

LITTLE
CREEPING
THINGS

CHELSEA
ICHASO

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1

“Kill it, Cass!” Tina Robbins yells over the pulsing music. My tank top-clad teammates scramble into position, shoes squeaking across the gym floor.

The ball is a high lob. I take three running steps to the net, inhaling the scent of sweat and deodorant. Adrenaline hums in my ears as I swing my arms, jumping. My palm slices through the air, pounding the ball.

Straight into the net.

I grind my teeth, biting back a curse.

Ever since Coach started trying out new girls in my spot, I’ve been training day and night. But I’m jittery; this practice is my only shot at tomorrow’s starting lineup. Coach’s hand

is plastered over her forehead. I'm one screwup away from my new friend, the bench.

Laura Gellman, our setter, crouches in the back row, ready for the next serve. She sneers and murmurs, "You can't say the *K* word around Cass. It's like a trigger. It'll give her ideas."

As I find my position, a memory coats my thoughts in a smoky haze. I turn to glare at Laura, but her eyes aren't small and hazel anymore.

They are massive, like a doll's. And bluer than the sky.

Not now.

I blink hard, trying to clear my vision.

Stephanie Reed squats beside Laura, up at the net. But her eyes have gone impossibly cerulean too. Long, spidery lashes line her unblinking lids. The smell of smoke tickles my nose, and a swell of heat crawls up my skin.

"Cassidy, pay attention!" shouts Coach. I pivot, wrenching my mind from the hallucination to focus on the ball spinning over the net. Stephanie dives for it and sends a crisp pass to Laura, who sets it up my way again. I skitter into place, my steps timed to the beat of this über-inspirational '80s song from our practice playlist.

Three, two, one. I jump again.

But the phantom smoke swirls around me, filling my eyes, my lungs. Its tendrils expand into a thick black curtain as I soar through the air. Every voice drowns beneath crackling

fire and the groan of the buckling gym ceiling. I search for the ball in the thick darkness, but my face collides with something real, and I fall backward. All around me, flames dance and leap and ash rains down.

I land flat on my back, face stinging. Gasps trickle through the buzzing white noise. I rub my eyes to find everyone hovering over me. Laura is in the middle, pink lips tugging at the corners like she's holding back a smile.

But her irises are back to small and hazel. The smoke has cleared. Not a single flake of white ash clings to my T-shirt or sprinkles the wooden floor.

I get up—much too fast—and shove my way through the swarm of volleyball players. I spot Gideon at the back of the gymnasium, clothed in football practice gear, and rush toward him. The panic starts to fade with each step closer.

Laura scurries ahead of me, flinging her chestnut-colored ponytail and impeding my path. “Cass, are you okay? Do you want me to call the nurse?” Her sugary voice brings on a wave of nausea.

I brush past her, my legs wobbly. *Do not lose it.* “I’m great.” Other than the total-humiliation thing. In front of the whole team and the boy of my dreams.

When I reach Gideon, my voice barely emerges over the lump in my throat. “Can we get out of here?”

He studies me for a moment, his olive skin flushed, dark eyes concerned. Then he nods and slings an arm around me.

We exit the gym, the chatter behind us fading, and stop at our lockers to grab our backpacks. “What were you doing in there?” I whisper.

“I knew today’s practice was important, so I skipped warm-ups to watch.”

My face ignites. “Pretty impressive, wasn’t it? You know, I’m the only volleyball player to nail the triple-axel double backflip mid-spike.” I tilt my head. “Minus the spike part.”

Gideon squints down at me. “Cass, what happened back there? You can hit that ball with your eyes closed.”

“Nothing. Let’s just go.” Technically, this counts as skipping school because we both have sports for the last period of the day. We sneak down the hall and out the double doors to our bikes. We don’t need to exchange a single word about where we’re going—we’re headed to the underground hideout we built as kids, our one escape.

