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BLUE

By Julie Cassar



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“Ruby Blue”

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Book One of the Ruby Blue Series

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Chapter 1

I slowly opened my eyes and found myself staring up at the angled ceiling of my upstairs bedroom and let out a relaxed, lazy sigh as I stretched my arms over my head. I turned to look out the window and saw the clear blue skies peeking through the tops of the trees that were visible from my second story window. Sunny skies this morning. The garden out back would be full of life today. Magical things can happen in a garden. Or a forest...Or really anywhere that's green and lush. Trust me. I know. How do I know this? Because I've experienced it firsthand. My name is Ruby Blue. No, I'm not a rock star. Although it sounds like I should be, huh? It's a good stage name I think...I should learn how to play the guitar or something. Sadly, I'm just a regular 17-year-old girl, living in a regular little Midwest town in northern Michigan, going about my regular life. My mother is obsessed with the *Wizard of Oz*, and everything and anything that has to do with the *Wizard of Oz*, i.e. rubber slippers...hence, my name, Ruby. My last name is Blue, so, there you have it. I'm just glad they didn't get too cheeky and think it'd be cute to name me Aqua or Turquoise, like my dad wanted. Ugh. That would've been pure torture. Could you imagine? Aqua Blue. Yuck. The teasing would have never ended. Who would name their kid Aqua? It's not even a real name! Anyhow, I think I got off easy with Ruby.

I've got straight, shoulder-length dishwater blonde hair (that's what my mother calls it anyway), greyish-blue eyes, and I'm a slight 5'5". But, I'm stronger than I look. Really, I am. I'm a jeans and t-shirt kind of girl all the way. No dresses for me. Yuck. No thank you. My little brother, Leo, is fifteen and usually a pain in my ass. And no, Leo's name isn't short for anything. My mother's obsessed with the *Wizard of Oz*, remember? Leo, (for the Cowardly Lion – duh) seemed a heck of a lot better than the tin man or scarecrow. Knowing my dad, he could've gotten stuck with Cerulean Blue for Pete's sake! So me, my pain-in-the-ass little brother and my parents live in this tiny little bungalow in a small town in northern Michigan named Lake City.

I don't even know why they call it a city. It's sooo not a city. Shoot, it's not even a town. It's a street. With a few businesses on it, a flea market, a school, a few neighborhoods scattered throughout and some Christmas tree farms. Yes, we are known for Christmas trees. In fact, we are considered to be the "Christmas Tree Capital." How about that? Super exciting, isn't it? (Not.) But we also are surrounded by beautiful lakes. Three huge inland lakes, to be specific, less than one mile apart from each other...that's where I think we really get the name from. It's not a city in the typical sense...it's a city of lakes. Beautiful, crystal clear, freshwater lakes. And if you're not about three minutes from a lake, you're walking through a forest of trees...Birch, White Pine, Old Oak, Maple – you name it, we've got it. So I'm a regular girl, who lives in this rinky-dink city of lakes that twist through forests of trees, with my pain-in-the-ass little brother, and oh yeah...I can see fairies.

You probably don't believe me. That's okay. I wouldn't believe me either. But trust me, I really do see fairies. I have been able to since I was about five years old. The fairies I've seen told me I have been enchanted with the gift of Fairy Sight. My mother loves to garden and she'd always drag me outside to "get some fresh air" as she liked to say and she'd make me pull weeds. Who does that? Makes a five-year-old pull weeds? But, my mother loved (and still loves) her gardens. You see, we live on about an acre of land which backs up to a huge forest. At the back of the property, twisting through the woods is a well-worn dirt path that leads right to a huge lake – Lake Missaukee. Although

the trees block most of the view of the lake from the back of the house, I can see it from my bedroom window upstairs. I'm the only one who sleeps upstairs though. My parent's and Leo's rooms are on the main floor. I have this long room with really angled ceilings. Down the hall from me is also a bathroom and tiny guest room (but it's mostly used as a junk room.) I think my parents stuck me up there so they wouldn't have to listen to my "crazy, loud music" as they called it. They told Leo he could have the tiny guest room, but it's really small and he's way too lazy to haul all his crap up there.

Anyhow, as I was saying, my mother loves her flowers. She's always saying how she loves to "play in the mud." But I kind of get what she means, because I do too. That probably makes me weird. What 17-year-old likes to garden? One who's a dork. That's what kind. Oh well. So I like flowers? Big deal. In fact, my mother is going to be getting some new flowers from my Aunt that I'm going to help her transplant soon...see? Dorky. There was one such occasion, when I was helping my mom in the garden, that I had my first experience with a fairy. It was about twelve years ago and I was out crawling around in one of my mother's many gardens, helping her pull weeds, when I saw *her*.

She was tiny...so small I might have missed her. But the quick movement and soft, glittery glow caught my eyes. I was amazed. Heck, I was only five. What five-year-old wouldn't be drawn to sparkling, dancing magical creatures? Her golden glow and coppery wings sparkled against the green leaves of the plants. She looked up at me, put her finger to her mouth, as if to say, "Shhh," and then winked at me. I giggled. She flitted around and danced in my palm. Her wings tickled. She was dressed in a yellow translucent gown, and she had long, jet black hair the color of onyx that glistened in the sun. Have you ever seen black hair glisten? When the sun hits it just right, it's like strands of black jewels sparkling against flowing black silk. Thinking of it now, the style kind of reminds me of those old Hollywood movie stars, with sort of natural swoopy, swishy curls, just barely curling up at the ends where it bounced on her shoulders. Her skin was fair and her eyes were like ice-blue diamonds, dancing with pure joy. She told me her name was Anya.

And so began my friendship with fairies.

I didn't see them everywhere. Mostly just in the garden. Or the forest. (That's where the fairies like to play.) I saw lots of fairies, but Anya and I grew close over the years. She was a young fairy...only a year older than I was, and she liked to play with me. Anya also had a younger brother. Brennan. He was just a year younger than her, so he was my age exactly. Brennan looked a lot like his sister... clear fair skin, sparkling pale-blue eyes, and jet black hair. Only he had no movie star hairstyle. It seemed to stick up in every direction, crazy as could be. And he liked to bug the crap out of us, just like my brother, Leo, did. So now I had two pains in my ass...My brother, Leo, and Anya's brother, Brennan. Ugh. How did I get so lucky?

