

JASON SEGEL
KIRSTEN MILLER



NIGHTMARES!

~ ILLUSTRATED BY KARL KWASNY ~

CHAPTER SAMPLER



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NIGHTMARES!

You'll never sleep the same again...

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CHAPTER ONE

THE STEPMONSTER'S LAIR

It was five minutes past midnight, and a boy was gazing down at Cypress Creek from the window of an old mansion on the town's highest hill. It was an odd-looking building. The front porch was overrun by a jungle of potted plants. Thick green vines crept up columns, and lady ferns and blood flowers fought for every patch of moonlight. An octagonal tower sprouted straight from the house's roof, and the entire structure was painted a dreadful shade of purple. Anyone who saw it might assume that the mansion's occupants were a bit on the strange side—and yet the boy at the window appeared perfectly normal. He had



sandy blond hair and no visible tattoos, scars, or hideous warts. But judging by the miserable expression on his face, something was terribly wrong.

His name was Charlie Laird, and he'd lived in Cypress Creek all twelve years of his life. He and his little brother, Jack, had grown up in a house just down the street. In fact, Charlie could see the old place from his new bedroom window. A different family of four owned it now. Every night, Charlie watched the lights in his former home go out and imagined the kids snuggled up nice and safe, tucked into bed by their mother and father. He would have given almost anything to trade places with them. It had been

three months since he'd moved to the purple mansion on DeChant Hill with his brother and father. And it had been three months since Charlie Laird had gotten a good night's sleep.

Charlie took a step back from the window and saw his reflection in the glass. His skin was the color of curdled milk, and dark bags sagged beneath his red-rimmed eyes. He sighed at the sight and turned around to start his night's work. Thirty-eight heavy boxes sat in the center of the room. They were filled with video games and comic books and Little League trophies. Charlie had unpacked nothing more than a few changes of clothes. The rest of his belongings were still stowed away in their cardboard boxes. And every night, before he lay down in his bed, he would move them. Nineteen boxes were used to block the door to the hall. The other nineteen were pushed against the bathroom door, though that often proved *quite* inconvenient.

It would have seemed ridiculous to anyone else. Even Charlie knew the barricades couldn't stop his bad dreams. But the witch who'd been visiting him every night for three months wasn't like other nightmares he'd had. Most dreams faded, but he couldn't forget her. She felt just as real as the nose on his face. So when the witch swore that one night soon she'd come drag him away, Charlie figured he should take her threats seriously. He just hoped all the





boxes could keep her out of his room.

She'd already gotten as far as the hallway. The first time he'd heard someone sneaking through the house, Charlie had just woken up from a nightmare. The sun's rays were peeking over the mountains, but the mansion was still and quiet. Suddenly the silence had been broken by the creak of rusty door hinges opening. Then the floorboards groaned and there were thuds on the stairs. The footsteps were heavy enough to be an adult's. But when Charlie worked up the nerve to investigate, he found his father and stepmother still asleep in their bed. A few nights later, he heard the same thing again. *Creak. Groan. Thud.* His father said that old houses make noises. His brother thought the place might be haunted. But Charlie knew there was no such thing as ghosts. He'd been searching for almost three years, and if they'd existed he would have seen one by now. No, Charlie Laird had far bigger problems than ghosts.

The thirty-eight boxes were waiting. Charlie stared at the daunting task in front of him and wondered where he'd find the energy to complete it. His nightmares had gotten worse—and every night he fought a losing battle against sleep. Now his eyelids were drooping and he couldn't stop yawning. As usual, he'd stood by the window until midnight, waiting for his father and stepmother to go to bed.

He didn't want them to hear him sliding the boxes across the floorboards or grunting as he stacked them against the doors. But staying up was growing harder and harder. He'd tried taping his eyes open, but Scotch tape was too weak and duct tape pulled out his eyebrows. Pacing just made him dizzy. And while he'd heard that a full bladder could keep sleep at bay, every time he tried chugging water at bedtime, he ended up frantically shoving nineteen boxes away from the bathroom door. So a few weeks earlier, when all else had failed, Charlie had taken his first trip to the kitchen for a cup of cold, leftover coffee. It always made him gag, and sometimes he had to hold his nose just to get it all down—but the coffee was the only thing that kept him awake.

