

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THE PRINCESS DIARIES

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the

Haunted
mediator

CHAPTER ONE

“Well, well, well,” said a distinctly masculine voice from behind me. “If it isn’t Susannah Simon.”

Look, I won’t lie to you. When a cute guy talks to me—and you could tell from this guy’s voice that he was easy on the eyes; it was in the self-confidence of those well, well, wells, the caressing way he said my name—I pay attention. I can’t help it. I’m a sixteen-year-old girl, after all. My life can’t revolve entirely around Lilly Pulitzer’s latest tankini print and whatever new innovations Bobbi Brown has made in the world of stay-put lip liner.

So I’ll admit that, even though I have a boyfriend—even if boyfriend is a little optimistic a term for him—as I turned around to see the hottie who was addressing me, I gave my hair a little bit of a toss. Why shouldn’t I? I mean, considering all the product I’d layered into it that morning, in honor of the first day of my junior year—not to mention

the marine fog that regularly turns my head into a frizzy mess—my coiffure was looking exceptionally fine.

It wasn't until I'd given the old chestnut mane a flip that I turned around and saw that the cutie who'd said my name was not someone I'm too fond of.

In fact, you might say I have reason to be scared to death of him.

I guess he could read the fear in my eyes—carefully done up that morning with a brand-new combination of eye shadows called Mocha Mist—because the grin that broke out across his good-looking face was slightly crooked at one end.

“Suze,” he said in a chiding tone. Even the fog couldn't dull the glossy highlights in his raffishly curly dark hair. His teeth were dazzlingly white against his tennis tan. “Here I am, nervous about being the new kid at school, and you don't even

have a hello for me? What kind of way is that to treat an old pal?”

I continued to stare at him, perfectly incapable of speech. You can't talk, of course, when your mouth has gone as dry as . . . well, as the adobe brick building we were standing in front of.

What was he doing here? What was he doing here?

The thing of it was, I couldn't follow my first impulse and run screaming from him. People tend to talk when they see impeccably garbed girls such as me run screaming from seventeen-year-old studlies. I had managed to keep my unusual talent from my classmates for this long, I wasn't about to blow it now, even if I was—and believe me, I was—scared to death.

But if I couldn't run away screaming, I could certainly move huffily past him without a word, hoping he would not recognize the huffiness for

what it really was—sheer terror.

I don't know whether or not he sensed my fear. But he sure didn't like my pulling a prima donna on him. His hand flew out as I attempted to sweep past him, and the next thing I knew, his fingers were wrapped around my upper arm in a viselike grip.

I could, of course, have hauled off and slugged him. I hadn't been named Girl Most Likely to Dismember Someone back at my old school in Brooklyn for nothing, you know.

But I'd wanted to start this year off right—in Mocha Mist and my new black Club Monaco capris (coupled with a pink silk sweater set I'd snagged for a song at the Benetton outlet up in Pacific Grove)—not in a fight. And what would my friends and schoolmates think—and, since they were milling all around us, tossing off the occasional “Hi, Suze,” and complimenting me on my ever-so-spiffy ensemble, they were bound to notice—if I began

freakishly to pummel the new guy?

And then there was the unavoidable fact that I was pretty convinced that, if I took a whack at him, he might try to whack me back.

Somehow I managed to find my voice. I only hoped he didn't notice how much it was shaking. "Let go of my arm," I said.

"Suze," he said. He was still smiling, but now he looked and sounded slyly knowing. "What's the matter? You don't look very happy to see me."

"Still not letting go of my arm," I reminded him. I could feel the chill from his fingers—he seemed to be completely cold-blooded in addition to being preternaturally strong—through my silk sleeve.

He dropped his hand.

"Look," he said, "I really am sorry. About the way

things went down the last time you and I met, I mean.”

The last time he and I met. Instantly I was transported in my mind’s eye back to that long corridor—the one I had seen so often in my dreams. Lined with doors on either side—doors that opened into who-knew-what—it had been like a hallway in a hotel or an office building . . . only this hallway hadn’t existed in any hotel or office building known to man. It hadn’t even existed in our current dimension.

And Paul had stood there, knowing Jesse and I had no idea how to find our way out of it, and laughed. Just laughed, like it was this big colossal joke that if I didn’t return to my own universe soon, I’d die, while Jesse would have been trapped in that hallway forever. I could still hear Paul’s laughter ringing in my ears. He had kept on laughing . . . right up until the moment Jesse had slammed a fist into his face.

