

PART I: THE STRANGER IN THE MIRROR

CHAPTER ONE—The boy

Even before your eyes pop open in the pre-dawn dimness, you know something is wrong. You follow the random cracks in the ceiling, straining to read what's written there. Maybe some answers.

You sit up. You're wearing boxer shorts and an unfamiliar tee shirt with a drummer and the name of a rock band on the front. You raise a hand in front of your face and study it as though it were a specimen in a laboratory. Veins stand out under the smooth skin. The fingernails and the flesh around them are bitten raw and ragged.

Faint snores echo in a large space. You're in a dorm room. A dozen beds extend down the length of the room. In the next one over, a preteen boy mumbles in his sleep. Beyond him, another kid sucks his thumb.

You move to the windows. Outside the shelter, there's a featureless cement enclosure, surrounded by a tall chain-link fence. The sun is not yet visible in the morning overcast.

You turn back into the room with a growing sense of unease. Something is missing. Something important: Your name. Your history. Your sense of yourself.

You cross to one of the dressers. In the mirror, you observe a scowling teen with brown eyes, longish hair, a crop of fading pimples on a cheekbone, stubble on the chin. It's the face of a stranger. Panic once again bubbles up in you, but this time you manage to suppress it, numb it down to a dull ache of anxiety. Even panic gets old after so many repetitions.

Scenes from the last several days drift back: You remember huddling in your thin jacket against the cold. Blotting your eyes on its filthy arm. Hitchhiking. Flagging down a pickup truck. Sleeping under an overpass. Walking. A lot of walking. Entering a town and walking some more.

As you wander the bleak streets, you have no idea where you are. That seems fitting. You have no idea who you are, either. You have no self, no past, nothing to anchor you. The more desperately you grope at the pale shapes drifting through your head, the more they dissolve into a fog. It's too frustrating to deal with. You focus instead on your more immediate problems: empty pockets and an empty belly.

You stumble up to a Starbucks and stare at the morning commuters lined up for coffee. Then a small miracle: a kindly older man gives you a bag. You open it and stare inside at a granola bar and a small carton of milk. You gaze at his retreating form.

Eating and walking, you wonder about future meals. A bed. You face up to a stark question: Are you homeless? How does a homeless person survive? By staying in the shadows? Are places offered to homeless people to keep them off the streets? To keep them safe?

Should you think about finding work? Flipping burgers at a fast-food joint? Bagging

groceries? But when you catch a glimpse of your filthy reflection in a shop window, your fantasy collapses. Who would hire a teenage boy with no identification, no address, no name, no past?

As if in answer to this problem, a police officer comes along.

At the station, they ask questions you can't answer.

What's your name? Mother's name? Father's? Any brothers or sisters? Where are you from? Here in Sequoia City? Another town in Northern California? Another state? What's the name of your high school? What year are you in? How long have you been away from home?

And the one that interests them the most: How did that blood get on your shirt?

The police are friendly enough. They ask permission before they take a mug shot. They don't call it that, of course. They're trying to help. They explain it all very carefully, as if you're retarded. There's a nationwide clearinghouse of information about missing children and teens. Your face and fingerprints will be compared to others in the database and once there's a match, they'll know who you are and where you belong.

Pretty simple, these days.

There's only one problem, as it turns out. They don't find you in the database.

They don't understand. "Didn't your family file a Missing Persons report?"

It makes you wonder. Who *is* your family, anyway? Do you even have one?

At least your fingerprints don't turn up in the criminal files. Lucky you.

After they fill out papers, the police confer with Welfare. Plans are made. Someone decides to take you to the Emergency Ward of the hospital. Just a quick checkup.

It's a short ride. No ambulance, no siren. In fact, they don't even use a squad car, to your disappointment. It's some five-year-old Government Issue Blandmobile.

The officer talks to the admitting clerk, and then you wait while real emergencies are handled. Knifings. Gunshot victims. An old man having a stroke. A young woman having a baby. At last a doctor comes around.

Like the cops, he's curious about your blood-spattered shirt. He has you take it off. He sees no cuts or scratches to account for the blood. But your torso and arms are covered with large ugly bruises, beginning to turn yellow. Your ribs ache under his probing. He indicates there may be a fracture. When he asks if you remember anything about the blood, you shake your head.

He shines his little penlight in your eyes. Has you stick out your tongue. Stares up your nostrils. He says your nose was broken recently.

