my view.

Now I'm watching from outside myself. I'm someone else, but I'm still tethered to my body with an invisible rope. Jadore feeds on me enthusiastically. My gaze strays to Campbell's eye. In the threshold of the pupil door, there is a silhouette of a man. Although the form

is familiar, it is presented as an empty space that my brain can't yet fill.

Joseph G. Campbell: a shadow in the realm of the forever sun.



*... wind through the thicket...*

*... breathe in the darkness...*

*... become its master...*

*... Ingrid, open the door.*

My legs are so twisted in the blankets and I'm in such need to get out of bed that I fall to the floor in a confused, sweaty heap. I can't remember where I am. Or what's real.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Carpet. It smells new. That's because it is new. This room is old, but everything in it, including me, is new. And I finally remember: I'm at Sparkstone University. In my new dorm room in Rita House. Sunni's old room. Stripped of everything that was Sunni by the aliens in disguise, it was remade and redecorated for me, as it was the first room to become available in the girls' residences.

I lie on the floor until my breathing becomes more normal. This is the third time this week I've had a dream like that, where I'm with Sunni again, and there's a door before me, and Jadore shows up and kills me. It sounds silly when I explain it to myself when I'm awake, and the feeling of immediate danger has faded. But I know better than to ignore the dream. It's a warning.

My cell phone sits on my nightstand, beside my alarm clock. I retrieve the phone with a sleepy grip and confirm the date. September eighth. Monday morning.

The dream was specific in a way it hasn't been before, giving me a date. Saturday, September thirteenth. I wonder what it means.

Untangling my limbs, I sit up and lean against the bed. My matted long red hair hangs free around my shoulders. The whispers at the end of the dream were so real. Audio hallucinations are sometimes common after intense dreams—I'd read that somewhere somewhat credible. I know the voice. I'd only known Sunniva Harris for a day, but her face and her sound are ingrained in my memory.

Somehow, she's speaking to me in my dreams. She's trying to send me a message.

I hug my pillow to my chest and stare at the framed photo on my nightstand. It's of me, Mum, and Dad, taken last summer on a vacation in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Some nice tourist took it for us. We're in front of a tree at the Alexander Graham Bell Museum, and behind us, a sailboat leaves a rippling trail. My mom is squinting because the sun is in her eyes, but my dad is grinning, and I've got my arms around them both. Craig and Margaret Stanley. I wish I were with them now.

I press the cool glass of the frame against my sweaty forehead. I don't want to be here. I didn't ask to be in this place, with these extraterrestrial problems. I want Sunni to be alive again. I want to see my parents, and have them tell me that it's okay.

But more than anything else, I want to go home.

# CHAPTER 1



“Ace of clubs, suckers,” Misty says, sneering.

With a satisfied look on her face, she tosses the card onto the reject pile. I look down at my hand. I have four cards left and could definitely win. But it’s not my turn. It’s Jia’s, since she’s sitting directly across from Misty. Then it’s Wil’s turn, and then mine.

Jia is concentrating hard, but her expression does not reveal it. Calm and collected, she is. Only her almond-shaped eyes reveal a competitive, fierce spirit. She plays a two of spades and shoots Wil a triumphant look.

Wil barely glances at his hand as he picks up two cards and then plays a five of spades. He adjusts his glasses as he stares out the window of the Evergreen Café. Two white trucks drive down the main road—Sparkstone Boulevard—then turn off onto a side road and make their way towards the research labs at the edge of the town of Sparkstone. His dark eyes follow them intently.

Playing cards keeps our hands busy. More than that, it helps us temporarily forget the terrible responsibilities

weighing on us—such as our mission to bring down the Collective.

The distraction also helps us deal with Sunni's death.

I play a seven of spades, and then Misty plays a Joker, sending Jia into a huff. Wil throws out his own Joker, which delights Misty, as she only has one card left. She plays a seven of hearts and throws up her hands in victory.

"Playin' real good today," Misty says, smirking. Her smiles are rare. She and Sunni had been close, Jia told me—friends before they came to Sparkstone.

"For someone who knows a bunch of languages, your English isn't that great," I remark.

Misty gives me a look I've come to know well in the past week that I've hung out with the Sparks: narrowed eyes, thick with black mascara, and drawn, almost snarling lips that forbid joy. The look is accompanied by a light snort that suggests I am the dumbest person at the table.

