

The Screaming Season
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Sample Chapter

BOOK ONE: CRIES AND WHISPERS

Insanity is relative. It depends on who has who locked in what cage.

—Ray Bradbury

Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.

—Albert Einstein

CHAPTER ONE

February 20

possessions: me

my sanity? they think I've lost it. at least my loyal dormies keep reminding everyone about my fever. who knows how long I was wandering in that snowstorm? pneumonia.

all my stuff back in my dorm room:

my textbooks, mummy-wrapped in Marlwood book covers.

six filled regulation Marlwood Academy notebooks (my first semester's work).

six 1/3-filled notebooks (my second semester).

the vast Marlwood logo-land of my school supplies: highlighters, pens, pencils, etc., etc.—they must make a fortune off all this stuff.

my clothes, including Memmy's UCSD sweatshirt & the socks I knitted my dad.

my ash-caked Cons. PROOF.

here with me in the loony bin:

the borrowed clothes I wore to the Valentine's Day dance, ruined.

my St. Christopher's medal, which they will not let me have (do they think I'll try to strangle myself with it?).

my Tibetan prayer beads—wearing them down, but no prayers have been answered.

the red string Miles Winters wrapped around my wrist when he came to...to do
what? did he come to see how I was? or to make sure no one would listen to me?
Panda, Julie's little corgi stuffed animal—proof that I'm not alone.

with me always:

the ghost of Celia Reaves.

haunted by: a hundred years of fury.

listening to: the screams of dead girls, dying over and over again.

mood: is "possessed" a mood?

possessions: them

couture clothes, shoes, purses, all designed for them and featured in *Vogue* and *W* and
shown at Fashion Week. but it's not enough. it's never enough. it's like they have a
having disorder.

family jewels: the wristwatch Picasso gave Great-grandmama, in lieu of marrying her.
blood diamonds.

techie gear so advanced their fathers have to sign nondisclosure agreements to get them.
bringing sexting and character assassination to new lows.

everything they want, on demand, without a single moment's doubt that they're entitled.

has Mandy ever told them that ghosts are living inside them? do they shed them as
carelessly as their other possessions?

haunted by: have hauntings become déclassé? have they moved on to something more interesting...like serial murder?

listening to: they don't listen. they don't have to.

mood: they don't have to feel anything they don't want to. *Do I envy that? Or is that what insanity is?*

##

“Hey, sweetie,” Julie said, squeezing my hand. “Welcome back.”

I want to go home, I thought, wobbling and weepy. If I make a wish and tap my heels three times, all this will have been a dream. Three, two, one...

I opened my eyes.

And I saw...

“Oh, my God!” Julie shouted, jumping to her feet and leaping away from my hospital bed. Her chair slammed on its side and she tripped over one of the legs, slamming hard against the wall. “Lindsay, stop! Stop, it's all right!”

Tongues of orange flames whooshed up around the bed. Ebony smoke billowed toward the ceiling, fanning out and rolling across the light blue surface like rushing water. Searing heat slapped my face.

Flashes:

Dead blackbirds in the snow.

Splatters of blood.

Claw marks in the trees.

Shadows in the forest.

The lake house.

The Ouija board.

The white head.

The fog rising from Searle Lake, where the dead drifted, waiting for one of us to look into the water and see...

That horrible, horrible face, laughing at me, pushing me back against the bed, showing me the ice pick and the rubber mallet and whispering, "*Do as I say, and it'll be all over.*" His words were a whisper that echoed around the burning room, ricocheting and bouncing off Julie's sobbing and my screams. His *ssss*'s were hisses of steam, and everything I saw morphed into his bloodshot eyes and the gleaming tip of the ice pick. One jab, one thrust.

"Get him away!" I shrieked.

I wailed and shouted. I could hear myself, but I could also hear *him*, and I heard Julie whimpering. My focus snapped back and I saw her hugging herself as she pushed against the wall with her back, as if she couldn't get far enough away from me.

"Calm now, Lindsay, calm down *now*," Ms. Simonet ordered me. The middle-aged nurse sounded angry, scared, impatient. But of course I wasn't going to calm down when *he* was going to shove an ice pick into my eye socket, twitch it back and forth like a cat's tail, and split my brain apart. What sane person would?

He's not there, he's not, I told myself—but he *was*. Just because they couldn't see him didn't mean that he existed only in my imagination.

I knew better.

At Marlwood, the enraged dead possessed the living and made them do horrible, unspeakable things. Made them torment, and torture, and kill. Spirits, ghosts, whatever

you wanted to call them, *could* hurt you. He was really there, in the blazing infirmary; he wanted to shut me up. I knew the terrible secrets of Marlwood. I knew that dead girls roamed the halls and spied on us, and sent bothersome, nosy girls to drown in Lake Searle, or pushed them over the edge into insanity so no one would believe them, no one would—

“*He’s here!*” I shrieked, trying to push the nurse away. And that was when I realized they had tied me down. There were leather cuffs lined with felt around my wrists, attached to my bed.