Any trip to the hideout includes a quick stop at my house for snacks; Gideon is always hungry. My mom’s car isn’t in the driveway, but we park our bikes against the back gate just in case. The fact that my brother Asher’s car is out front doesn’t worry me. Before he graduated last year, Asher would have ditched school with us. He was an accomplice in all of our shenanigans.

Asher was accepted to UCLA and NYU but turned them down to start a property management company. My parents were skeptical. *Everyone* was skeptical. It’s difficult to imagine

someone with only a high school diploma telling grown-ups how to run their investments. But Asher's not most people. My parents said he could live and work from home until he got his company up and running.

We reach the kitchen, where the burnt-toast smell of breakfast lingers. My eyes still sting. How did I let that shiny-haired attention fiend get to me again? I browse the contents of the pantry, tossing bags of chips into my backpack.

"Are we ever going to talk about this?" Gideon's voice is low and gentle. "I couldn't hear what Laura said, but I can imagine." He reaches for my shoulder, and I spin into him, a few tears leaking onto his green hoodie. I look up, and his deep brown eyes wear me down.

I can tell him. He's the one person I can trust with anything. I just don't exactly know *how* to tell him. *Gideon, I hallucinated flaming doll people.* Not quite right.

"Gideon, I think...I might be..." New tactic. "I think I have 'the shine.'" Gideon arches a brow. "You know how Jack in *The Shining* sees creepy stuff around every corner, and he's not sure if it's really there or if he's hallucinating?" I take a deep breath and spit it out. "I had a similar premonition in the gym."

Gideon shoots me a wry look. "You saw demonic twins in the school gymnasium."

"More like I saw the gym go up in flames," I say somberly.

"Wait a minute," he starts, leaning toward me, but the wooden hallway floor creaks and we jerk apart.

Asher saunters in, wearing dark jeans and a crisp gray polo. He stops when he sees us, eyebrows cocked, and gives a curt wave. “I thought I heard voices.” His gaze travels to the wall clock above the counter. “Shouldn’t you two criminals be somewhere?”

“Uh,” I stammer, “yeah. We were—”

“Cass had a rough day,” Gideon cuts in.

“What happened?” Asher’s skin is paler than Gideon’s, but their furrowed brows match.

My face burns as I draw in a slow breath. “Fire stuff.”

Both boys bristle, and Asher’s fingers graze the jagged pink scars on his left hand. He steps closer. “Who was it? Laura?”

“Calm down. I’m fine.”

Asher’s shoulders slacken. He steps closer, peering down at me with those crystal blue eyes we share. “I know what you need. A movie night. Tonight?”

I force a smile. “That sounds good.” As long as it’s not *Firestarter*.

“Great. Maybe Brandon will stop by.”

A week ago, the thought of sharing a sofa with Brandon Alvarez would’ve sent me deeper into depression. Asher’s former best friend hasn’t been around much since he decided to date Laura Gellman freshman year. Out of loyalty to me, Asher stopped hanging out with him. Then last spring, Brandon and Laura broke up, and Asher got the deluded notion that I’d magically forgive and forget.

It doesn't help that Asher spied Brandon and me getting on swimmingly together at a party last week. I told my brother the truth about my moment with Brandon: we'd discovered we had something in common.

I'll never tell a soul exactly what it was. When the buzz wore off, I tried to go back to despising everything about Brandon, down to that stupid dimple. But I couldn't. Everything's weird now.

Asher's head tilts toward Gideon. "Cass, give us a sec, okay?" I nod. They duck into the hall, and I can't make out a word over the hum of the air-conditioning.

I stand alone in the cold kitchen, backpack heavy in my hands. The whispers floating through the air send pangs into my gut. I hate their guy talk.

Moments later, they slink back in, smiling.

"Okay." Asher checks his back pocket for his wallet. "I ran out of printer ink, so I'm off to see if Carver's has anything remotely compatible. If not, I'll be back in three hours." He's exaggerating, but not by much. Maribel, Oregon, is a tiny former lumber town in the rural depths of the state. We have one drugstore, one diner, one dive bar, and one ice cream parlor. If that doesn't cut it, the nearest shopping center is an hour drive. Though Maribel boasts breathtaking scenery, boredom is the leading cause of death. I don't plan on sticking around long enough to challenge that statistic.