"Just because I speak ten languages good don't mean I have to speak them *well*," she replies, flinging the reject cards at Jia, who is collecting the deck.

It's easy to underestimate Misty, to take her at face value as a messed up, angry girl who has several facial piercings, dresses in dark clothes, and stares at you as though she's got a death wish. I try not to misjudge her; I try not to engage in her attempts to rile me. Arguing with her is like trying to move a wall by snapping your fingers, so I just shrug.

A waitress trudges by, tall and lithe but wearing clunky high heels that *clomp-clomp* on the tile. She leaves the cheque on the table between Wil and me.

Jia smiles and bows her head in victory to Misty, then nudges Wil playfully. "Someone over here needs to pay more attention to his cards."

Wil's dark skin flushes red momentarily, and he adjusts his round wire-framed glasses, like this will help him manage his embarrassment. He glances at his watch. "That's the last round. We should pay up. Bill is"—he picks up the cheque—"thirty-five, plus tip. Which is, uh..."

He stutters only for a second, but Misty rips into him. "Your IQ is three standard deviations above the mean and you can't figure out tip?" She snickers again.

"Hey, hey, I'm distracted." His eyes flicker to the corners of the room, where hidden cameras are apt to live.

Everyone in the small northern Alberta town of Sparkstone is watched because the Collective harvests students with an active Gene 213 in their body. Supposedly this gene activates superpowers in humans and manifests itself in many different ways. It allows Wil to manipulate technology, communicate telepathically, and feel people's emotions and presence.

My gaze sweeps the room. Sure enough, there's a tiny red light in the upper right corner, just above the chalkboard menu on the wall, and the counter where we ordered our food. Wil could block the camera's audio and video, but we're trying to limit the use of his powers. Today, I imagine he's concentrating on keeping the camera's gaze focused on everything but us so as not to arouse Professor Jadore's suspicion.

Even thinking about her name brings up twisted images of her reptilian face and soulless black eyes from my nightmares. We have to pretend she didn't kill Sunni a week ago while we sit in her tutorial and she continues to masquerade as a blind human professor.

We are all dreading our tutorial with her this morning even more than usual. In the week since Sunni's murder,

Misty, Jia, and Wil have not been productive with respect to their projects. Sparkstone University is different from other undergraduate schools in that instead of classes and exams, we have tutorials and personal projects that professors oversee. The projects are supposed to relate to the two majors we choose, and usually they require a lot of individual research. We are expected to explore a topic in a new and interesting way. Wil has finished his project for the semester, but he's struggling to come up with a new one and is starting to run out of technical mumbo-jumbo to feed Jadore. My concentration hasn't been much better.

"You know—"

Wil holds up a hand to cut Misty off. "I know what you're going to say. And it's not a good idea."

Misty snarls. She hates it when Wil can predict her arguments. I don't care much for it either. "You're not the only one at the table, jackass."

"Fine. But it's not a good idea."

Jia looks back and forth between the two of them. "What?"

Misty's mouth twists as she cracks a few knuckles. "We should call her mother and tell her what really happened."

We don't have to ask who *her* is. Sunni. But I'm surprised. Jia, Wil, and I try not to bring up Sunni while Misty is around. Misty had gone insane on the day Sunni was murdered. This is the first time she's dared to say her name out loud since.

"How would that help us at all? And would she believe it?" I ask.

Shrugging, Misty leans back in the booth. "Didn't say it would help, or that she'd believe us. Just sayin' that she deserves to know the truth."

I muse on this. If I died here, I'd want my parents to know the truth. But it would take a lot of explaining to get them to believe that some people have superpowers and that aliens are harvesting our genes.

"We should do nothing, for now," Wil says. He switches to telepathy. *No doubt the Collective has contacted Sunni's mother and told her that Sunni has been transferred. I think it's only a matter of time before Mrs. Harris figures out that something is wrong.*

I want to believe this is true, but somehow I doubt that the Collective would massively screw that up. Who knows how many young adults the aliens have captured and murdered, just for their genes. Their influence is far-reaching—and the hafelglob, one of the many alien races of the Collective, could even be using their shape-shifting abilities to impersonate students who have been killed.