And let me tell you something else about fairies. They aren't so tiny and fragile all the time. In fact, as I soon found out, they can appear to be the same size as humans. They can even walk among us, look just like us and go completely unnoticed as fairies. They lose the wings and most of the glowing sparkle...but it's still there, if you look hard enough and pay close enough attention. Have you ever seen someone just smiling and seeming to be radiating a glow? Maybe you've seen them in the grocery store, or in the park? It's probably a fairy. You see, fairies can live in both worlds – ours and theirs, which they call "Fey." But when they are small, like when they're at the bottom of the garden, they continually draw from the energy of the plants and earth. It's like nourishment for their bodies and souls. Also, and just as important, they are still connected to their world. They can hear, see and even communicate with all of the other fairies in Fey. When they are human-sized and full grown, come into our world, they are disconnected – on vacation without their cell phone so to speak. The

can sense when they're needed (after all, they do have that bit of fairy magic) but otherwise, they are cut off from their world. Most importantly, the longer they walk among us, the weaker they become. They don't like it for long periods of time, but they do love to interact with humans. They enjoy playing with our sense of wonder and find our culture both unusual and stimulating. They are fascinated at how much faster humans age, and the speed at which we live our lives. They like the change of scenery, the fast pace and the modern inventions of the human world. Our technology mesmerizes them. Fey is a very old and very traditional realm where magic and simplicity are a part of their every-day life. They don't drive around in cars or fly in airplanes. (They have their own wings, duh.) And they don't have gadgets and gizmos like we do. Don't even get me started on what they think of our food. Fast food and junk food simply enchants them! The first time Anya tried a bite of my candy bar, I thought she would tackle me and take me down like a line backer to get the rest of it out of my hand! Many fairies see the human world as vacation from their own world. But, as I said, the longer they are here, the weaker they become.

Anya and Brennan seem to be the exception. They'll often stay for days before feeling weak, needing to recharge themselves either in the garden or in their own world of Fey. I don't really know why that is. I've seen and talked to other fairies before, and they usually can't stand being in our world more than a few days without at least some recharging time in the garden. But Anya and Brennan have gone at least a week without returning to Fey or to the garden. I've asked Anya about that and she kindly brushed me off and said, "Well, not all humans are the same, are they? Fairies are all different to some of us are stronger than others." She didn't elaborate any further, but it made sense to me, so I let it drop.

I also asked Anya if everything is small in Fey, since when I saw her as her tiny fairy self in the garden, I imagined that everything in their world must be small too. "We must be like giants!" she exclaimed to her. She merely shook her head and giggled. "Actually, we're the same size as you are in Fey, except we have wings." I was surprised by that. "Why do you get small in the garden and forest then?" I asked. "Picture an hourglass," she said, "You know, the kind with sand in it and it's wider at the top and bottom, and really narrow in the middle?" I nodded my head. She went on to explain that each end of the hourglass was like our two worlds, Fey on one side, the human one on the other, but both existing in the same space. The small, little narrow part in the middle was the doorway between the two worlds, so in order to cross over, the fairies had to fit through that little opening; they had to become small to pass through. They would come through the earth, with the garden base and forest grounds as that center of the hourglass. The fairies could flutter there endlessly, enjoying the flowers of the earth, and energy from our world, while still staying connected to theirs. Once they pass completely through to our side of the hourglass, they emerge as their normal-sized selves, minus the wings. "I wish I could do that." I mumbled in disappointment to her.

"Well, we've got fairy magic on our side," she replied. "Maybe one day..." she told me.

The first time I saw Anya as her true size, I just about fell down. I was six years old, she was seven. One minute, I was giggling with her while I was kneeling in the dirt, and the next minute, there was a kind of mist that arose from the ground, swirling quickly, gradually taking on the transparent form of her, until finally, she was solid and whole. It sounded like when you unscrew a cap on a soda-pop bottle after you shake it up, and the bubbles are all trying to escape. You know that bubbly, effervescent fizzing sound? That's what it sounds like when a fairy is crossing completely over to our world. Anya simply looked down at me, while my mouth hung open in surprise, and started giggling again. Then she took off running through the yard yelling, "Tag! You're it!" I quickly scampered on my feet to ensue the chase.

Now, I don't freak out when Anya or her brother soda-pop fizz appear to me. Shoot, it's been 1 years since I first met them...it better not freak me out any more. There are other fairies who do it to but I don't really know too many of them. Mostly, they stay small and flutter around the lush ground. They like to stay connected to their world. Not many fairies (that I've met) are as brave as Anya and her brother. Of course, I never go anywhere. And Anya tells me that fairies live all over the world...I believe her. One thing I learned early on about fairies... they can't tell lies...not even if they want to. It's against their fairy code or something. They can withhold telling you something, skirt around a topic or not reveal all of the facts, but they can't *actually* tell a lie.

So, there you have it. I see fairies. And one of my best friends happens to be one. You're probably wondering if everyone thinks I'm crazy because I see fairies. Actually, nobody knows. Not my parents, not even my pain-in-the-ass brother. Oh sure, they know Anya and Brennan...but they've only ever seen them when they look like us. They think they live across town. I didn't actually introduce them to my family until about four years ago. But both Anya and Brennan thought it would be better to pass them off as part-timers... you know...kids who came up to vacation in town, spend weekends at the family cottage, that kind of thing. Our little neck of the woods is a popular destination for campers and cottage dwellers. It's usually crazy- busy over the summer, with tourists coming from all over the state. Anya and Brennan live in a cottage on the lake that's owned by their family. It is gorgeous. How they can afford such beautiful cottage, I don't know. I don't ask either. They even have other fairies that come over from time to time (disguised as humans of course) to take care of the house, keep it stocked with groceries and maintain the lawn and gardens. I've never met their parents...they never seem to be around. Anya said they are pretty busy in Fey with their work and can't go away too often. But they're always in constant contact with Anya and Brennan. All they have to do is head to the garden or forest, shrink down and zing! They've got their "cell phone" signal. They can see and hear them instantly. Plus, with a little fairy magic, they can sense when their parents need them at home. Even though their parents never seem to be at the cottage, they have spoken to me and to my parents a few times on the phone...to keep up appearances I suppose. They must be pretty cool people if they let their fairy kids have their own house to escape to whenever they're bored, in a whole other world even! My mother freaks if I tell her I'm riding my bike to the local Dairy Queen. "Look both ways before you cross the street. Remember to walk your bike through the intersection." Blah, blah, blah...she reminds me every single time. Duh, mom. I'm 17. I think I can handle it.