Asher grabs his keys from the hook by the door. “See you tonight.” He tosses me one last concerned look before the door clanks behind him.

I turn to Gideon. “What was that about?”

He sighs. “What do you think? He tried to pump me for more information. I honored your wishes and kept quiet. He just told me to watch out for you.”

My heart surges and falls. Of course. My brother, the hero. He has a way of making me immensely grateful and astoundingly irritated all at once. “You always watch out for me, Giddy.”

Gideon zips my backpack and takes it from me, shoulders rolling as he hefts it on. “Tell your brother that. And tell me we’re going to exact some sort of vengeance on Laura.”

I follow him out the back door. “Why is she such a terrible person?”

“Please remember she’s not really a person. Laura—demon spawn, alien, whatever she is—is jealous of you.”

“Sure,” I mutter dryly. But we both know why Laura really targets me.

We begin walking through the forested area behind my house. The fragrance of my mom’s perfectly pruned jasmines fades, replaced by fresh pine and earth. A cool wind whips through the trees, and I wrap my arms around myself. Gideon stops suddenly, and grumbles, “I forgot about Dave’s thing tonight.”

Right. Dave Halper’s big party. Gideon and the rest of the football players are supposed to go, which means he wants

me to go and keep him company while our schoolmates grope one another until they puke.

I pick at a fingernail. “We already met our quota of *things* for the year. Wouldn’t you rather stay in tonight and watch movies?”

“Of course. I just promised I’d stop by. But I can text Dave that something came up.”

He starts walking again and I tag along after him. “Gid—”

“Cass, I’m supposed to be making *you* feel better. Forget the party. Forget Laura. Let’s talk about life’s big questions. Like...what are you going to study in college that combines your academic prowess with your volleyball abilities?” Gideon scratches his head as if in genuine, deep thought. “What sort of profession entails working equations while cramming a ball into someone’s face?” His smile is contagious.

“I’m sure we can think of something,” I joke.

“We’ll have to make a list of those prerequisites and you can give them to the guidance counselor, Whatshername, at your next appointment.”

“Whatshername was always my favorite counselor.”

“Definitely beats out my counselor, Whatshisname, a.k.a. Haymitch, when it comes to counsel.” Gideon’s steps pause. “Though I’m starting to wonder if the Haymitch thing applies to more than his uncanny resemblance to Woody Harrelson.”

“Ahhh, you think there’s a flask behind the desk?”

“His cheeks are so gosh-darn rosy.” He passes me a silly, knowing look, and I punch him in the arm.

We reach the small creek that runs through my family’s property. At this hour in the afternoon, the creek becomes enchanted by the sunlight that bursts through the spaces in the trees, making the water shimmer. We carefully hop over a few stones blanketed in green moss to cross to the other side.

Gideon and I approach the barricade of trees that shelters our sanctuary. We crouch down like forest animals and push through the bases of the tree trunks where the leaves thin out. The grass and weeds itch all the way up to our faces.

Once inside the clearing, we kick aside the woven cover of twigs that camouflages the opening. We tug off the large blue tarp, setting it to one side, and use a wooden crate to step down into the roofless, bunker-style hideout. A crumpled math test and a few empty soda cans litter the floorboards. Gideon shoos a stowaway lizard up the wall and brushes aside some cobwebs while I pull out the snacks. Then, using my backpack as a cushion, I settle into a corner, breathing in the musty scent.

This place had been Gideon’s idea. When we were ten years old, I read *The Lord of the Rings: Part 1*. Gideon, on the other hand, didn’t have the attention span for it. But one day, he appeared before me beaming.

“I saw *The Fellowship of the Ring*,” he said, his words dripping with excitement and mischief. “My parents were

watching it last night. I snuck out of my room and sat behind them in the hallway.”

“You watched a three-hour movie sitting on the hallway floor?” I struggled to imagine Gideon staying silent and still for anything for three hours.