They think I’m crazy.

They know I’m crazy.

“*Lindsay, I’m here too,*” said the ghost of Celia Reaves, the dead girl who had possessed me on my first day at Marlwood. I could hear her inside my head. Celia, who had died in the fire she had started in 1889. Celia was evil, and mad, and *oh, God*, had I hurt those birds and that cat? Had I pushed Kiyoko Yamato into the lake and watched her drown?

“*Let me calm you. Let me help you,*” said the madman no one else could see. He was Dr. Abernathy, the handsome young doctor who promised to take Celia away from all this and meant it, but not in the way she had believed. “*You will never suffer again.*”

So much fear, so helpless. I jerked my head; then I kicked my legs, realizing they hadn’t tied them down. I tried to raise my knees to my chest to push him away with the soles of my feet, but all he did was laugh.

And then he became the nurse, jabbing something into my arm. I felt Celia thrashing inside me. I couldn't tell if she was fighting the drug or fighting me. Did she want to burrow in deeper, or did she want to escape?

"No, please," I whispered as the nurse studied my face. My eyelids were drooping. She was taking my pulse. "Please, don't do this."

"There. Now you'll calm down." Her face was tight. I was pissing her off.

Julie was standing behind Ms. Simonet. With her cute new haircut, wheat-colored hair all chopped, my roommate looked like the a slightly more grown-up version of the sweet, shy girl who had glommed onto me when I showed up, roommates and instant best friends. Her hazel eyes were smudged with smoky makeup that was running down her face. She looked so worried, not at all like the Julie who had become possessed, her eyes completely black, shouting to the others to come and get me...

She didn't remember any of the horrible things that had happened. She had no idea that she'd been possessed...and had been set free.

I wasn't free.

Not yet.

The nurse said to Julie, "You'll have to leave."

"Please, let me stay for a few minutes," Julie murmured. She slipped her hand into mine.

I could barely keep my eyes open. I could see a blur of shadow as the nurse bent over me and opened each of my eyelids.

"She has pneumonia," Ms. Simonet said. "She needs her rest."

Maybe they're going to kick me out, I thought. Ironically, even though Marlwood was a death trap, getting booted would be the worst thing that could happen to me. Celia had made it very clear that she had unfinished business here, and I would never be free of her until she had gotten what she wanted.

But what she wanted was Mandy Winters dead.

“You have two minutes,” Ms. Simonet told Julie. I wondered why she couldn't stay longer. It *was* the middle of the night, but so what?

My roomie gave my hand a squeeze. I tried so hard to keep my eyes open, but everything was going very blurry. I wondered if Celia would be drugged too. Or if she walked when I was asleep; if that was when she made me do things that I couldn't remember when I woke up. If that was the case, I should be glad for getting tied down. Except, if the specter of Dr. Abernathy returned, I would be defenseless.

Julie cleared her throat and gently slid her hand away from mine. It was a little awkward; we hugged each other on occasion, but we weren't hand-holders, that was for sure.

“Are you, um, *okay*?” she asked. “Bad dream, huh?”

“Yeah. It's the fever,” I managed, but my tongue was too large for my mouth. My chest was too heavy to catch a breath. I felt as if someone were sitting on my chest, and I could hear deep breathing and a low, sadistic chuckle.

“You were out in that snowstorm for *hours*,” she said. “They were really worried about you.”

They still are, I wanted to tell her, but I couldn't make sound come out of my mouth. My hospital bed was spinning. The inside of my body was a cold block of ice—the sensation that came over me whenever Celia took charge.

“Maybe you'll get to go home,” she said in falsely cheerful voice. “You know, your friend back home, Heather? She's been texting you. I hope you don't mind that I looked at your phone. It kept vibrating and I thought maybe it was Troy.”

Drifting, drowsy, I wasn't sure I'd heard her right. Heather Martinez used to be my best friend back in San Diego. But that was before I proved my loyalty to the cool clique by publicly dissing her every chance I got. When I had gone home for Christmas, we tried to reconnect by going to a movie together. The hugeness of that blunder could not be overestimated.

Riley, my hot, sexy, lying creep jerk ex-crush, had shown up at the theater too, and there we were, the three of us, watching a Christmas horror movie like back in the old days—except that Heather had never been present at any function when Riley and I had been a couple. That night was like two different versions of my past colliding, none of it working because I was already on the verge of losing it and being there was stressful in the extreme.

“Linz?” Julie said. I tried to open my eyes. “She just texted again. She said she has to talk to you about Riley. Not in so many words, of course. Because it's texting.”

“Lemme see,” I whispered, but I wasn't even sure I said the words aloud. My heartbeat was slowing because of the drugs, but in reality, it wanted to pump into overdrive. It was like being artificially possessed, aware that I wasn't all there and

something else was taking me over. Not ghosts, in this case, but “modern” medicine. At least it was temporary; lobotomies were forever.