You might be wondering why I don't have car. I am 17 after all. Well, I'm working on that. I've got a job at the craft and hobby store in town and I'm saving every penny I can to buy one. (Okay, maybe not every penny...but a lot!) Geesh, a girl needs her ice cream, nail polish and new Chukka Taylor Converse shoes every once in a while! Yes, I absolutely love those retro lace-up Converse basketball shoes. You know, like they wore in the fifties? I have them in almost every color imaginable. They match everything and they are uber-comfortable. And I can't imagine I'd have to explain the importance of nail polish (in every shade imaginable) or ice cream. I'm addicted to ice cream. Chocolate is my go-to flavor, but any kind will do. Except coffee. I hate coffee-flavored ice cream. And lemon. Yuck. It reminds me of Lemon Pledge...like I'm eating furniture wax. Gross.

But as I was saying, other than the occasional pair of tennis shoes, my weekly ice cream treat (okay, maybe daily ice cream treat) and a bottle of polish every so often, every other penny I earn goes socked away for a new sweet ride. It'll probably be an old sweet ride, but a sweet ride nonetheless. And the best part is it won't require me to get off of it and push it through an intersection, or pump up the tires with my dad's old air pump.

See? I told you I'm a regular girl. Who just happens to see fairies. Deal with it.

Chapter 2

It's the beginning of summer vacation and I just finished my junior year of high school. I am sooooo looking forward to spending long days at the lake (when I'm not working) or reading a book in the garden (when I'm not working) or hiking through the woods with Jeremy (when I'm not working). Wait. Have I told you about Jeremy yet? Jeremy is my best friend. Next to Anya that is. Jeremy is about six feet tall, kind of skinny for a guy, also with jet black hair (which I'm pretty sure he dyed because it used to be brown.) Jeremy wears all black. All the time. Black jeans, black t-shirts, black Chuck Taylors.... Black, black, black. He didn't always though. The all-black-I'm-going-to-a-funeral-kind of punk-thing started only about a year-and-a-half-ago. I don't really know why. I think he's just doing his teen rebellion thing. You know, trying to be different, push some buttons, grab some attention, that sort of thing. Jeremy and I have gone to school together since we were five years old. He was even my first boyfriend....when we were five. Because, ahem. Jeremy isn't really into girls anymore. At least not in *that* way, if you catch my drift. Not many people know that Jeremy prefers boys to girls though. Just his mom and me. Oh yeah, and Anya and Brennan. Yeah – he knows them too. But he doesn't know they're fairies. In fact, I think he kind of has a crush on Brennan. Even though, as far as I can tell, Brennan doesn't roll that way. I know, I know, I should tell my best friend this super-huge thing about myself – that I can see fairies – but I just can't. Once I realized everyone thought I had “imaginary friends” when I was little, I just figured it was easier to keep quiet about my little knack for seeing the magical creatures. Plus, after I met Anya and Brennan they made me promise not to tell anyone about their true identities. Anyhow, Jeremy and I always spend most of the summer together. Even though his fashion sense has gone berserk-o, he's still one of my best friends.

I was looking forward to a summer with Anya and Jeremy...and probably Leo and Brennan too...those pains in my ass!

The first Saturday of summer break and the clear blue sunny skies definitely put me in a good mood as I rolled out of bed a little after 10:30 in the morning. The other thing that put me in a good mood was the fact that I didn't have to work today. Yaho o! As I slowly made my way down the hardwood stairs in my bare feet, red t-shirt and plaid boxer shorts, I was greeted by the sound of the vacuum cleaner. I saw my mother balanced precariously on a chair, leaning over the side of the vacuuming the curtains hanging on the window. Her hair was tied back in a navy blue scarf and she had denim cutoffs on. She was barefoot too. My dad always asked us why we never seemed to have shoes on (unless I was wearing my favorite tennis shoes) and Mom would always answer, “We like to feel the earth under our feet.” I would just shrug. Eh. It's more comfortable, I always thought. Plus, I was too lazy to put my shoes on when I was around the house.

“Oh good! It's about time you're up,” my mother exclaimed as she twisted around to greet me. “You've got chores young lady.”

I rolled my eyes and held my hand to my mouth as I let out a yawn. “Geesh, Ma, gimme a break. I woke up like two minutes ago. I need my chocolate cereal first.” I walked through the living room into the kitchen and grabbed a bowl of my favorite cereal. My dad was at the kitchen table, with greasy car parts spread all over newspapers, tinkering away. I don't know what the heck he was doing. I don't think he did either. But, he loved working on broken down cars. Hey, at least when I saved enough to buy a junker for myself, I knew my dad could keep it running for me. Well, probably I

could. Maybe.

I shoved some of the newspaper to the side and sat down to eat. "So Rubes, what's on your agenda for today?" my dad asked while not taking his eyes off whatever part he was cleaning with his greasy, white rag.

"Uhhh. Not much of an agenda Dad. I'm a teenager, remember? It's Saturday," I answered while I shoveled in another mouthful of chocolate puff cereal.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," he replied, as he glanced over the top of his reading glasses at me. Ugh. I shook my head. Just then, the phone rang. I jumped up from the table and grabbed the yellow phone from the wall. When in the world were my parents going to move into this century and get a cordless phone?

"Lo?" I managed to get out as I swallowed a mouthful of cereal.

"Oh good! You're up! What's up, Buttercup?" the all-too chipper voice replied.