I shiver. Sunni's kind-hearted, brave spirit, replaced with gross alien slime. It just isn't fair. Nothing is fair anymore.

My cell phone buzzes in my jean-skirt pocket. I nearly jump out of my seat. Jia gives me a worried look but I reassure her with a smile as I dig out the phone. The phone number is Dad's cell, and my smile becomes a grin.

"Hi, Dad!"

"Hey!" The reception isn't great, and it sounds like he's in a busy place. "Did I catch you at a bad time? You're not studying or anything, are you?"

"No, just... hanging out with friends." I glance around the table at my mishmash of new peers and then rise from the table and walk to the other side of the café.

"That's great. So you're getting along, then, with your classes?"

“No classes here, Dad, remember? Tutorials and independent projects.” I’ve talked to him maybe once since he and Mum dropped me off over a week ago.

“Well, I hope you’re not spending too much time having fun. With friends, I mean. What is your project about again?”

I roll my eyes. “Dad! I don’t want to waste all my cell phone minutes telling you about my boring school stuff. Tell me about you and Mum. You guys are all right, right?”

He chuckles. “Yes, yes, we’re fine. We’re supposed to be the ones worrying about you, not the other way around! You know...your mother misses you a lot. I miss you a lot.” There’s a moment of tender silence on his end. “You know, if your *boring school stuff* is too complicated for your old man, you just say so. I won’t get offended.”

“No, Dad. It’s...it’s not too complicated for you.” My dad is a pretty smart guy. “It’s just stuff to do with the brain and how it reacts to...um...external stimuli.”

“Oooh. You going to dissect someone’s brain over there?”

My gut clinches. The joke is too soon. “No.”

“Okay, okay, just kidding.” There’s some noise on the other end, and a lot of static, and I hear Dad talking to someone else. Then: “Listen, Ingrid, I have to go. Just thought I’d give you a call to see how you were doing. I’m glad to hear you’re all settled in.”

“Yeah.” I swallow. My throat is tight. “I miss you a lot, Dad.”

“I know. We miss you too. Love you! Talk to you again soon.”

“Bye, Dad.”

I wait for him to hang up. The click in my ear is one of the worst sounds I've ever heard. I hate having my parents so far away. The three of us—Mum, Dad, and I—we're a close family, and it was only a few days ago that Jadore threatened the safety of everyone I loved if I tried to do anything rash against the Collective. She doesn't know that I somehow magically teleported from an exploding ship to Earth. That the important powers supposedly inside me, powers needed to defend our world, had awakened—if only briefly.

I return to the table and sit next to Misty. "All right, let's get out of here. We'll get together later. For lunch."

Jia shifts and reaches into her purse for her wallet. She radiates a sense of calm, as if nothing paranormal is happening around her, and I wish I could do the same. A purple ten appears between her fingers, and she lays it on the table. Wil pulls out a twenty from his wallet, and Misty grimaces then nods a reluctant thanks.

I gulp and dig through my own purse. Thankfully, I'm not short. I slap down a ten dollar bill and do some quick mental math. I've spent at least sixty dollars on food in the past couple of days. I think I have fifty dollars left in cash, and then I'll be burning through what little I have in my savings account, via my debit card. Avoiding the cafeteria is expensive. And I'm not sure if it's doing me any good. My stomach has been topsy-turvy these past few days, but it's just nerves. I haven't thrown up since my first day at Sparkstone, when the cafeteria food practically seduced me into eating it and turned me into a mind-controlled freak. Whatever poison they put in the food is effective, and we avoid it like the plague.

Scooting out of the booth, Wil waves to the server. Jia

gets out after him. “Hey, Ingrid, do you want to go for a run with me later?”

Exercise and I don’t generally mix, but Jia is good company, and I know that fighting aliens will be easier once I’m in shape. “Sure. This evening, maybe?”

“Or after tutorial.” A small smile spreads across her face. She’s not going to let me escape this time. I said no to her yesterday.

“Okay, okay.”

Misty nudges me and I slide out, freeing her. She massages her arms and looks warily out the large windows. I follow her gaze, and goosebumps blaze a hellish cold trail up my arms and down my back.