Charlie tiptoed to his bedroom door, opened it slowly so the hinges wouldn't squeal, and took a peek outside. He was relieved to see that the hallway was dark. He preferred it that way. The walls were lined with old paintings that were far creepier when the lights were on. He listened closely for signs of movement and then sock-skated awkwardly toward the stairs. Past his brother's room. And his father and stepmother's. He was almost outside the last door on the hall when he heard it—a high-pitched laugh that nearly sent him sprinting back to his bed. Behind the



last door lay the stairs to the tower. And at the top of those stairs was a room known in the family as Charlotte's Lair. The door was open a crack, and Charlie heard the sound of a fat cat's paws padding down the wooden stairs. A pale golden light leaked out into the hall.

His stepmother was still awake.



CHAPTER TWO

THE MAGIC TOWER

Long before Charlie had become a prisoner of the purple mansion, he'd been bewitched by its tower. The mansion sat in the center of sleepy Cypress Creek, perched on top of a hill. Below it lay streets lined with tasteful houses painted white and beige. Downtown, there were flower-filled parks and charming shops. It would have been a picture-perfect village if not for the purple mansion's tower. No matter where you were in Cypress Creek, you could always glance up and see it. With wooden shingles like dragon's scales and a steep, pointy roof that resembled a witch's hat, the tower would have been right at home in a fairy tale. It had



two windows—one facing north and one facing south. Neither had a curtain or shade. And at night, when the rest of the house disappeared in the darkness, the tower windows appeared to glow. It was a faint and flickering glimmer. Charlie's little brother, Jack, used to joke that someone must have left a night-light plugged in. Charlie had a few ideas of his own.

Whenever Charlie walked around town, his eyes were drawn to the tower. He was certain that some kind of magic was taking place there each night. The house was supposed to be empty, but late one evening, he thought he saw a figure standing at one of the windows. After that, his fascination was mixed with fear. At school he wrote stories about the tower. At home he drew pictures of it. His father taped the drawings to the refrigerator and said Charlie had been blessed with a vivid imagination. He couldn't understand what his son found so interesting. And as far as Charlie was concerned, that was the strangest thing of all. Most people thought the purple mansion and its tower were just eyesores—warts on the face of Cypress Creek that they did their best to ignore. But not Charlie. Charlie knew better.

There had been *one* other person who'd known about the tower's magic. Every time a new drawing appeared on the family fridge, Charlie's mom had seemed a little more

worried. Then one day, when he was eight years old, his mother confessed that she had visited the purple house several times as a kid. In those days, she'd said, the tower room had belonged to a girl her age.

“What was the tower like?” Charlie had asked breathlessly. “Was it creepy? Was it cool? Was it haunted, was it . . .”

“It was . . . *unusual*,” his mom had replied, and her skin went pale, which told Charlie there had to be more to the story—something dark and dangerous. He pleaded for details, but his mom would only say that the mansion was probably best avoided. Charlie must have looked heartbroken when his mom wouldn't reveal more, because she sat him down and made him a promise. She said she would tell him everything she knew about the tower when he got a bit older. But that ended up being a promise Charlie's mom couldn't keep. She fell ill a few months later—and died four days and three hours before Charlie turned nine.

After his mom passed away, Charlie's fascination with the tower had continued to grow like a noxious weed. He asked his teachers about it. He interrogated the town librarian. He even cornered the mayor at the town's annual radish festival. But no one in Cypress Creek seemed to know much about the old purple mansion—aside from four simple facts:





1. The mansion was older than the rest of the town.
2. It had been built by Silas DeChant, a millionaire hermit and notorious grouch.
3. Silas's wife had painted the house purple herself.
4. The mansion had been vacant for years.

Charlie's dad said that the last person to live there had been an elderly woman. A teacher claimed that an old lady dressed in purple used to hand out grape-flavored lollipops on Halloween. One of Charlie's neighbors said he'd heard that the mansion's owner had gone to live with her daughter in a faraway state. The neighbor's wife swore that the old lady in question had to be at least 110.