"Hey Jeremy. Whaddya mean what's up? I just woke up. Nothin's up. Not since last night when I talked to you," I crabbily answered. Duh. I have no patience in the morning.

"You wanna hang today?" he said, ignoring my snarky attitude.

"Yeah, but I gotta do my chores first," I announced loudly as I glanced over at my dad who was still polishing whatever part he had in his hand.

"Kay. Meet me at the lake 'round noon. If you talk to Anya or Brennan, tell them too."

"Sure thing," I replied.

Click. He hung up. I hung up the phone and shuffled back over to my bowl of cereal as I tried to rub the sleep out of my eyes.

"Jeremy?" my dad asked.

"Yep. We're gonna meet at the lake later, 'kay?"

"As long as your chores are done," he said, still tinkering away.

"Yeah, yeah..." I grumbled. Did he not hear what I just said to Jeremy on the phone? I was standing three feet away from him. Sometimes, I don't think parents pay very much attention to their kids. I finished up my cereal and put my bowl and spoon in the dishwasher. Then I reached under the sink and grabbed the stuff to dust the furniture and clean the upstairs bathroom (my lovely weekend chores).

As I walked past my mother again (this time she was vacuuming the sofa), she called out "Wake up your brother too, the trash cans aren't going to empty themselves!" She was dancing around humming the theme song to the "*The Wiz*," while she was sucking up crumbs from under the couch cushions.

I passed my brother's room in the hallway on the way to the stair case; I set down my cleaning supplies and pounded on his door with both fists as hard as I could. "Rise and shine CLEOpatra!" (Heh...I loved calling my brother all kinds of girly names. He absolutely hated it.)

I heard my brother grunt and then...THUD! I heard him roll off his bed and onto his hardwood

floor. He shouted, "DAMMIT RUBY! You made me fall outta bed!" I snickered and started to sk away from his door, "Ooohhhh! You're gonna get it! Mom heard you swear!" I laughed. He can thundering out of his room, hair all disheveled, and chased me down the hallway. I scurried up th stairs, using my hands as leverage on the steps as he grabbed at my ankles. "MOMMMM! Leo grabbing me!" I squealed. "I AM NOT!" He retorted, while still struggling to hang on to my left fo as I kicked him in the face with my right. He turned his face and exclaimed, "Geesh Ruby! Do yo ever wash your feet!?"

"Shut up. Mom told me to wake you up. You have chores Dragonbreath." Ugh. Little brothe are so immature. My mother finally turned off the vacuum and came down the hall to investigate th ruckus we were causing. Leo instantly let me go and I scrambled up the stairs.

"Hey Ma. 'Sup?" my brother casually nodded as he flicked his shaggy, sandy blonde hair out o his eyes and leaned against the staircase railing. My mother, not a stupid woman, knew we were up o our typical sister-brother shenanigans and sternly scolded, "Get to work, Leo."

I finally finished my chores around 11:30 a.m. Just as I was reaching into my dresser to put o my swimsuit to go to the lake, I heard the familiar soda-pop fizzing sound behind me. I turned with a smile. There, suddenly standing in my room were Anya and Brennan. I don't know how they cou keep doing that, coming up out of thin air (well, swirling misty air) and never get caught. Since I introduced them to my family and Jeremy four years ago, they've never accidentally appeared in fro of them. Boy. That would be a shocker – huh? Anya said it has something to do with their magic an how they can sense if I'm alone or whatever. I have no idea. It's really over my head, so I don't try t overanalyze it.

"I'm glad you guys popped in," I said, "Jeremy wants to hang out at the lake today."

"Yeah, cool," answered Brennan. Anya added, "We just have to pop over to our house and g our suits." Anya looked simply radiant, standing there in silver flip flops, white shorts, a bright yellow tank top and her shimmery beautiful black hair curled up just right. Brennan looked...eh. He look like Brennan always looked. Kind of sloppy. He had on khaki cargo shorts, a faded blue t-shirt, and h dark hair was sticking up in every direction. He was about five or six inches taller than me and suppose he had a decent build compared to some of the boys I knew, although I've never really give it much thought. He's usually annoying me so much that I can't get past the pain-in-the-ass part o him. Oh, and he was barefoot. I knew why I was barefoot; I was standing in my own house. But wh the hell was he? Even I put shoes on when I go places.

"Do you ever wear shoes?" I shook my head at Brennan. He looked down; seemingly unawa that he wasn't wearing any. "Huh. Guess I forgot. No biggie. We've got to go back to the cottag anyway, right, Anya?" Anya nodded.

"Kay, hurry up then. I told Jeremy we'd meet him at the lake. Usual spot." I said. "Now get ou I gotta change." I shoved at Brennan's shoulders and started to shoo them away. Suddenly, I wa pushing at nothing and a huge "POP!" startled me still. Although they usually don't surprise me wh they arrive, they almost always scare the crap out of me when they leave. You see, when fairi "disappear" it isn't a slow fizzle, like when they appear. It's a quick POP, like a cork popping out of champagne bottle. And then they're gone. Just that fast. I quickly put on my red tank swim suit, pull on my jean cutoffs and slipped on my white (well, kind of grey now) Converse. I went to the line closet in the hallway, grabbed a beach towel and draped it around my neck. I hurried down the stai and headed for the back door.

“Hey! Where ya goin’ Scooby?” my brother yelled from the kitchen. Nice. Ever since my brother realized that the cartoon dog’s name rhymed with mine, he’s called me it ever since. “None of your freakin’ business Cleopatra!” I hollered back as the screen door slammed shut behind me.

