

Chapter 1

I Meet my WHAT?!

I should not be here.

I'm standing with Dad and my six-year-old sister, Clara, on a hot Las Vegas footpath. We've made a nice Kayden family obstacle course, even without Mum. Exotic Palace is in front of us. Dad says it's the biggest casino in Vegas. I bet it's the ugliest too. It looks like a cardboard box that came last in a paintball battle.

'Ready for fun?' Dad says. His voice is hoarse. I know why, I see it on his face when he thinks I'm not looking. He doesn't think we should be here either. And not 'cause we're melting into the footpath.

'Okay.' I wipe a sweaty palm on my shorts and take Clara's hand.

We follow Dad into the casino. My sneakers squeak across the lobby's marble floor, grown-ups glare at me as I pass. Dad steers me and Clara down a crowded corridor towards Showroom Nine.

That's where Brodie Tallen is having her thirteenth birthday party.

My dad works for Brodie's dad at Tallen Industries, and they've just finished a big project: rebuilding this casino. Dad says everyone who worked on the project is here for the grand reopening.

But while Dad goes to the reopening, Clara and I have to go to Brodie's birthday.

A birthday for a girl we've never met (checking out her *#GothGirl* selfie posts this morning doesn't count).

‘No adults are invited,’ Dad says, like saying the same four words for the tenth time will suddenly make me backflip with joy.

We weave through the crowd –

A super-tall man wearing the shiniest suit in existence blocks our path.

Clara gasps and darts behind my back, taking my arm with her. I end up in a twist.

‘Ah Leon,’ Super-Tall Man says to Dad, ‘*these* must be yours.’ He wiggles caterpillar eyebrows at me and Clara.

Dad gives a nervous cough. ‘Yes Mr. Tallen. My son, Steward, and my daughter, Clara. They’re very excited about Brodie’s party, aren’t you, kids?’ Dad flashes me a look: *Perform like a circus act. Please!*

I untwist myself, ‘Can’t wait!’ and force a smile.

Dad’s boss nods like I passed some secret test. ‘Reopening ceremony starts in five minutes, Leon. Don’t. Be. Late.’ He struts away and we hurry on to Showroom Nine.

It’s not hard to pick Brodie out. She’s at the showroom door, all decked out in black, from the leather necklace better suited to a dog down to her studded torture-device boots. She should rethink the dark goo around her eyes too. Better yet, ditch the whole vampire look. It’s only the start of October. Too early for Halloween.

Brodie’s studying her blood-red fingernails like she’s unsure what they are. She raises them like Wolverine when a cluster of squealing girls pushes past us to mob her. Nothing goth about them, and no shortage of air kisses in their declaration of love for all things Brodie.

Someone, save me.

‘You must be Brodie,’ Dad yells over the squeals.

Squeals stop.

Everyone turns our way.

Now a good thing about being short is I barely reach Brodie's neck, ruling out any air kisses over her shoulder from me. Bad thing about being short is it puts her ponytail at prime swatting level. She takes out my left eye when she spins to face us.

Dad shoves an orange bunny soft toy at me, kisses Clara on the head, and whispers, 'Sorry, I have to go.' He escapes, leaving the spotlight on me.

It's the most interest I've had since we moved to Vegas two months ago (if I don't include my first school week at Earlgreen, when everyone thought I was cool 'cause I 'talked funny.' It didn't last.) With my freckle-full whiter-than-white skin, blue eyes (with one weeping from its whipping), and stop sign red hair, it's hard to hide. I pass Orange Bunny on to Brodie without looking at her. I glance at Clara instead.

Clara's frowning at my watering eye. 'Why are you crying?' she broadcasts in that voice that makes strangling your little sister an appealing option.

A phone camera clicks in my face and I drop my head. 'I'm not,' I say through my teeth.

Why did Mum have to go away THIS weekend? We wouldn't have had to come if she hadn't gone to that conference in San Francisco. Then I wouldn't be the unlucky star of the next *#GothGirl* –

'What are you looking at?' Brodie snaps.

I jerk my eyes up from...*oops*, somewhere near her groin area.