“Here. Look.”

More shadows shifted; I was pretty sure Julie was holding the cell phone close to my face. Her head was a white blob, and behind it, darker shapes floated through the room. Something crept along the wall, sneaking a look at me now and then. Light glinted.

The ice pick.

“She left you a voice message. Do you want me to play it?”

I couldn’t speak, couldn’t utter a sound.

Don’t leave me, I wanted to beg her. I’m so afraid I won’t wake up.

“I’ll put it in your hand,” Julie said. “And maybe I can loosen these things.” She began to fumble with my restraints.

If she untied me, I could fight *him* off. But if Celia wanted to roam, I wouldn’t be able to stop her.

I felt the coldness moving inside me, almost as if Celia were waking up too. I hated the feeling. Hated her. She was evil, insane, and she was using me.

“You have to go now, Julie,” Ms. Simonet said.

Julie’s hand jerked, and the phone slipped from my rubbery grasp. I groaned. Something soft and fuzzy moved against my forearm.

“Here’s Panda,” Julie said. “Remember that I brought him for you?”

Julie had gotten the stuffed animal for Christmas. It was so sweetly sad to me that she was still excited about little toy dogs.

Christmas. Christmas was when Celia's white face had appeared in my swimming pool, and she had told me I had to come back here, to Marlwood, or I would never be free of her. That if I stayed safely in San Diego, my friends would die, one by one—as payback, revenge. It seemed so long ago.

It seemed like it had happened to someone else.

I was so drugged out and freaked out that I didn't feel like anyone at all. I was floating in an endless sea of identities or souls or loose, unbound emotions, and none of them were mine.

"Julie, it's time." The nurse's voice was gentler. She *liked* Julie. My roommate was like the baby of the Marlwood family, agreeable and cute. I'd always thought nice girls got stomped on, but Julie's charm...*charmed* people. That was a kind of power that sarcastic chicks with wild hair and bad clothes were denied.

"Okay, sorry. Sweet dreams, Linz." I smelled Juicy Couture as she leaned over me, maybe debating about kissing me good night. I was going so numb that I didn't think I'd be able to feel it if she did.

I heard footsteps. Julie murmured, "Does she have to sleep tied up like that?"

Ms. Simonet replied, but I didn't hear what she said. I assumed the answer must have been yes, because no one came to free me.

Then the door to the clinic opened and I heard the wind. I didn't want Julie to go out in the cold. I wanted her safe, always.

But who could ever be safe, here at Marlwood?

I continued drifting on icy currents, wondering if I would ever be warm again. There was truth to the saying, *Cold as the grave*. Ironic, that someone who had burned to death could chill me to the bone.

Something vibrated against my side, and I started. I was so out of it that at first I couldn't figure out what it was. Then I realized it was my new phone. My old one was rusting at the bottom of Searle Lake, where I myself had nearly wound up. I had a new number, and not that many people had it. I could count them on one hand.

Was it Heather? Why was she calling me all of a sudden? Had something happened to her or my family?

No more, I begged the universe.

"Yes, Dr. Ehrlenbach, she's been sedated," Ms. Simonet was saying, and I grunted, startled by the sound of another human voice. Had my scary headmistress arrived to check on me? "Yes, have a good trip."

She's leaving? Abandoning us?

The room went silent again. Ms. Simonet must have been talking on the phone to Dr. "Ehrlenfreak," as we called her. I envied my headmistress; she could get out of here. Then I thought of everything hanging on her shoulders—Kiyoko's death and the school's reputation. The wealthy parents *had* to be asking if Marlwood Academy was safe enough for their blue-blooded children. For them, Marlwood had been one choice among many when it came to posh boarding schools that cost around fifty thousand dollars a year. For me, a scholarship student given late entry from the wait list, it had been my only escape.

I screwed up again, I thought, tears sliding across my temples. I had a breakdown in San Diego, sure, but here, away from civilization...I tried to kill my boyfriend with a hammer.

Only, Troy wasn't my boyfriend. And when I had tried to kill him, I had thought he'd been possessed...

...by the ghost who, at that very moment, might be creeping around my room in the infirmary. Out of body, not in someone's else, like Celia was in mine. I sensed frosty shadows moving against the wall, then dripping down onto the floor and sliding toward my bed. I had dreams of someone crawling over me, pinning me where I lay. Dreams both waking and dreaming .

"Count backward from ten to one," whispered the ghost of Dr. Abernathy, *"and I'll make it all better. You will never, ever be afraid again."*

I shook with fear as he floated closer. I was alone in the bed, unable to call for help.

"I'll make it all better," he said again. *"I'll make it stop."*

And in my hazy desperation, I was tempted to obey.

"Ten," he prompted.

Nine, I thought.

And then I heard Celia screaming.