I walked through the gardens in the back yard and headed down the well-worn dirt path carved through the woods at the back of our property that lead directly to the lake. I enjoyed looking at the flowers blooming while I strolled towards the water. Scattered along the path were the white trilliums and little baby-blue bunches of goodness called forget-me-nots, and I even saw some of the treasure morel mushrooms that tourists came looking for. The birds and bees seemed busy today too. I noticed a couple of bright blue and crimson red dragon flies zipping around. Those were always fun to see. I spotted a few fluttering fairies and smiled as they gave me a wink. It seemed like everyone was enjoying this beautiful, summer day. It was only a three or four minute walk, so I knew I’d be early. As I got closer to the beach, I could hear the familiar sounds of seagulls squawking overhead. I emerged from the wooded path and walked down the grassy embankment that led to the beach. It seemed pretty deserted to me, which was weird because it was a Saturday. I suppose it’s still early in the season though. Not too many people were on their vacations – most of other schools weren’t open for the summer yet. I liked it when I had the beach to myself. It’s such a serene place, with the white sandy beach, the dark, blue-green water and sounds of the seagulls overhead. The best part was that there was no saltiness in the air. You only get that if you go to the ocean. But Michigan is surrounded by the five great lakes, all freshwater. It smells....clean. Like fresh, cool water coming from a garden hose. The lake behind our property wasn’t anywhere near as huge as Lake Michigan, but it’s still pretty big. I love that I can swallow water and not gag on the salty grossness, or take a swim with a huge wicked cut on my foot (which happens often since I’m always bare foot, let me tell you), and not have it sting to high heaven. The best part was that my hair and skin never felt dried out from the water.

I slipped off my shoes and carried them in my hand as I walked barefoot through the sand towards our usual spot on the beach. There was an abandoned lifeguard tower (there’s never an lifeguard there) and a huge, old fallen tree in the sand next to it.

I laid out my towel, threw my shoes on it, and sat down on the driftwood log. I propped my elbows on my knees and just stared at the calm water lapping in on the beach. That’s when I saw it.

I wasn’t sure that I saw anything at all at first. But then I saw it again.

Chapter 3

It was out towards the middle of the lake where I saw it. A large, dark hump surfaced above the water, then disappeared again. At first, I didn't think anything of it. Probably a piece of trash, or a loose buoy, I thought. Then I saw it again. Only this time, the large hump seemed to surface for a little longer and glide along the surface for a few feet before submerging again. I squinted and put my hand up to shield my eyes from the bright sun, hoping to catch a better glimpse of the dark, moving mass out in the lake. What the hell was it? Last I heard, the Loch Ness monster was somewhere in Scotland, not hidden in some lake in northern Michigan. I stared intently at the water, searching for any sign of it again. I had heard the urban legends that Lake Erie had a lake monster. I think they called it Bessie. Maybe old Bessie decided to take a summer vacation and visit our little neck of the woods?

Jeremy's voice startled me out of my revelry, "HEY! Whatcha lookin' at?" he called out as he came jogging up to meet me at our driftwood on the beach. He was wearing a black swimsuit (big surprise) and a ratty, old Ramones t-shirt. Kickin' it old school I guess. I dropped my hands and shrugged, "Nothin' I guess. I thought I saw something out in the water, but it's gone now. Probably just a loose buoy or some tourist's trash thrown from their boat." They tend to do that. The weekenders come up, speed around the lake half-drunk all day, then they throw their bags of trash and bottles over the side of their boat instead of lugging it back to shore with them. It's so annoying.

"Losers." Jeremy shook his head.

"Who are losers?" Brennan asked as he and Anya suddenly walked up behind Jeremy, surprising him. He spun around to greet them as he exclaimed, "Hey guys! I didn't see you there!" I covered my snicker with a cough. Jeremy didn't see them because they *weren't* there about three seconds ago. He hadn't noticed their soda-pop fizz appearance behind him. Brennan had on blue board shorts, just a few shades darker than his ice-blue eyes, with his faded blue t-shirt that he had on earlier, and Anya had on a bright yellow swimsuit with a long white sundress over the top of it. I've got to say the girl did like wearing yellow.

"Oh, nobody," I answered. "Just the boof-nut losers who dump their trash in the lake." Anya crinkled up her nose in disgust. "People are just so inconsiderate sometimes," she said with annoyance. I nodded my head in agreement, but couldn't shake the fact that I didn't really think it was someone's trash. It seemed too organic and fluid in its movement. It didn't just bob up and down, like a buoy or a bag of trash would. I looked out to the water again. Well, whatever it was, it didn't make another appearance.

"Cool board shorts," Jeremy said, eyeing Brennan up and down, "They are *shagtastic!*"

I rolled my eyes.

"Thanks," Brennan answered while he pulled his t-shirt off over his head. "Who's going to swim? Last one to the water has to smell Ruby's feet for two minutes!" He was laughing and running backwards towards the water. "SHUT UP!" I retorted, "You've been hanging around Leo too much!" I stripped off my cutoffs while I took off towards the waves. I swear he was just as immature as my brother. Jeremy and Anya followed, with Jeremy being the last one into the surf because he was complaining it was too cold. He kept hopping around in ankle deep water, complaining, "Come on"

guys! How c-c-can you just run in like that?! This s-s-stupid water is f-f-freezing!”

After about an hour-and-a-half of Brennan trying to dunk Anya, myself and Jeremy and swimming around, one by one we dragged ourselves back up the beach to our towels, looking like a bunch of drowned rats.

I plopped down on my towel as Anya gracefully knelt down onto hers. “I am famished!” she declared. “We need to get something to eat before I faint.” Anya always spoke like she was ten years older than us. She had her share of giggles and fun, but she was much more reserved than most 17-year-old girls I knew. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear she was a southern belle debutant, schooled in etiquette. But, really, she was just wise beyond her years. Most fairies I met seemed to be very proper. Except maybe Brennan, that is. Sometimes he spoke like he was from another time, but usually he was just a pain in the ass. I nodded in agreement as I began to lift the sides of my towel to pat myself dry wherever I could reach. Just then, the boys came running up from the water’s edge, kicking up sand on us. “Hey!” I yelled. “Quit that! We’re trying to dry off here.”

“Oh yeah?” Brennan sneered and then began to shake his head back and forth like a dog spraying us with the cold wet droplets from his hair. “Ugh! Brennan!” I screamed. Anya added, “Really, Brennan. Grow up. You’re 17, not 12.” Jeremy grabbed up his towel and draped it around his shoulders, shivering while he stood in the sand and whined, “I’m cold again. And hungry. Where are we gonna eat?” Brennan stood there laughing; his arms folded across his chest, dripping like a wet dog, his hair sticking out in every direction again. Just then, I noticed a group of guys messing around and walking up the beach towards us. I scanned the group quickly, and my eyes stopped when I saw *him*.