A man wearing blue maintenance-worker overalls and a navy baseball cap is standing across the road, staring at us through the window. But he’s not really a man. Beneath that human image is a mess of tentacles and a spiralling, deadly garden of teeth in a hideous, drooling mouth. It’s Ohz, the hafelglob, and I know from his smug smile that he’s waiting for me.

Wil sees him too. My friend hovers nearby, silently waiting for me to decide how to handle the alien. Taking a deep breath, I put on my game face and march towards the door. I won’t let the alien see how terrified I am. I won’t.

Beside me, Jia pushes the door open and whispers in my ear. “You say the word, and we can be gone. We don’t have to deal with him.”

I nod. “Thanks, Jia. But I can’t hide forever.”

Technically, we could hide, as Jia has the power to turn herself and anything she touches invisible. But it would only delay the inevitable, not to mention make the Collective incredibly suspicious.

We step onto the patio, then walk down the stairs to the sidewalk. Ohz ambles across the road, hands in his pockets. There are three cars coming towards him but he pays the vehicles no mind. They slow for him, and someone honks a horn, but he is not afraid of traffic. I grit my teeth as his boots claim our side of the road just a few feet in front of us.

“We’re going to be late for tutorial,” Misty grumbles.

She’s right. And we can’t afford to have Jadore breathing down our necks even more than she already is. I avoid eye contact with Ohz and start down the sidewalk, towards Sparkstone campus.

“Ingrid Stanley,” Ohz says, in his strange Indian-German-Italian hybrid accent. “Will she not stop to talk with me, miss?”

Misty, Jia, and Wil form a human wall around me and keep pace as I tear down the sidewalk past the alien in disguise. MacLeod Hall is a five-minute walk away, and if we hurry, we can make it to tutorial on time.

“Has information, Ohz does.” He smacks his lips together.

Misty swivels around. “Stay away.” Her palms glow a bright red. “Or else.”

Now I chance a glance at him. Ohz looks Misty up and down, evaluating her strength. Misty singlehandedly took some hafelglob down during our last encounter. No doubt Ohz remembers that. The creepy smile slides off his face.

“This one not hurt the *Crosskey*,” he replies, his voice quieting at the word *Crosskey*. He throws me a fervent look. I still haven’t figured out why he calls me this. He holds up his hands, as if to surrender. “But *Crosskey* hurt Ohz. Deeply. You not remember?”

Of course I remember. I rammed the blunt end of a broom handle into his shifting form, and puss exploded all over my temporary room. And my clothes. And my boots. It had taken me hours to scrub all that alien scum off my precious leather boots.

“We don’t want any trouble,” I say. “We’re going to be late for tutorial.”

“Mmm. Don’t want Mistress mad. No, Crosskey, no.” He slows his pace, and sticks his tongue out. “Warning, then. Not in a good mood, Mistress. Think she not notice you skipping cafeteria? You think café food any better? Café is open before noon now. Think this is a coincidence? Crosskey, think twice!”

He’s shouting now, and my stomach lurches. I exchange a worried look with Wil. My hurried pace turns into a run. No, no, no. Curse this damn school and all the aliens in it. Jia and Wil stay with me, but Misty runs on ahead.

*I considered this, Wil says to our minds. But I don’t know how we can avoid ingesting whatever poison is in the food. If the alien is telling the truth, no doubt Jadore will infect all food in the town. We may have to grow our own. But that would be Sunni’s domain . . .*

Misty throws a deadly glare back at us for bringing up Sunni, and then sprints away. She grows smaller and smaller on the grassy plains.

“Growing food takes time,” Jia says between even breaths. “We need more information about whatever it is they’re putting in the food so we can . . . can stop it.”

Easier said than done. The Collective could pump drugs into any food made in this town. Fortunately none of us have felt ill yet from eating at the Evergreen Café, but as Wil said, maybe it’s only a matter of time.

And time is something we don't have this morning. I check my cell phone. Three minutes past the hour. Dammit. Late already. And my side is cramping. Wil and Jia are more fit than I am, so I wave for them to go ahead. Wil raises an *are you sure* eyebrow, and I nod. There's no need for Jadore to be angry at all of us.

I slow my pace, clutching my side, and it takes me another five minutes to get to MacLeod Hall. The hallways are almost empty, save a couple of stragglers collecting items from the lockers that line the right wall, between the classroom doors. Room 216, that's me. The door is closed and a shadow moves within. Jadore's shadow. She's standing with her back to the door, leaning on her cane.