I could hardly believe any of this was happening. Here it was, a perfectly normal September morning in Carmel, California—which meant, of course, a thick layer of mist hung over everything but would soon burn off to reveal cloudless blue skies and a golden sun—and I was standing there in the breezeway of the Junipero Serra Mission Academy, face-to-face with the person who'd been haunting my nightmares for weeks.

Only this wasn't a nightmare. I was awake. I knew I was awake, because I would never have dreamed of my friends CeeCee and Adam sauntering by while I was confronting this monster from my past, and going, "Hey, Suze," like it was . . . well, like it was simply the first day back at school after summer vacation.

"You mean the part where you tried to kill me?" I croaked, when CeeCee and Adam were out of earshot. This time, I know he heard my voice shake. I know because he looked perturbed—though

maybe it was because of the accusation. In any case, he reached up and dragged one of those largish tanned hands through his curly hair.

“I never tried to kill you, Suze,” he said, sounding a little hurt.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. My heart was in my throat, but I laughed anyway. “Oh,” I said. “Right.”

“I mean it, Suze,” he said. “It wasn't like that. I'm just . . . I'm just not very good at losing, you see.”

I stared at him. No matter what he told himself, he had tried to kill me. But worse, he'd done his best to eliminate Jesse, in a completely underhanded manner. And now he was trying to pass the whole thing off as bad sportsmanship?

“I don't get it,” I said, shaking my head. “What did you lose? You didn't lose anything.”

“Didn’t I, Suze?” His gaze bore into mine. His voice was the one I’d been hearing over and over in my dreams—laughing at me as I struggled to find my way out of a dark, mist-filled hallway at either end of which was a precipice dropping off into a black void of utter nothingness, over which, right before I woke up, I teetered dangerously. It was a voice filled with hidden meaning. . . .

Only I had no idea what that meaning could be, or what he was implying. All I knew was that this guy terrified me.

“Suze,” he said with a smile. Smiling—and probably even scowling, too—he looked like a Calvin Klein underwear model. And not just his face, either. I had, after all, seen him in a pair of swim trunks.

“Look, don’t be this way,” he said. “It’s a new school year. Can’t we make a new start?”

“No,” I said, glad that my voice didn’t shake this

time. “We can’t. In fact, you—you’d better stay away from me.”

He seemed to find this deeply amusing. “Or what?” he asked, with another one of those smiles that revealed all of his white, even teeth—a politician’s smile, I realized.

“Or you’ll regret it,” I said, the tremor back in my voice.

“Oh,” he said, his dark eyes widening in mock terror. “You’ll sic your boyfriend on me?”

It wasn’t something I’d have joked around about, if I were him. Jesse could—and probably would, if he found out the guy was back—kill him. Except that I wasn’t exactly Jesse’s girlfriend, so it wasn’t really his job to protect me from creeps like the one in front of me.

He must have figured out from my expression that

all was not copacetic in Suze-and-Jesse-land, since he laughed and said, “So that’s how it is. Well, I never really thought Jesse was your type, you know. You need someone a little less—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence, because at that moment, CeeCee, who’d been following Adam in the direction of his locker—even though we’d solemnly sworn to each other the night before over the phone that we were not going to start off the new school year chasing boys—came back toward us, her gaze on the guy standing so close to me.

“Suze,” she said politely. Unlike me, CeeCee had spent her summer working in the non-profit sector, and so had not had a lot of money to blow on a back-to-school wardrobe and makeover. Not that CeeCee would ever spend her money on anything so frivolous as makeup. Which was a good thing, since, being an albino, she had to special-order all of her makeup anyway, and couldn’t just stroll on

up to the M.A.C. counter and plunk her money down the way anybody else could.

“Who’s your friend?” she wanted to know.

I was not about to stand there and make introductions. In fact, I was seriously thinking of heading to the administrative office and asking just what they were thinking, admitting a guy like this into what I had once considered a passably good school.

But he thrust one of those cool, strong hands at CeeCee and said with that grin that I had once found disarming but that now chilled me to the bone, “Hi. I’m Paul. Paul Slater. Nice to meet you.”

Paul Slater. Not really the kind of name to strike terror into the heart of a young girl, huh? I mean, it sounded innocuous enough. Hi, I’m Paul Slater. There was nothing in that statement that could have alerted CeeCee to the truth: Paul Slater was sick,

manipulative, and had icicles where his heart should have been.

No, CeeCee had no clue. Because I hadn't told her, of course. I hadn't told anyone.