He gives you a quick physical. Other than the bruises, he says you're in good health. *Good to go*, he says. You wonder: go where?

The shelter is housed in a rambling old three-story home, with the upstairs rooms converted into dorms. Boys sleep on the third floor, girls on the second. A locked gate at the adjoining staircase is watched over by a staff person, whose office is right there. As they explained, that's to avoid any incident that could threaten their funding.

The first floor has the kitchen. A common room with TV, ping-pong and foosball. A small

reading room and another room for arts and crafts, plus staff offices.

They settle you into a bunk. You have no personal belongings to put away in the small dresser they provide. Nor anything in your head to occupy your thoughts: only perplexity, anxiety, frustration and growing anger because your questions have no answers.

The sounds of activities echo faintly through the place: the television, shouts of kids playing, the sound of an endless ping-pong volley.

Later, a beefy red-faced staffer bustles in and introduces himself as Eric Jennings. He shakes your hand, asks your name. When you tell him you can't remember, he's startled, but only for a moment. Then his face lights up. "Hey, this gives you a chance to pick your own!"

You shift your shoulders.

"Can't come up with anything? Maybe I can help."

He's so cheerful you want to puke.

He opens a closet where donated clothing is stored. You sort through a number of items of the right size. You can't wait to shower and change out of your filthy things.

At dinner, you're introduced to the other kids: a couple dozen, ranging in age from twelve to seventeen or eighteen. Glancing down the table, you note a few stares of curiosity, but mostly nobody gives a shit. Fine with you. You don't feel like starting a conversation anyway. You'd be stuck for an answer to the very first question anyone would ask. "Where you from?"

The next day, Ms. Samuels, another staff person, drives you to Redwood High School. In the administrative office, the tests you take indicate you should be in your third year. She helps you go through the curriculum and choose the right kinds of classes. There will be a bus pass and weekly spending money, she says.

You're silent on the drive back to the home. Even your thoughts are silent.

So is Ms. Samuels. She seems stern, almost angry. But as you're about to leave the car, she makes a little speech. "If anyone bothers you about your memory loss or anything else, either here or at school, please let me know about it. And if any of the classes seem too difficult, I want to know that, too. Despite the test you took, we're not really sure how far along you are in school. We want you to do well. The more comfortable you feel, the sooner you'll return to--to yourself."

You turn and look at her, so surprised and moved by her concern you don't trust your voice to thank her.

CHAPTER TWO--Margot

I shot a look over my shoulder to make sure my bedroom door was shut before I turned back to stare at the goddess on my monitor. Salome, painted in a brazen pose, arms aloft, head uplifted in a wild dance, a flimsy skirt slung low on her belly, her top bare and provocative. Hidden in the shadows, served up on a silver platter, the head of John the Baptist. King Herod's reward to the teenage temptress for her Dance of the Seven Veils. A major dude undone by one of the original *Femmes Fatales*, according to Wikipedia.

I shut the page and cleared my history. My parents probably didn't spy on my computer activities, but why take chances? Why get them wondering what the hell their innocent daughter was up to? --Innocent? Good one, Margot.

Femme Fatale. There was an ancient Britney Spears CD by that name. I barely remembered it. But eighteen months ago, shortly after The Incident that shocked everyone and changed everything, someone slipped it into my school locker. I wasn't a big fan of the blonde idol with the shaky career, but at first I thought, *Cool! A gift*. I was so oblivious I even showed it to my friend Kendra Shelby, thinking I could dig out my old player. As soon as she saw it, she went white. That's when I got the message: *Femme Fatale*: Fatal Woman. A woman to die for. Or from.

Fucking Mean Girls Cabal. When I finally got their message, I screamed and cracked that damned CD in half. In retaliation, it sliced my palm open. Blood everywhere. I had to get stitches. Now and then, like a sick reminder, my hand still gets this icy ache.

That was the first of many sick memos I received from the Mean Girls Cabal. Before The Incident, I was happy and friendly and even sort of popular. After, I constructed a shell and hid inside, according to the therapist my parents had me seeing for about a year. My true friends stuck with me despite all my new bitchiness. The rest of the school hated my guts. They still do, I'm sure. Those who remember. All that hate turned me into a mean girl myself. Mostly to guys. According to the therapist, that was really more of a defensive measure than actual meanness. *Hah!*

Yesterday I saw the damning phrase once more, in a story about Mata Hari in my history book. Stupid me, I had to go and check it out online. And unbury all those dark memories.