Nick Martino. He was almost six feet of pure hotness. About 5’10”, already golden tanned, broad shoulders and muscles that no boy our age should have yet, with emerald green eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair, he looked like he belonged on the beaches of California, not northern Michigan. Nick’s parents owned the pizza place in town. Every time I was near Nick, my heart started beating like crazy and I seemed to lose all ability to speak. Oh sure, I’d dated a few other guys before, but most of them turned out to be losers. Like Brad Gordon, for example, who I dated when I was in tenth grade. What a douche bag. After three dates and a few make-out sessions, he thought his old tent house, a sleeping bag, flashlight and a condom was a romantic and appropriate fourth date. Ugh. Like I said, douche bag. But nobody made me feel like Nick Martino did. Sigh. He was just gorgeous. And he made my insides feel all twisted up and nervous and jittery. Anya leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Is that him?” I nodded my head, not taking my eyes off Nick as he walked towards us. I watched as he tucked his golden locks behind his ears and sauntered up to us in his orange and white board shorts. Oh yum. He was just too beautiful.

“Hey Ruby,” he casually said, throwing me one of his trademark smiles. I cleared my throat, looking up from my sitting position on the towel and held my hand up to block the sun as I squinted up at him and answered, “Hi Nick!” Oh my gosh. He has to be able to hear that thudding in my chest. Anya knelt next to me, smiling brightly and exuding warmth. Jeremy just stood there drooling over Nick, looking him up and down, while Brennan stood strong with his legs apart, arms still crossed over his chest and raised up his chin in acknowledgment.

“Hey.” Nick said, as he too raised his chin and looked past Jeremy and over at Brennan. Must be a cool-tough-guy greeting: the quick chin-raise acknowledgement. As if they couldn’t be bothered to lift any other part of their body but their chins. Nick looked back down at me and continued, “S

Ruby, you wanna come up for pizza tonight? I'm workin', but I get my dinner break at seven."

I almost peed on my beach towel. Oh. My. Gosh. Did Nick Martino just ask me out? I sat there dumbly looking up at him like a four-year-old seeing Santa Claus for the first time. I swear, if I was a cartoon character stars would be shooting out of my eyes. Anya quickly answered for me, "Of course she'll meet you!" I smiled, and nodded in agreement as I tried to swallow the huge lump that seemed to be stuck in my throat.

"Cool." Nick flashed a smile again. "See ya later." Then, he turned and walked off with his buddies, as they started jumping on each other and pushing each other into the water.

"Ohmygosh!" I said, sitting there staring blankly out at the water. I looked over at Anya, "Did Nick Martino just ask me out? I mean, really, really, ask me out?"

"I'm pretty sure he did," she smiled. I shook my head in disbelief... What was I going to wear? What was I going to say? Oh crap. I look awful! My hair was a mess, and I was soaking wet. Crap, crap, crap. But worse yet...how was I going to get there? I couldn't just ride up on my stupid teen speed. Talk about looking like a dork. I curled up my knees, wrapped my arms around them and laid my head face-down in my lap. "Oh no, no, no..." I muttered quietly.

"What's the matter?" Anya gently asked.

"This is just craptastic. How am I gonna get there? I will look like a complete loser if I ride up there on my bike!"

"No worries," Jeremy piped in, "I can take you. I'll borrow my mom's car."

I gratefully looked over at Jeremy, a huge smile spreading across my face, "Thankyouuuu! You're the best!" I jumped up to give him a hug. Almost as soon as I wrapped my arms around him, he pulled away and looked at me seriously, "Wait a minute. You are not crashing my date with Mr. Hotness," I warned.

He looked hurt. "Geesh! What kinda friend do you think I am?"

"The kind that will ogle and make inappropriate comments to my date! That's the kind of friend I think you are!"

"You know me too well," Jeremy finally laughed.

"I know!" Anya interrupted. "We'll all go. Don't worry Ruby, we'll just drop you off, then we'll make Jeremy drive us over to the Burger Hut so you can have some alone time with Mr. Dreamy."

"Uh. That's Mr. Hotness," I corrected, as I smiled at her.

"Whatev," Jeremy said, looking annoyed again, "But someone's buying my dinner if I'm driving everyone all over town tonight."

"I'll buy your burger," Brennan finally spoke up.

"You can buy me *more* than a burger." Jeremy coyly teased, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Uhhh. No. I think I'll just stick with the burger," Brennan nonchalantly answered. I rolled my eyes. I don't think Jeremy got that Brennan was just not into him that way. But whatever.

"I swear, I need food this instant or I'll faint," Anya complained.

“Okay! Okay! Let’s go up to Dairy Queen. Ice cream is my favorite kind of lunch,” I said. We gathered up our towels and headed up the beach to the main road. “Oh crap!” I said, “I left my shoes! Hang on, I’ll be right back!” I jogged back towards the driftwood and reached down to grab my shoes. I saw Nick Martino and his friends messing around in the water and just as I was turning to head back towards my friends, I caught a glimpse of that smooth gliding hump out in the distance again.

What in the world was it? I had forgotten all about it, especially since my interlude with Nick but there it was again. I strained my eyes to see if it would appear again, but nope. Nothing was there. Brennan and Jeremy started yelling my name, “COME ON RUBY! What is taking you so long?!” I shrugged it off and ran back towards my friends, answering, “Coming!”

After all, there were bigger things on the horizon for me than staring at some dumb, dark hump in the water...like ice cream...and pizza with Nick Martino.

Chapter 4

“Sweet stars of Mars, Ruby! You can put away more ice cream faster than any human I know” Brennan incredulously observed as I licked the last spoonful of my large, fudge, chocolatey ice cream concoction. “Nice, Brennan. You sweet talk to all the ladies like that?” I replied, as I closely examined the inside of my cup, trying to scrape out any remaining melted ice cream circling at the bottom. Luckily, Jeremy didn’t catch the “*human*” remark Brennan made. Or, if he did, it merely thought Brennan was being a wise-ass, which he usually is.