“Mm-hmm.” His eyes had a vacant look that let me know he was somewhere else—in this case, Middle-earth. “Gave me an idea.”

I thought for sure we were in for an afternoon of sword fighting and arguing over who would get to be Aragorn when he simply said, “We’re going to build a hobbit house.”

“A hobbit house?”

“It’ll be our *secret hideout*. No one will know about it except us.”

It was our first secret.

Now, Gideon digs a hand into a chip bag. “And if Whatsername and Haymitch can’t help—you know who’d *love* to help you find your true calling? Peter. He can’t stop asking about you when he’s supposed to be helping with my math homework. He’s a smart guy. I’m sure he’ll have some ideas about your *unique future*.” Gideon is smiling, but his eyes aren’t.

Peter McCallum is Gideon’s tutor. “He’s probably trying a lot harder on your math homework than you are,” I mumble. It’s an old argument, that Gideon could easily get out of the remedial class if he applied himself.

He munches noisily on a handful of chips, reclining against the wooden boards that make up the underground walls. We'd done a decent job for two ten-year-olds, but our hobbit house ended up more of a glorified six-by-six-foot hole. Dirt seeps through the cracks in places, and we have to be careful to avoid loose nails. Rain sometimes trickles beneath the tarp, leaving a perpetual smell of damp wood.

Leaves rustle above us, and the snap of a twig echoes through the woods. "Shh," I whisper, swatting my hand to silence his munching. "I heard something."

A female voice floats into our haven, followed by giggling. I roll my eyes at Gideon, and through the scattered rays, he rolls his back. Some kids at the log. Years back, my dad set up an idyllic sitting spot beneath the pines. Occasionally, kids discover it, sneaking over during the summer or on weekends to have a smoke or a beer, even though this part of the creek is on my family's property. When we were little, Gideon and I used to play spies, camouflaging ourselves within the coniferous trees and trying not to get caught.

We aren't kids now, though, and it's just annoying. I figured we'd have this area to ourselves, at least until school lets out. I want to talk to Gideon, the person who's known me since second grade and never once whispered about my homicidal tendencies in the school halls. The person who's always known just what to say to cheer me up. But now we have to keep our voices down, so no one discovers this place.

Even after Asher became the third member of our trio, back when he and Gideon became football buddies freshman year, I refused to let him in on our secret. Asher has lots of things—the adoration of the town and our parents, for starters. The hideout is *mine*. The one thing I've kept between my best friend and me.

Gideon exhales, his breath warm on my bare arm, and my pulse quickens. A rogue strand of dark hair has fallen over his eyes, and I resist the urge to push it back. When we were kids and built this place, he had the wiry body and static-stricken hair of a primate. Now he's tall, with the muscular body of an athlete. It doesn't leave much space between us in the tiny, underground hovel.

“Come on, you really brought me *here*?” asks the girl. I cringe, recognizing the chirpy voice and distinctive kooka-burra cackle. Melody Davenport. She was in my brother's class at school, and we used to play volleyball together. She's Laura Gellman's best friend and basically an older, blond version of her. After high school, Melody started working at Gina's Diner in town.

“Ooh,” I whisper, grinning slyly. “Who's she talking to?”

Gideon listens, chin resting on his palm. “Herself. She has to invent friends while Laura's at school.”

“Is that so?” Melody asks coyly, her perky voice transforming into something softer. The rest of her words are partially drowned by the gentle whooshing of the stream.

Silence follows, broken only by the occasional giggle and moan. I dig around quietly in my backpack, searching for a distraction as I mentally will Melody and whoever she's with out of the vicinity.

Gideon leans in. "What if she's up there with Seth?" he whispers, laughing into the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

"No way!" I sputter, scrunching my nose. "Melody would never." Seth Greer graduated with Melody and Asher, but before that he was our school's token creep, who loitered behind the bleachers, spying on girls.

Gideon's eyes twinkle with amusement. "They looked pretty heated this morning."