From the kitchen came the second call. "Margot, let's go, honey."

Not honey: *Femme Fatale*. I logged off, powered down, retrieved my backpack, shoved my books and homework into it and drew several calming breaths. I refused to give in to shame, remorse and all the other ugly emotions my computer search had reawakened.

I grimaced at my reflection, flung my hair out of my eyes and went downstairs.

"I fixed you a BLT. I hope that's all right."

"It's fine, Mom." I wished she'd stop being so careful around me. Like I might break into shards of glass.

I had her let me out a couple blocks from school as usual. I didn't have a car of my own, but why advertise the fact? Catching up with a few friends, I pasted on a smile. "Hey guys."

I'd barged into the middle of a noisy critique of one of TV's many talent competitions.

“You catch the Showdown last night?”

“Just the last few minutes.”

On our way in, they compared notes on who had the better act. Frankly, I wasn’t all that into it, but I tried to keep up on the names everyone would be yakking about.

I sorted my books at my locker and headed for Homeroom, an ancient custom our school had revived during my freshman year. One good thing from my parents’ generation, anyway.

I cracked open my history book and found the Mata Hari article once more. A World War I spy who betrayed her country and its soldiers to the Germans. What made me curious enough to go to Wikipedia was the sidebar. It talked about Hollywood *Femmes Fatales*. Those beautiful dames with long legs, long wavy hair, pouty lips and a saxophone wailing in the background. It also ran through a list of other bad girls from history, mythology and fiction. Bad behavior so common it deserved a special name.

I couldn’t help wondering if some women were genetically disposed to be toxic. If it was their fate to attract men only to destroy them. Even if they didn’t intend to.

“Hsst! Margot!” My friend Lisa Hennings poked me in the back.

I turned around.

Eyes bulging with urgency, she tipped her head towards the front of the room, where Mrs. Harrison stood with an embarrassed-looking new boy.

“Kids, this is John Smith. He’s joining our homeroom. Please make him feel welcome.” She directed him to an empty seat near the back.

I slouched at my desk and checked him out without being obvious about it. New kids usually copped some kind of attitude. Too cool for school, rabbit-nervous, eager to make friends, whatever. Frankly, this dude seemed way lost. He slid into his seat and glanced quickly around at the other kids. As soon as his eyes turned towards me I let mine drift away.

Kendra and Lisa had their heads together. Lisa was whispering with enthusiasm. No surprise. Those two were always on the lookout for fresh meat. Kendra pretended she was bored, but Lisa didn’t know how to do that.

Mrs. Harrison stood at her desk. “Kids, a reminder. The Homecoming Game is in three weeks. You can’t go unless all your absences and tardies are made up. And that means *all*.”

A few of the boys muttered their complaints. Todd Bannister raised his hand. “How can I do my makeups? I work after school.”

“Talk to your employer. Or maybe we can arrange weekend sessions.”

“Weekends?” he moaned.

Todd was killer handsome, but he had a head full of scrambled eggs. He was always forgetting addresses for parties, losing his car-keys, showing up late. I heard from an ex-girlfriend of his that he once picked her up for a dance wearing shoes from two different pairs.

The buzzer sounded. We all gathered our junk and herded out the door. I found myself jammed up next to the new kid. I gave him a wiseass smile. “So, John Smith. Find your Pocahontas yet?”

The kid looked blank for a moment. Then his face got red.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never heard that one before?”

“No,” he said. “Excuse me.” He walked away.

What a jerk.

I joined Kendra and Lisa at the lunch table. Lisa was poking into Kendra’s lunch bag.

“I can’t believe you can eat all this shit and not gain an ounce.”

“It’s my burden.”

“How is that a burden? I eat half a sandwich and gain three pounds.”

“That’s your burden.”

“I know, but how is eating all this fattening shit and not gaining an ounce a burden?”

“One day it will all catch up with me. I will explode.” Kendra inserted the remains of a sugar-crusted donut into her mouth.

“Probably when she gets pregnant. She’ll turn into a giant creampuff and her husband will run away screaming.”

I ignored their bickering.

“Hola chicas! Como estan?”

I looked up. “Hey, Tonay!”