*I can do this. I've done some research. Just spit it out at her, and you will have survived another day.*

I roll my eyes at my thoughts as I venture towards my locker. Survive. Because that's all I feel I can do right now. The school is dangling on the edge of an alien invasion, but my hands are tied. My shaking fingers twist the combination lock. Another minute goes by. Another minute I'm late, another minute's worth of Jadore's wrath washing over me. But I can take it. I have to. I can do this.

I draw in a breath of strength as the lock clicks and I swing the door open. Then I take a step back, blinking in surprise. My backpack is in the locker, of course, but so are at least ten black artist's tubes. Ethan's artwork. Even seeing his things makes my heart go pitter-patter. We are sharing a locker, and a romantic tension that is hard to deny. Whenever he's around, it's hard for me to keep it together, and I'm having a hard enough time as it is keeping it together—especially since the morning he found me lying in the grass field beside the campus. I made a total fool

out of myself and kissed him goodbye because I thought I was dead.

No time to think about silly, embarrassing moments. I have to prepare for Jadore. I maneuver my backpack around Ethan's art tubes and swing it over my shoulder, then shut the locker door.

"Oh, hold that, don't close it."

My heart leaps into my throat, and I almost gag I'm so caught off guard by my new favourite British voice. I hadn't even heard him approach. Now he's here, in the flesh, and my skin shivers hot and cold.

I turn and step awkwardly, slowly, to the side, so I can feel the warmth of his body as he reaches over me to reopen the locker door. His dark hair is ruffled, his clothes need an iron, and his fingers are permanently stained black from his charcoal, but somehow all of these elements add up to nothing short of handsome.

I cross my arms. I should really be going. Yet, here I am. Not going. And we're all alone in the hallway.

"You all right? Haven't really seen you much lately," Ethan says as he pulls out some tubes and tucks them under his arm.

"Uh-huh. Um, I mean, yeah I'm doing pretty good." So, so dumb. I'm getting nervous now. "How have you been?"

"Oh, you know. Holed up in my studio. Professor Jensen loves to smother me in smaller assignments. Really pushes me, wants me to create a larger body of work. I think I might be exhibiting in a few months. Not really sure where though. There aren't many art galleries here in Sparkstone. Calgary, maybe?"

"That's great! I'm sure any gallery would love to have some of your stuff to exhibit. Not that I know anything

about that, or anything. And...and not to say that my praise means nothing. Because it's...sincere."

He chuckles at my nervous ranting. He's juggling some of the tubes, so I help him close the locker.

"So you taking those to your tutorial now?" I ask.

"Yeah, in like five or ten minutes or something." He frowns. "Don't you have tutorial right now? Jadore'll be bloody mad at you if you're supposed to be in there and you're not."

My eyes dart towards the door. I am way past late. Maybe I just shouldn't go. But pretending to be sick is useless. The camera on the ceiling above the door reminds me of that.

I shrug and pretend that angering a murderer is not a big deal. "It's fine. I can handle it."

He looks as though he's about to leave me to it, but a tube slips from his grasp and tumbles to the tiled floor. I swoop down and pick it up for him just as he attempts to retrieve it himself, and our fingers brush. And then linger. One second, two seconds. A grin, wild like his hair, spreads across his face. For a moment, I live in that grin and the joy that it brings to my pounding heart.

"I, I uh, I haven't seen you in the cafeteria lately," he says. "Kind of miss eating with you."

I blush. We only ate together once, and that was the time I was under the effects of whatever drug goes into the food. I straighten and allow him to take the tube.

"Was hoping I'd get a chance to ask you something."

"Ask me something?" I get my hopes up. "What about?"

"Well, I was wondering..." He half-smiles and runs a hand slowly through his cropped curls, almost dropping two tubes this time. "There's a band playing this Friday, down at the SPC. I mean, the Sparkstone Performance

Centre. SPC. Anyway, we don't get too many bands willing to come this far north, but uh, I was able to get an extra ticket before they sold out." Holding the mess of tubes tightly to his chest, he reaches his free hand into his pocket and pulls out two tickets printed on light blue paper. "Not sure really if they're going to be any good or anything, but I didn't really want to go alone, so if you were available—"

"Yes. I can be available."