“No,” he shook his head. “But I don’t see any ladies around here either.”

Anya shoved at his shoulder. “Grow up, Brennan!” She shook her head and gingerly licked her soft serve plain vanilla cone. We were all sitting at a small square table in the Dairy Queen, each of us on one side of the table. Jeremy mentioned going to the adventure golf place in Cadillac on Thursday because it was half-off that night. I am all about cheap. Between saving for a car and my ice cream addiction, I didn’t have much money to blow. Cadillac was the next town over, about 15 miles away and we often drove there to hang out. I longingly looked at my empty ice cream cup and used my finger to scrape out any remaining melted ice cream from around the sides.

“Done.” Jeremy declared, as he slammed his empty peanut butter ice cream cup down on the table and reclined back against his chair. Brennan had finished his in about six minutes, but nobody seemed to tease him for wolfing down his ice cream. How come just because I was a girl and liked to eat ice cream, it was such a big deal? “Hey,” I said, licking my finger clean, “I heart me some ice cream. What can I say?”

“You can say that this is *the* best lunch,” Jeremy said as he leaned back farther in his chair, folded his arms behind his head, stretched out his legs and stared up at the ceiling tiles of the restaurant.

“Yes, I’m sure your mother would approve of such a choice too,” Anya teased.

Jeremy sat forward in his chair, “I don’t see what’s wrong with ice cream for lunch.”

“Me neither!” I interjected, as Jeremy started ticking off points on his fingers, “One: it’s dairy which is one of the main food groups. That also means it has calcium and vitamin D, all good for you. Two: it’s also a protein and mine had peanuts, which is more protein. And there are tons of health benefits to chocolate, don’t you ever watch Oprah?”

“Apparently, not as often as you do,” Anya smiled while licking her vanilla cone.

“How can you not be done already?” Brennan whined at his sister. “Kansas over there finished hours ago!”

“Hey! My name is Ruby, not Kansas. Lame *Wizard of Oz* reference, Brennan. Very lame. You can do better than that, can’t you? And so what if I enjoy my ice cream a little faster than most people? We can’t all be tiny, little waifs like Anya or Jeremy,” I retorted.

Jeremy kicked me under the table, and Brennan chuckled.

“Okay, okay, I’m almost finished,” Anya said. “Now. What are you going to wear tonight?” she asked.

The boys rolled their eyes. I kicked back at Jeremy under the table. “Oh please, Jeremy. If I had you, you’d be in my closet picking out my outfit!” I exclaimed.

“Touché.” Jeremy replied with a raised eyebrow. Brennan just sat there and shook his head. “Can we leave now?” he asked again.

Exasperated, Anya finally said, “Oh, why don’t you boys go throw stones in the water or something!”

I cleared my throat. “Um. I think you mean, *skip rocks*, Anya.” She sheepishly grinned. “Whatever.” She waved her hand at us as if she didn’t care, “Just... run along boys. Pick us up at the cottage at 6:45 sharp. Brennan, I will make you eat dirt if you are late. I need to help Ruby get ready for her date. We’ll raid my closet, Ruby, I’m sure I have something. Now you two...leave.” She shooed them away from our table with her hands. I smiled. She really did seem ten years older than any of us sometimes. Just like a mother hen or something. I could always count on Anya to stick up for me or take care of me when I needed it.

“But it’s not even three o’clock yet!” complained Jeremy, “How long does it take to get ready for a date?!”

Brennan snickered, “Oh. With Kansas Ruby? Hours, Jeremy. Hours.”

“*Shut up* Brennan.” I scowled at him. Geesh, I already had one annoying little brother at home. Why did I put up with another one?

Chapter 5

Anya and I went our separate way from the boys and headed back to the cottage where she and Brennan “lived.”

“I’ve just gotta call my house and let ‘em know what’s going on,” I said to Anya as we walked up across the long, white porch. Anya and Brennan’s cottage was a craftsman style house, with stone pillars, white siding and a huge white porch that wrapped around the entire house all the way to the back, overlooking the lake, complete with big pots of red Geraniums every four feet or so. It was definitely one of the nicer cottages on the lake, not quite as grand as the beautiful old homes on the bay of Traverse City, but quaint and cozy. It blended in quite nicely with the other homes around it, and it was from the same era. But the inside...now that was a different story. Anya opened the door and ushered me inside first. I made my way through the open space to the phone that was sitting on the granite counter in the kitchen. Their cottage was absolutely beautiful. A wide-open floor plan decorated in hues of white, sand and a pale lime-green. The back of the house was almost entirely windows and offered tremendous views of the water. Espresso dark wood plank floors were a stark contrast to the sand colored walls and white cabinetry and furniture. The front door led immediately into the open space of the living room and dining area, with the kitchen off to the right side and on separated from the main living space with a huge island and bar stools. Directly to the left were two bedrooms, each with their own bathroom. To the right was yet another bathroom, a laundry room and staircase that led upstairs to their sun room. Now, most people have a sun room off the back of the house, but not Anya and Brennan. Nope, theirs was upstairs. The entire second floor, actually. And again, the entire back wall and most of the roof were glass windows or solar panels.

Upstairs was a magical place – it was their very own garden room. Potted plants, trees and flowers of every kind landscaped the interior space. There were even small palm trees up there! Palm trees for Pete’s sake! In Michigan?! It was crazy. But because the room was like a tropical climate in itself, beautiful hydrangeas, hibiscus, lilies, birds of paradise, and about a hundred other types of flowers bloomed there, all year long. It was really something to see, their indoor, botanical cottage garden. It was like their own personal battery recharging station. Most fairies couldn’t live more than a day or two away from the forest or their own world of Fey. Even though Anya and Brennan were stronger than the other fairies I had met, they still felt drained from time-to-time, especially on extended visits. But, with their little upstairs oasis, they could stay human-sized and grab a few volts, so to speak, right in their own house.