Antonia Laquesta moved to California last year from Argentina. A significant improvement to our society, if you want to know the truth. I was glad she liked to hang with us.

“So what’s in your lunch bag?” I asked her.

“I brought you an empanada.”

“Gracias.”

“De nada.”

Empanada. De nada. “Wait. Does that mean the empanada is empty?”

“Only your head is empty.”

Lisa and Kendra, my pals since Second Grade, picked at their sandwiches and each other.

“Last time we hit the mall, you spent all afternoon looking at shoes,” Lisa said.

“Shoes are important. And Crocs are not shoes.” Kendra eyed Lisa’s colorful footwear.

Lisa’s friend Nina was struggling to open her lunchbox. Her right hand was immobilized by a black brace festooned with Velcro straps and buckles.

I reached over and unlocked it for her.

“What’s with the glove?” asked Lisa.

“Doctor’s orders. He says I have carpal tunnel.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s Latin for finger in the snatch,” said Kendra. “Looks like you’ll have to start jerking off with your other hand. Or maybe give your poor tunnel a rest.”

“That or get a boyfriend,” Lisa added.

Nina’s face turned red as the rest of us laughed our asses off.

Kendra changed the subject. “I’d like to take in a movie this weekend. Some good ones are opening.”

“Hey, let’s put a group thing together. Get John Smith to join us.” Lisa waggled her eyebrows. The little ring in her left eyebrow flipped back and forth. Her latest trick.

Antonia sipped her Coke. “Who is this Juan Smith?” When she said it, it came out Smeeth.

She wasn’t in our homeroom, so she’d missed the introduction. I filled her in. “New kid. No sense of humor.”

“Oh? You already offended him?” Antonia always came from an unexpected direction. That was one of the things I liked about her. She seemed so exotic and wise, even when she acted obtuse. “What did you find to insult him about so quickly?”

“His name. It’s so stupid.”

She didn’t get it.

“John Smith always sounds made up. It’s the first thing that pops into someone’s head when he doesn’t want to give his real name.”

Antonia shrugged. “To me, it does not seem a subject for humor.”

“Whatever.” She still didn’t get it. “Those earrings your cousin sent you from Buenos Aires? Can he get me some like them? Not exactly the same, but, you know, similar.”

“I will speak to him about them.” *Heem. Theym.* Antonia’s i’s sounded like e’s and her e’s sounded like a’s. But she was working on it. “He will need a credit card number.”

“That can be arranged.”

Lisa started whispering feverishly to Kendra, hiding her face behind a magazine. I nudged Antonia. “To your left. Don’t look yet. The new guy.”

“Juan Smith?”

“Right.”

My friend stood up, slung her book bag over one shoulder. As she pushed past me, she murmured, “Cute boy. Nice hair. Too bad you made him your enemy already.”

I grabbed my bag and followed her. Even though I had no interest in cute boys or any boys, I said, “I’m sure I can make him overlook one stupid wisecrack. Besides, any guy who can’t take a joke isn’t worth bothering about.”

We stopped to pee. At the sink, I checked my teeth for food-specks, ran a brush through my hair and put on lip gloss. Antonia used a dark red lipstick that looked great with her olive complexion. I scowled at my reflection. My own skin was too pale, with an unfortunate tendency to turn pink and telegraph my every emotion.

“Why do you do that?”

“What?”

“Make that angry expression every time you see yourself in the mirror. Don’t you like your beautiful face?”

I didn’t know how to answer her.

I was at my locker after final period when Lisa showed up, breathless with gossip. “Margot! Omigod, you’re never going to believe what I heard. It’s just the weirdest!”

I worked the combination and opened the door. “What did you hear?” I started sorting my

books and banging in the ones I wouldn't need.

"The new kid?" Lisa's eyes nearly bulged out of her chubby face.

"John Smith, yeah-yeah, what about him?"

"That's not his real name."

I stopped abusing my books and turned to her.

"It's the name they gave him at the shelter. That's where he's living."

"What do you mean, the name they gave him? What's his real name?"

"That's the thing. He doesn't know. He can't remember. He has amnesia!"

I thought about what I'd said to him. My stupid Pocahontas joke. I felt my face turning red.

"Oh no. Oh hell. --Lisa, I have to talk to him."

"Why?"

"I have to apologize."

She stared at me, mystified.

"What, you don't think I know how?"