The more fool I.

If CeeCee found his fingers a little too cold for her liking, she didn't let on.

“CeeCee Webb,” she said, as she pumped his hand in her typically businesslike manner. “You must be new here, because I've never seen you around before.”

Paul blinked, bringing attention to his eyelashes, which were really long, for a guy's. They looked almost heavy on his eyelids, like they'd be an effort to lift. My stepbrother Jake has sort of

the same thing going, only on him, it just makes

him look drowsy. On Paul, it had more of a sexy rock-star effect. I glanced worriedly at CeeCee. She was one of the most sensible people I had ever met, but are any of us really immune to the sexy rock-star type?

“My first day,” Paul said with another one of those grins. “Lucky for me, I already happen to be acquainted with Ms. Simon here.”

“How fortuitous,” CeeCee, who, as editor of the school paper, liked big words, said, her white-blond eyebrows raised slightly. “Did you used to go to Suze’s old school?”

“No,” I said quickly. “He didn’t. Look, we better get to homeroom, or we’re going to get into trouble. . . .”

But Paul wasn’t worried about getting into trouble. Probably because Paul was used to causing it.

“Suze and I had a thing this past summer,” he informed CeeCee, whose purple eyes widened behind the lenses of her glasses at this information.

“A thing?” she echoed.

“There was no thing,” I hastened to assure her.

“Believe me. No thing at all.”

CeeCee’s eyes got even wider. It was clear she didn’t believe me. Well, why should she? I was her best friend, it was true. But had I ever once been completely honest with her? No. And she clearly knew it.

“Oh, so you guys broke up?” she asked pointedly.

“No, we didn’t break up,” Paul said, with another one of those secretive, knowing smiles.

Because we were never going out, I wanted to shriek. You think I’d ever go out with him? He’s

not what you think, CeeCee. He looks human, but underneath that studly façade, he's a . . . a . . .

Well, I didn't know what Paul was, exactly.

But then, what did that make me? Paul and I had far more in common than I was comfortable admitting, even to myself.

Even if I'd had the guts to say something along those lines in front of him, I didn't get a chance because suddenly a stern, "Miss Simon! Miss Webb! Haven't you ladies got a class you should be getting to?" rang out.

Sister Ernestine—whose three-month absence from my life had not rendered her any less intimidating, with her enormous chest and even bigger crucifix adorning it—came barreling down upon us, the wide black sleeves of her habit trailing behind her like wings.

“Get going,” she tut-tutted us, waving her hands in the direction of our lockers, built into the adobe walls all along the mission’s beautifully manicured inner courtyard. “You’ll be late to first period.”

We got going . . . but unfortunately Paul followed directly behind us.

“Suze and I go way back,” he was saying to CeeCee, as we moved along the porticoed hallway toward my locker. “We met at the Pebble Beach Hotel and Golf Resort.”

I could only stare at him as I fumbled with the combination to my locker. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I really couldn’t. What was Paul doing here? What was Paul doing here enrolling in my school, making my world—from which I’d thought I’d rid him forever—a real-life nightmare?

I didn’t want to know. Whatever his motives for coming back, I didn’t want to know. I just wanted to

get away from him, get to class, anywhere, anywhere at all . . .

. . . so long as it was away from him.

“Well,” I said, slamming my locker door closed. I hardly knew what I was doing. I had reached in and blindly grabbed the first books my fingers touched. “Gotta go. Homeroom calls.”

He looked down at the books in my arms, the ones I was holding almost as a shield, as if they would protect me from whatever it was—and I was sure there was something—he had in store for me. For us.

“You won’t find them in there,” Paul said with a cryptic nod at the textbooks bulging from my arms.

I didn’t know what he was talking about. I didn’t want to know. All I knew was that I wanted out of there, and I wanted out of there fast. CeeCee still

stood beside me, looking bewilderedly from my face to Paul's. Any second, I knew, she was going to begin to ask questions, questions I didn't dare answer . . . because she wouldn't believe me if I tried.

Still, even though I didn't want to, I heard myself asking, as if the words were being torn involuntarily from my lips, "I won't find what in here?"

"The answers you're looking for." Paul's blue-eyed gaze was intense. "Why you, of all people, were chosen. And what, exactly, you are."

This time, I didn't have to ask what he meant. I knew. I knew as surely as if he'd said the words out loud. He was talking about the gift we shared, he and I, the one over which he seemed to have so much better control—and of which he seemed to have such superior knowledge—than I did.