"Oh! Great." He looks relieved. "I'll just hold onto these then. This is... this is really good." Then, much quieter: "I was hoping you'd say yes."

I purse my lips to stop myself from singing with joy. I'm about to say something witty in reply when someone calls Ethan's name. He turns, and I peer around him. A girl, maybe a year or two older than I am, comes down the stairs at the end of the hall. Her shoulder-length black hair bounces as she runs. A single strand is braided down her left side, as if she's a Jedi Padawan. Too artsy to be a Jedi, though. Her skinny jeans have colourful patches on the knees, and her paint-stained white shirt falls off one shoulder.

Ethan's face lights up as he awkwardly waves back and stuffs the tickets back into his pocket. She grins, and as she approaches Ethan, her arm slips briefly through his, careful not to disturb the tubes. He nudges her playfully and she retracts her grasp. They're both smiling.

A pang of jealousy stabs my already queasy stomach.

"You're going to be late," she says to him. Her accent sounds American and her words fire quick from her lips. "Walk me there?"

He exaggerates an eye roll. "You just want help carrying

*your* canvases. You see how many I got now? Typical. I can't carry anything else."

She eyes his tubes. "I can't help it if I'm a more prolific painter than you."

Ethan seems to remember that I'm standing in front of him. "Oh, Ingrid, you haven't met Kimberly yet, have you?"

I shake my head, vaguely recalling her name mentioned a few days ago. Might as well have been a few years ago, with all that I've been through.

She holds out a polite hand. She's wearing a ring on her middle finger that holds a blue gem the size of my eyeball. I shake her hand and wonder if the gem is real.

"Ethan told me about you," she says as a sly smile slides across her flawless dark skin.

Oh great. So she knows how I threw myself at Ethan and made out with him in the middle of the field in the wee hours of the morning just because I thought I was dead and going to Heaven.

"Nice to meet you," I manage to say through my embarrassment. "So, um, you and Ethan are in the same... tutorial? You have the same major?"

"Not the same tutorial, no, but we have a similar major, yes. Have you seen his paintings? They are *gorgeous*. You should come by the studio sometime. I'll show you mine." She talks a mile a minute, gesturing excitedly, and the beads around her neck click and clack and tangle as she moves. Smiling, she shakes Ethan's arm and almost upsets his delicate grasp on his tubes. "Are you almost done the one you started a couple days ago? You *have* to show her that one. It's absolutely beautiful. Is it in one of these tubes?"

"Um, no, not quite done yet. Maybe when it's finished

you can come see it.” Now it’s his turn to look a little uncomfortable. He readjusts his grip.

“Sure. As long as I’m not intruding in your space or anything.”

“No, no, of course not! You can come any time. Any time I’m not racing to finish an assignment or anything. Unless that’s a good time for you. I guess I could—” Ethan stops babbling suddenly. His eyes widen. “Oh *shoot!* I was supposed to have a meeting with Ms. Agailya this morning.” Ethan checks his watch. “Bloody hell, a half hour ago. And my tutorial is starting. Sorry Ingrid, I have to go.”

I mumble a goodbye but he’s not really paying attention to me anymore.

“You’re *always* forgetting!” Kimberly exclaims, throwing her hands up in the air in exasperation. “Just write it down. You’re like, the most disorganized, head-in-the-clouds guy on the planet. Here, at least let me help you with those tubes before you embarrass yourself.”

Her ribbing continues and fades as they disappear down the hallway. I shouldn’t be jealous. I bet Ethan’s not jealous that one of my new friends is a guy. And Ethan did just ask me on a date, basically. He is interested in me.

Right?

God, I hope he’s not one of those guys who just hangs out with girls for the attention.

My attention shifts to Room 216. I am *so* late for tutorial.

I push the door open and interrupt Jia midsentence. She’s talking about her meta-analysis paper on child psychology research, which she’s writing in addition to this semester’s project. She only falters for a moment, but the door opening trumpets my arrival on its own. Jadore

rises from her chair, positioned in front of the semicircle of students, and slowly pivots to face me. Jia's words peter out as Jadore fixes her gaze upon me.

“Late, very late,” Jadore says.



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