

Chapter One

The room was ice-cold and pitch-black.

I tiptoed inside, my heart thudding. The silence seemed to swallow me. I glanced over my shoulder, hoping no one had followed me. It looked like I was alone. I wiped my clammy palms against my satin skirt and took a deep breath.

Then I saw them.

Glowing from every corner, like tiny points of light, were pairs of small red eyes. Evil eyes. And they were staring right at me.

Fear snaked down my spine, but I told myself not to run away. I had to go ahead with this. There was no turning back now.

Suddenly, an eerily familiar voice called out in the darkness.

“Emma-Rose!”

I froze. They knew my *name*?

The familiar voice called again, more urgently this time.

“Emma-Rose! Up and at ‘em, young lady!”

Wait, what?

I blinked, and another room materialized before me. Purple curtains. Black wallpaper dotted with hot-pink skulls. A picture I’d drawn of my best friend, Gabby, tacked up over a wooden desk . . .

Oh.

I was in my bedroom. And my mother was hovering over me, frowning. My heartbeat slowed down as reality sank in.

It was Mom who’d been calling my name. I’d been *dreaming*.

Having that same creepy nightmare. Again.

“It’s after seven, honey,” Mom said, glancing at my bedside alarm clock. I must have slapped the OFF button in my sleep. “You can’t keep being late for school.”

“I know,” I groaned, sitting up and brushing my dark hair out of my eyes.

Ever since I turned twelve in August, I’ve had serious trouble falling asleep. I’ll toss and turn, my

thoughts tumbling, and I won't drift off until dawn. And lately, my dreams had been haunted by those glowing red eyes.

Yawning, I watched as Mom walked over to my window and yanked up the shade. I cringed — but then felt a swell of relief. It was a beautiful day. The sky over Central Park was a stormy gray, the autumn wind howled, and thunder rumbled. I smiled, suddenly feeling awake and alert.

Okay. I realize that most people — say, my parents, and Gabby, and pretty much anyone normal — prefer warmth and sunshine. But gloomy weather suits me best. I guess I've always felt a little bit different from other people, period.

Her mission accomplished, Mom headed for the door. "Sausages and eggs for breakfast!" she sang over her shoulder as she left.

My stomach growled. The promise of sausages (and rain) made it easier than usual to get out of bed. I padded across my room, my black shag rug tickling my bare feet. Mom and I had fought long and hard over that rug; she hadn't understood why I didn't want a cheerful yellow one instead. Thankfully, Dad had said it was important for me to express myself creatively, and I'd agreed. I want

to be a designer when I grow up — maybe fashion, or interiors, or both.

After showering, I put on one of my favorite outfits: a black sweater dress, dark purple tights, and knee-high black boots. Then I joined my parents in our too-bright kitchen. Mom was brewing coffee, and Dad was eating cereal while he watched New York 1, the local news channel. Outside, eight stories down, Manhattan bustled to life with the blare of taxicab and bus horns.

“Oh, honey,” Mom sighed, eyeing my dress as she handed me a plate of sausages, scrambled eggs, and toast. “Won’t you at least *try* wearing pastels one day?”

My parents love pastels. That morning, Mom had on a light blue pantsuit, and Dad wore a white T-shirt and khakis. But the differences between me and my parents go beyond our taste in clothes. I don’t resemble either of them — at all. Mom is blond with gray eyes, Dad has auburn hair and brown eyes, and they both tan easily. I have long, straight jet-black hair, navy blue eyes, and milk-pale skin that turns a lovely shade of flaming lobster after two minutes in the sun. Gabby likes to joke that I was adopted, and I’ve wondered about that myself.

“Hmm,” I replied, plopping down next to Dad at the small table. “Pastels. Let me see. Maybe . . . when pigs fly?”

“Good morning to you, too, Ms. Snarky.” Dad flicked off the news and smiled at me, wiggling his reddish eyebrows. “Don’t give your mother a hard time,” he chided me gently. “She’s got a busy Monday ahead of her.” Dad is a cartoonist, and he works from home, so he’s usually the more laid-back parent.

Mom nodded, pouring coffee into her silver thermos. “We’re putting the final touches on the *Creatures of the Night* exhibit. The opening’s only two weeks away.”

I felt a beat of excitement as I dug into my breakfast. Mom works at the American Museum of Natural History, which is a few blocks from our apartment building. The museum is most famous for its dinosaur bones, but it also hosts cool exhibits on things like butterflies and sea monsters. Mom is in charge of these exhibits, and every time one opens, she and Dad go to a big party at the museum. This year, for the first time, Mom was allowing me to attend the opening gala, too. I couldn’t wait.

“And, of course, our special guest is arriving this

afternoon,” Dad said, standing up and putting his bowl in the sink.

“Guest?” I repeated, glancing from Dad to Mom in confusion. Just then, our shaggy sheepdog, Bram, came bounding into the kitchen with a series of barks. When I reached down to pet him, he veered away from me. Sigh.

“You don’t remember?” Mom asked, stepping around Bram and checking the screen of her iPhone. “Your great-aunt Margo is coming to stay with us, all the way from Romania. She’s been a long-distance consultant on the exhibit, and now she’s going to help out with the opening.”