Most fairies didn’t come over to our world during the winter....no flowers, no life in the trees. Everything’s dormant – at least where we lived it was. But not in Anya and Brennan’s house. Of course, in the winter they didn’t come over as often...it was simply too cold for them to be here for long periods of time. Fairies don’t like the cold weather much. But with their personal paradise, they could make as many trips as they wanted. With fairy groundskeepers to maintain the place, it remained a beautiful haven for them year-round. Again, I had no idea how they could afford such a place, but my mother always told me it was impolite to ask people about money, including how much they had or what they earned. So I kept my mouth shut on the subject.

After I checked in with my mom and told her what was up, Anya pulled out the magazine “Time to prepare,” she seriously stated while handing me a stack of them. She must have had even

fashion magazine you could think of. We plopped down on the huge lime-green sectional sofa in the living room and started looking through them. “Why do you get all of these things?” I asked as I leafed through the magazines, feeling more and more unattractive as I stared at the perfect unblemished models on all of the pages.

“They can be very informative,” she smartly answered. “For example, do you *know* what men really want on the first date? It says all *kinds* of things they want, right here on page 73,” she said pointing to the article. I shook my head. “Well. I don’t know about all this. I don’t even know how I’m gonna be able to *talk* tonight, let alone worry about what Nick might really want on our first date. I mean, I couldn’t even answer him when he asked me to meet him for dinner! Is this even a first date? To qualify as a date, isn’t the guy supposed to pick you up and take you somewhere? Is it a real date if I’m just going up to meet him at his work for a slice of pizza on his break?” The questions poured out of my head and my mouth in a seemingly never-ending waterfall. If I’m not choked with nerves and fear like I was in front of Nick, I’m usually doing the complete opposite, and talking non-stop until someone can shut me up.

“Of course it’s a real date!” Anya shrieked throwing up her hands. “He likes you Ruby. I can tell. Besides, I can’t lie, remember? What I am telling you is what I believe to be true. Come on. You can take a nice bubble bath in my tub, and then we’ll do our nails and our toes, and then we’ll pick out the perfect outfit that will make Nick be drooling all over you like Jeremy drools all over Brennan.” Anya laughed, “Wow! That would be something if Nick would be as gaga over me as Jeremy is over Brennan.” Anya pulled me up by my hands and led me to her bathroom. After she filled her ginormous tub, she walked out of the bathroom to give me some privacy. She paused at the door, “I’ll be upstairs. Come find me when you’re done.”

“Thanks, Anya.” I smiled gratefully at her.

“Anytime.” With that, I heard her pad up the stairs to her private retreat while I sank down into the bubbles.

When I was good and pruned, and my nerves seemed mostly settled, I emerged from the huge tub and wrapped a giant white terry cloth towel around me. I finished drying off, slipped on the robe Anya had left for me and went to find her.

As I entered the warm, fragrant garden room upstairs, I was a little taken aback at what I saw. Even though I’ve seen it before, it amazed me every time.

Anya was sitting crossed-legged in one of the large rectangular planters filled with grass in the center of the room. (My mom would say she was sitting “Indian style,” but in school they made us sit “criss-cross applesauce.” What the hell does that even mean? Criss-cross applesauce?) I shook my head and snickered silently at my own personal side thought. There were small flowers in bloom all around her. Her hands were placed palm-down, in the bright green grass and her eyes were closed. She looked so peaceful and serene. And she was *glowing*. I mean, literally, glowing. There was a slight glisten to her skin, and it seemed to be radiating a soft golden glow, almost like an aura. She looked like an angel, except she didn’t have the wings. Well. She did, but I couldn’t see them. Fairies wings weren’t visible to anyone, not even other fairies, when they were completely in our world and human-sized. Usually, when I saw Anya recharging in the garden or forest outside she was small...so the glowing, glistening, sparkling-thing wasn’t quite so dramatic. But sitting here, in the midst of the botanical beauty, she was stunning. She seemed so deep in meditation; I didn’t want to disturb her.

I cleared my throat to announce my presence. She slowly opened her ice-blue twinkling eyes and curled up a smile at me. ~~“All done?” she asked. “Mmhmm,” I nodded. She got up, stretched her arms, and then grabbed my hand. “Come on then! Let’s get beeeautiful!” She giggled and just about~~ skipped out of the room while she pulled me along with her.

After we polished our fingernails and toes perfectly (mine were Silver Moon Mist, hers were Hot Pink Passion), Anya proceeded to comb and blow dry my hair, while styling it with a big round brush as I sat and watched in the mirror. Then, we raided her closet.

After spending about an hour trying on outfit after outfit, I flopped down on the bed in disgust. “Ugh!” I exclaimed, completely annoyed. “I don’t look good in anything!” I pouted.

“Oh come on,” Anya replied, “There has to be something here. Just a minute. I think there’s a sundress in the back of the closet that will look perfect on you!” She jumped up and started shoving clothes to one side. “A dress?” I moaned. “I hate dresses Anya. You know this. Why do you want to torture me? I won’t feel like myself if I wear a dress.”

“Aha! Here it is!” She swung around holding a turquoise blue, straight cotton tank dress with a scoop neck. Very simple. Very plain. Very me. “Hey,” I carefully answered, “I actually kinda like that.”

Anya smiled knowingly, “I knew you would. The color brings out the blue in your eyes to you. Here, try it on.” She shoved the dress at me.

I slipped the dress over my head and looked in the mirror. It was perfect! Not too dressy, but not too sloppy either. It was just snug enough to show off my curves (or, what little curves I had) and was just a few inches above my knees, so I didn’t feel too slutty. Anya had styled my dishwater straight, blonde hair to curl just slightly under so it bounced on my shoulders. It was nothing too fancy and still pretty straight, but much nicer than it usually looked. I don’t wear much makeup, but mascara and lip gloss were a must. After all, this was Nick Martino, Mr. Hotness himself, who I had a date with.

“Here,” Anya held out the pair of silver flip flops she had on earlier today. “Put these on with it.” I slipped my feet into the shoes and gave her a little twirl. The shoes matched my nail polish perfectly. I must admit, I really did feel like I looked pretty good. She clapped her hands and giggled. “You look stunning!” she said. I was ready. I think. It was already almost 6:30 and the boys would be here soon.

Now, if only I could do something about the butterflies in my stomach.

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