Brodie drops Orange Bunny and folds her hands into fists. 'I asked you a question.' She twists her mouth at me like she's just sucked on a lemon. Bad time to remember that her social media profile says she's a just-turned-thirteen kickboxing champion.

Another phone clicks. Brodie flashes a fake smile nearly as fast. Nearly but not quite.

A girl wearing a pink tent as a dress pushes through the cluster. She jerks her head at me. 'Hey Brodes, who's your friend?'

Brodie huffs. 'Not my friend. Just another from Dad's company.' Like I'm standard issue to prop up birthday numbers. She swings around to give me her back (and misses my awesome lean back to avoid another ponytail whipping. Hope the phones got *that*). Brodie joins in on a series of selfies being taken by every member of her cluster. All at once.

I shift on my feet. 'Not my idea of fun,' I mutter.

'No' moi idea o' fun.' Brodie does a really bad imitation of my Australian accent in the middle of Pose Number Four, or Fourteen.

The cluster laughs. I pull Clara closer.

Brodie turns back to me, pancaking Orange Bunny's head under her boot. 'This is s'posed to be my birthday party, not a babysitting – You made it!' She pushes past me to greet a girl smothered in sequins and a sickly-sweet stink.

Clara picks up Orange Bunny and massages its head back into shape. 'I don't think he should live with her. He should live with us.' She tries to shove Orange Bunny into her already-full unicorn handbag. Not a chance it will fit. Clara shrugs at me.

I shrug back.

Brodie moves away.

As soon as she does, Stinky Sequins Girl turns to Pink Tent Girl and says, 'I heard this place was robbed yesterday, all being kept quiet. Great start to its reopening week.'

Pink Tent Girl scoffs. 'Robbed? Yeah, right.'

'True!' Stinky Sequins Girl nods hard. Sequins spray from her hair, her outfit. One hits me in the eye, in my good (not-watering) eye.

Shielding my face, I hurry Clara into the showroom and whisper, ‘Maybe it’ll be robbed while we’re here and we can leave. Go find some real fun, huh?’

‘But I don’t wanna leave,’ Clara whines.

‘You don’t?’ I follow her gaze to a table against the wall. It’s overflowing with chips, dips, and drinks. She has a point, except the table is guarded by a line of casino staff. Guess there’s no eating yet. ‘C’mon.’ I pull Clara by her dress sleeve to two empty seats – next to the aisle, halfway down to the stage, ten seats from food heaven.

I slump in my seat and look around.

The showroom is like my school hall but way fancier. All red and gold and not falling apart. A black banner hangs above the stage with SKETCH BROTHERS MAGIC written on it in swirly gold letters.

A magic show?

I sit up.

A drum roll starts, like the lazy banging of tin. It’s followed by claps, all from Clara. Brodie’s last to take her seat. She’s in the front row, and *she’s* got chips.

Two dudes in black shirts and pants stroll onto the stage like they own the casino. Gold stopwatches swing from chains pinned to their shirtfronts, and one carries a black duffel bag. If he wasn’t a head shorter than the other one, I’d say they’re twins. Both built like fishing rods, both with ginger hair tied back from pointy faces. Neither look old enough to put on a casino show. They should be in high school. Or juvenile detention.

‘Welcome!’ Taller Magician Dude flings his arms out wide.

Shorter Magician Dude drops the duffel bag at his feet and grins, real creepy-like.

Someone in the audience passes wind. Others join in. Even more snigger. The showroom erupts into a who-can-make-the-loudest-noise-with-their-body contest. The loudest noise without talking, that is.

Shorter Magician Dude's face turns red. 'Shoosh!' he screeches. He sounds like Clara.

I grimace. Maybe I'll give the show a miss, after all.

I fish my phone and earbuds out of the right front pocket of my shorts. It's the pocket with Secret Spot, the special pouch I made to hold stuff I don't want anyone to find. Only one teensy problem (found that last night). If you put something as small as a coin in Secret Spot, it might wiggle its way round to your butt. Real uncomfortable if it does. Secret Spot must have a hole. I must fix that hole.

I must get through this birthday.

I plug in my earbuds and scroll through games on my phone.

Until Clara yanks an earbud from one ear and says, 'I'm hungry.'