Right. I did recall hearing about Great-aunt Margo, my mom’s aunt, who still lived in the small European town that Mom is originally from. My dad was born in New York City, like me, but Mom came over to America with her parents when she was a baby. I was really little when my grandparents died, so I knew basically nothing about my European heritage.

I was about to ask how, exactly, Great-aunt Margo would be helping, when the doorbell rang. Bram starting barking like crazy, and my parents

and I looked at one another. “Gabby,” we said at the same time.

Every morning, Gabby comes to pick me up so we can walk to school together. Unfortunately, she often ends up going ahead without me because I can’t wake up on time. Gabby is extremely punctual.

“I’ll let her in on my way out,” Mom said. “See you later, guys!” She kissed Dad, hugged me, and whooshed out of the kitchen.

A second later, Gabby appeared, her honey-colored curls spilling over the front of her green cardigan. Bram jumped on her, his tiny claws digging into her jeans as his tail wagged frantically. It’s sad but true: My dog hates me and loves my best friend.

“Hey, cutie,” Gabby said to Bram, rubbing behind his ears. “Morning, Mr. Paley!” she greeted Dad, who waved to her from where he stood at the sink. Then Gabby turned to me, her dark eyes dancing. “I *knew* you’d be ready this morning, Em,” she said. “It’s your kind of weather.”

Gabby gets me. She’s gotten me ever since the first grade, when I was the only kid who wanted to

stay inside and draw during recess. One day, without any fuss, Gabby walked away from the monkey bars and the dodgeball games, sat down next to me, and started to draw, too. And the thing is, Gabby *likes* sports and running around outside. But she'd simply decided that I needed someone to keep me company. So we drew and drew, and by the end of recess, we were inseparable.

We still are. Gabby lives about five minutes away, and if I'm not at her place, she's at mine. We'll spend hours painting each other's nails (mine black, Gabby's purple), downloading music, swapping cuff bracelets, and talking, talking, talking. We have other good friends — like Padma Lahiri and Caitlin Egan, with whom we eat lunch every day — but I don't feel as bonded to them. I'm an only child, and Gabby is totally my stand-in sister.

"Hang on. I'm almost done," I said, my mouth half-full as I wolfed down the remains of my sausage.

"Pace yourself, Emma-Rose!" Dad called as he scrubbed the breakfast pans.

Gabby shook her head at me. "I don't know *how* you can eat that stuff."

Gabby is a vegetarian, and usually she puts up

with my burger cravings just like I put up with her salads. But my BFF *can* be a bit annoying when she starts gushing about the wonders of bean sprouts.

“It’s easy,” I replied, reaching for my glass of cranberry juice. “You know, open mouth, insert food, chew. I can get you some tofu to practice on.”

Gabby stuck out her tongue at me, and then we both burst out laughing. Dad looked at us like we were insane, which only made us laugh harder. When we finally calmed down, I put my plate in the sink and slung my backpack over my shoulder. Then Gabby and I said good-bye to Dad and to Bram (who flat-out ignored me), and took off.

As we rode down in the creaky old elevator, Gabby faced me, her eyes wide.

“All right, tell me,” she whispered. “Did it happen again?”

“You mean the dream?” I shivered, remembering it. Gabby was the only person I’d told about the nightmare that kept coming back. “Of course.”

The elevator’s oak-paneled doors slid open and we walked into the lobby. “I wish I could just figure out what it *means*,” I added as we waved to my doorman, James, and stepped out into the cool October drizzle.

Gabby tapped one finger against her bottom lip, looking thoughtful. Both her parents are psychologists, so Gabby and her little brother, Carlos, are always overanalyzing everything. “Maybe the nightmare represents your worries,” she mused.

“Worries about what?” I asked. I tilted back my head to gaze up at the gargoyles that jutted out from the top of my apartment building. The hideous, gnarled stone faces dripped with rain. When I was younger, I liked to pretend that my building was actually a big, rambling haunted house, smack in the middle of the Upper West Side. Sometimes I still liked to imagine it, especially on a gray day like today.

“Student council,” Gabby answered swiftly, opening her umbrella. “You’re nervous about today’s meeting.”

“I don’t need a dream to tell me *that*.” I sighed, linking arms with Gabby and huddling under her umbrella as we walked north along Central Park West. People zipped by us on their way to the subway, sipping coffee and talking into their cell phones. “But if you’re right,” I added, “it’s all your fault.”

Back in September, Gabby had declared that we should both sign up for an after-school activity

because it would look good on our college applications. When I'd reminded Gabby that we were in the *seventh grade* — and that she already took ballet, and I took an art and drawing class — she'd given me one of her Practical Looks and told me to just trust her.

So that was how I'd been strong-armed into joining student council, which meets Monday and Thursday afternoons. So far it's been pretty awful. The one good thing about it is that Gabby and I can use the meetings as catch-up time, because our only period together this semester is lunch. And at least today's meeting would be about the upcoming Halloween dance, which was something I was actually interested in. Halloween is my favorite holiday. It's the one time of year when everyone else is as into dark, spooky stuff as I am.

"I'm sorry, Em," Gabby said brightly as we crossed 86th Street. "But you can't hide in your room *all* the time, avoiding the world and sketching."

Why not? I thought sourly as our school, West Side Preparatory, came into view up ahead. Those things sounded way better than *any* extracurricular activity.

Maybe Gabby didn't get me so well after all.