Gideon had tutoring at Gina's Diner in town this morning. When I stopped by to bike with him to school, we saw Seth and Melody arguing outside. We did a double take since Seth never speaks to anyone, much less a girl like Melody Davenport.

"Not *that* kind of heated," I say. There's no way it's Seth up there with her. Still, I plant my hands firmly over my ears, just in case. I make a gagging face at Gideon. He bends closer, using my shoulder to stifle his laughter, and the vibrations rumble against me. Then he scoots closer to the backpack, yanking out his phone.

He nudges me with an elbow and I lower my hands. "I've got to text Dave before Coach calls my mom looking for me."

This part of the forest is a notorious dead zone. The

closest place to get a signal is back toward my house, but Gideon would pass right by the log. Thanks to Melody, he'll have to trek in the opposite direction until he reaches the next cluster of homes.

"Are you sure you want to go up there *now*?" I whisper, my eyes widening dramatically. "What if she's only one of a thousand homecoming-queen-demon-temptresses hiding in the woods? What if she lures you over there with her blond hair and that seductive witchy laugh and then it's a feeding frenzy?"

He shakes his head. "And Asher thinks you need to watch more horror movies." Gideon climbs stealthily onto the crate. "But jot Melody down for the part of blond female vampire in *Dracula*."

"Never," I spit out. Gideon and I like to recast our favorite horror movies with people from our real lives. Whenever we come up with a genius new casting, we jot it down in my mini spiral-bound notebook, which gets passed back and forth during classes and between classes. Or anytime, really. "The day Melody gets a part bigger than *background zombie with insides on the outside* is the day the game dies."

Gideon nods. "So true. That was wildly irresponsible of me." He drags himself up and out of the hole. "I'll be right back."

His footsteps soon fade as he wanders deeper into the woods. I shut my eyes and lean against the boards. I should be doing chemistry homework; instead, I daydream about filming Melody and her invisible stranger. And showing

everyone in school. Documented footage of her up there with Seth would be gold—Maribel’s queen kissing the town freak. Maybe I can channel the spy days of my childhood and sneak a couple photos. Just to even the score. I reach for my phone, but stop short when a second voice surfaces, deeper than hers and muffled by the conversation of the forest.

My hand freezes. I decipher the words *we’re alone*, but a raven’s raucous call erupts overhead. An unsettling thought prickles in the back of my mind.

Then, nothing. Only the wind whistling through the pines and the water slapping the rocks. Even the raven sounds like it dropped dead. *Good*. Maybe they’re gone. I heft the backpack onto my lap and scrounge up my chemistry book. I flip it open and attempt to focus.

From above, Melody’s voice rises. The other person must’ve already managed to piss her off. She’s shouting, words too jumbled to decode, and my irritation climbs. I fumble for the backpack, wondering if I left my earbuds inside.

But then a new noise—a shrill squeal—tears through the trees, stopping my heart. “Hel—” Melody cuts off abruptly, the shriek ending in silence.

A thread of panic spirals through my head, making its way down my spine and out to each limb. *Was that a scream for help?* Over by the log, the other voice speaks quietly. I can barely make it out over the trickling water, but it sounds like “Shh, it’s okay now.”

My heart spasms. I swing my head around, searching frantically for Gideon. But he's still off trying to send that text.

Maybe he heard the call for help and he's rushing back. I listen for footsteps, for the voices, but the raven's caw—ominous and piercing—starts up again.

Gideon's too far away. I should scream at the top of my lungs. But my jaw is bolted shut, throat obstructed. My heart is working again, pulsing faster than ever before and sounding like gunfire in this tiny space. But the rest of me is paralyzed.

My thoughts and vision blur. Everything darkens. *Breathe.* Lifting my chin, I suck in a deafening breath. Then I grab my phone, remembering with a sickening sense of dread that I won't have a signal.

I have to find Gideon. I have to get help. But one thought punches through the others, drowning all reason:

I have to get out of here.

Because I know the other person up there, the one whose hushed voice drifted over from the log and into our sanctuary.

He and I planned this murder together.