I snatch my earbud back. 'We can't have food yet. Watch the show.'

She grabs my phone. 'You're such a doofus.'

I grab it back. 'Where did you hear that word? No one says doofus anymore.'

Clara eyes a passing waitress, carrying a tray of soft drinks. 'I'm thirsty.' She sits Orange Bunny between her and the seat arm, like Orange Bunny is ready for a drink too.

Brodie twists around in her seat and gives *me* the evil eye, ignoring Taller Magician Dude calling for her to come up on stage.

'Ssh, Clara.' I remove my other earbud. 'Drink later.'

Clara's habit of weeing her pants has ramped up the last two months. That's why she goes everywhere with extra clothes. They're in the unicorn handbag she's about to whack me with.

Brodie's now on stage with the two magicians, exaggerating a yawn. Taller Magician Dude tells everyone he'll make her disappear. I'll clap to that.

I duck Clara's incoming handbag and nudge her with fake excitement. 'Look, they're going to make her disappear! Better watch or you'll miss it!'

Clara gasps and leans forwards, gripping the top of the seat in front with her pudgy fingers. Orange Bunny falls to the carpet, but I don't tell Clara. Watching her now, her eyes all shiny and lips scrunched together in anticipation, I almost forget how annoying she can be.

Almost.

I shove my earbuds back in and choose a game. I don't look up until I've built my first Martian base. With any luck, the show is over and we can grab some of that food—

I blink

and blink again.

I glance left

and right

and left again.

My fumbling fingers yank out my earbuds, my phone falls in my lap with a hollow thud.

'Cause no one is moving, no one is making a sound. It's like they're...*frozen?*

I wipe my eyes. No change. Goosebumps line up like an army on my arms.

'CAUSE

NO

ONE

IS

MOVING.

Except me. I'm panting.

Rows of heads face the front or each other, but none fidget

talk

cough

pass wind.

Nothing.

They're as stiff as Grandpa Alf in his funeral coffin.

Clara's still on the edge of her seat. Her eyes are open, as is her mouth. Both like when she sleepwalks.

'Clara?' Her name comes out sharp, it bounces around me. 'Clara?' I prod her warm arm, pinch it, knock on her head. 'Clara!' I shake her hard, then let her go. She doesn't yell, doesn't slap. Just wobbles to a stop, hands on the seat in front, while I shrink away and –

'Yikes!'

My elbow touches a waitress in the aisle, the same waitress who passed earlier. Only this time, she isn't passing. She's stuck with one leg above an aisle step, staring at the stage –

I slap my hand over my mouth and shrivel down in my seat. A nightmare, that's what this is. Yep, I so have the imagination to come up with

THEM.

Two *things*, vibrating on the stage.

Two things, white with rainbow streaks that ripple in waves (I swear, the Northern Lights from my overdue Science homework have invaded Vegas).

Two things, shaped like, *looking* like those two magicians. If those magicians were...
Ghosts.

And Brodie? Brodie isn't on the stage. Brodie is

Gone

Disappeared –

Kssshhkkk. A sound like...glass smashing? Coming from outside the showroom.

I slide to the floor in front of my seat and make a plan: *hide*. Already doing that.

Scream. And tell those ghosts I'm here? I stick a fist in my mouth.

Cry. About to.

Run. Legs strongly disagree.

Noise, what happened to the noise? There's no noise...no noise at all. Not even air-conditioning rumble, or *crssh'ing* background noise. Nothing. It's a Nothing Silence.

Get help. Get Dad.

I peep over the seat in front, at the rows of Stiffs, at the stage. The magician ghosts wobble on the spot, the only movement in the showroom. Besides me.

Get help. Get Dad. Run.

I look through tears at Clara. Last time I tried to lift her, I dropped her on her head.

And hurt something in my back that I'm sure is important.

Get help! Get Dad! Run, you doofus!

I'll get help and come back for Clara.

I jump to my feet, swivel to face the exit, and see

IT.

ME.

A GHOST OF ME, fluttering in my seat in rainbow colours, from its lanky hair to its sneakered feet.

A ghost of me, leaning over in game-playing mode...

Like I was.

My shriek comes out as a squeak.

AM I DEAD?