



*one*



“HEY, FREAK! WAKE UP!”

It’s not unusual for an older brother to be a bit nasty to a little sister. But in this particular case, the rude wake-up call was due to the fact that the little sister was holding a power saw. Which was running. And she was standing on the deck of a half-built tree house. In a forty-foot tall northern red oak. In the middle of the night. In a strange neighborhood. All of which *was* unusual.

Through sleep-fogged eyes, Sam could see her mother shouting something, too, but Margie wasn’t as loud or as ticked off as Jax. It probably would help if the saw was turned off, but Sam wasn’t completely coherent yet, and

besides, she had one bare foot on the deck and one slippers foot precariously poised on a tree limb and the only thing that seemed to be keeping her balanced and upright was the blade whizzing through a two-by-four. In the remaining 3.6 seconds she had before the board was cut through and she plunged twenty feet to the ground—decapitating herself and probably her mother, brother, and the family pug, Weezy, to boot—Sam assessed her situation and came up with:

*Jump.*

Which she did. Backward. Dragging the power saw cord. Hoping she had sleep-built enough tree house to catch her.

As Sam landed flat on her back on a remarkably well-constructed deck if she did say so herself, she heard Jax scream like a little girl, Weezy belch thunderously, which he always did when he was held too tightly, and the sound of the power saw bouncing against, and taking angry bites out of, what she only could assume was the trunk of the red oak. *Which is the state tree of New Jersey*, her brain informed her needlessly.

And then . . . silence.

Gasping for breath, Sam looked down to see a pajama-ed and bewildered-looking man holding a detached extension cord. Jax, her mother, and Weezy lay sprawled on the ground, panting, heads still attached. A little boy, hair so blond he lit up the yard like a miniature walking moon,

slammed through the screen door, looked up at the tree house, and yelled:

*“Awesome!”*



Sam slumped in the backseat of her mother’s decrepit Toyota as Margie talked to the police and the pajama-ed man (Moon Boy had been sent back to bed). She could only hear snippets over Weezy’s car-shaking snores, but she knew exactly what her mother was saying. After ten years of Sam’s sleepwalking, Margie could recite it like a memorized monologue.

“I’m so sorry, so sorry, Samantha’s been a sleepwalker all her life, it’s hereditary, you know, her father was a sleepwalker, too, he’s passed now, so it’s just me and I’ve tried everything, *everything*, but nothing seems to help, we find her in the *craziest* places, doing the *craziest* things, you just wouldn’t believe it, you won’t press charges, will you, I’m a single mother and she’s not a *criminal*, just a sick little girl, *sick*, I tell you—”

Margie was now tugging maniacally at the hair over her right ear, and Sam burrowed closer to Weezy, both to ward off the chilly autumn night air, and to drown out her mother’s voice by way of a flat-faced dog’s breathing problems. She

could see Jax pacing outside the car, slowing occasionally to give her a foul look. Sam knew Jax didn't care that she was a sick little girl whom Margie had tried *everything* to help; all Jax cared about was that Margie had a bald spot on the right side of her head due to anxiety and that the medical term for that anxiety was "trichotillomania" and that every time Sam ended up somewhere dangerous on her nighttime wanderings, Margie became more of a "trichotillomaniac" (not a real word; a Jax accusation-word).

All Jax cared about was that their dad, Don Fife, had sleep-wandered off a bridge ten years ago and every time Margie thought she was going to lose her daughter in some similarly uber-violent way, her bald spot widened.

All Jax cared about was that he was closely related to a loser. He never used that actual word because it was forbidden in their home (or "homes," really, since they had moved six times in the last ten years), but she saw it in every one of Jax's side-eye stink eyes.

Sam gently tucked Weezy's lolling tongue back in his mouth; he looked mildly perturbed, as if he had purposely left it out to dry in some sort of pug master plan. Margie was now highlighting some of the *crazy* things Sam had done while sleepwalking:

- Sleep-baked brownies
- Sleep-crocheted

- Sleep-mowed the lawn
- Sleep-sorted recyclables in a bin outside the Short Hills mall
- Sleep-stole a wheelchair from a rich octogenarian in an upscale retirement village
- Sleep-vinyl-sided a neighbor's house
- Sleep-directed traffic on Dodie Drive in Parsippany

And now add to the list sleep-built a tree house. Well, sleep-half-built, anyway. Sam absently pulled a splinter from her finger, sending up a silent prayer that Moon Boy's dad had some construction skills. Otherwise, Margie and Jax and Weezy would be out here again tomorrow night, trying to wake Sam up as she sleep-roofed.

Jax opened the car door, flopped his lanky body down on the passenger seat. "Got you out of another one. She shoulda been a lawyer."

For the millionth time, she said it. "Sorry."

"Uh-huh."

He didn't forgive her and Sam couldn't blame him. Jax was sixteen, athletic, super smart, and a Hottie-Biscotti (not her phrase, obviously, because *ew*, her *brother*, but one she'd overheard whispered about him in a bakery). He should have been the most popular kid in his school. Instead Jax Fife was a dreamboat sinking fast, helplessly anchored to a freak sister, semi-bald mother, and drowned Dad.

It was way past mattering that it wasn't her fault. Once upon a time, Jax had been her champion, defending her to anyone who would listen, "It's not her fault. Somnambulism is due to an immaturity in a person's central nervous system." Adorable coming out of the mouth of an eight-year-old boy defending the five-year-old sister who had somehow broken into her preschool in the dead of night and was found sleep-sterilizing baby bottles.

Less adorable when the preteen brother is trying to explain why his nine-year-old sister snuck into her elementary school gym at midnight to sleep-inflate droopy basketballs.

Totally unadorable when the high school sophomore's girlfriend dumps him because his preteen sister crept into her house through the doggy door and was discovered sleep-sequining the words "IS EVIL" after the name "TIFFANY" on said girlfriend's cheerleader uniform.

After the bedazzling debacle, it no longer mattered to Jax that Sam's central nervous system was immature. All that mattered was, *when the heck are you going to grow out of this?* Most sleepwalkers did, usually by the age when bedwetting stopped, and nearly always by puberty. But here she was, thirteen years old, and still sleep-wrecking their lives.