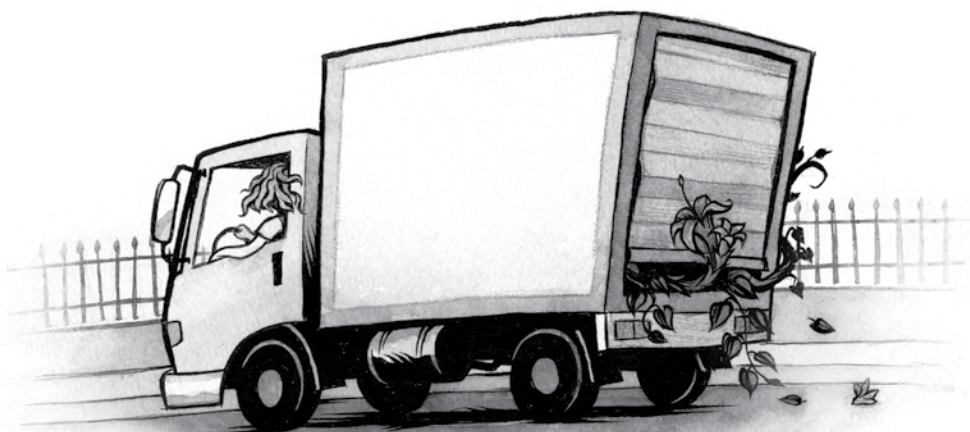
One Saturday morning, Charlie discovered that the purple house was the talk of the town. The postman delivered the big news with the mail: the mansion's elderly owner had passed away. Remarkably, she had died just two days short of her 111th birthday from injuries she sustained in a gin rummy accident.

At the coffee shop where the Lairds went for pancakes, a waitress told Charlie's dad that the old lady's granddaughter had inherited the mansion and was moving in. And a man at the next table knew that the new owner's name was Charlotte DeChant—and he'd heard she was opening a store on Main Street. The way folks gossiped about Cypress Creek's newest resident, Charlie figured

Charlotte DeChant might turn out to be interesting. And the first time Charlie laid eyes on her, he was certainly not disappointed.

It was a cool autumn day, and Charlie was riding his bike to his friend Alfie's house when he saw a moving van pull up in front of the purple mansion on the hill. A tall, wiry woman climbed out of the driver's seat. She had bright orange hair with curls that seemed to be blowing in a breeze—even though the air was perfectly still. Her black skirts billowed and swirled around her boots. She wore a white T-shirt emblazoned with a logo in blood-red and forest-green. It read HAZEL'S HERBARIUM.

The woman opened the back door of the van, and from where Charlie had stopped, he could see that there were no boxes inside. Only plants. In fact, it looked like an entire





garden had been uprooted, potted, and driven to Cypress Creek.

“Hey, you! Give me a hand with this stuff and I’ll give you five dollars,” the woman called down to Charlie.

Against his better judgment, Charlie walked his bike up the hill for a better look. “What is all that?” he asked.

“An enchanted forest,” the woman replied matter-of-factly.

“What?” Charlie took a step back. It was an odd thing for an adult to say. She was probably joking, but it did look like the van could hold a few gnomes and a wood sprite or two.

The lady’s laugh took him by surprise. It was high-pitched and unpleasant—more of a cackle than a chuckle. “Don’t you know when someone’s pulling your leg? It’s just a bunch of plants. I’m opening a shop downtown.”

Charlie and his friends had wondered about the shop opening up next to the ice cream parlor. They’d seen workmen painting the interior multiple shades of green. His friend Paige thought it might be a place to buy seeds and unusual vegetables. Rocco was hoping it would be a reptile emporium. “So it’s going to be a plant store?”

“More like a magic shop,” the woman replied, and Charlie perked up. Then she pointed at her shirt. “It’s going to be called Hazel’s Herbarium. I’m an herbalist. That means I use plants to treat sick people.”

For a moment Charlie felt a surge of hope. Then his heart fell when he remembered that his mom was long past treating.

He looked back up to find the strange woman studying his face. “What’s your name?” The way she asked made Charlie wonder if she already knew. He glanced down at his bike. His gut was telling him it was time to leave. This woman was *not* normal—at least, not the kind of normal *he’d* ever met. But he laid down his bicycle and held out a hand.

“Charlie. Charlie Laird,” he’d said. The woman took his hand, but she didn’t shake. Instead, she held it between her palms as if it were a little creature she’d been clever enough to capture.

“Charlie Laird,” the woman repeated, her lips stretching into a toothy smile. “I’m Charlotte DeChant. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

A chill ran down Charlie’s spine, and he pulled his hand away. “Why?” he asked a little too quickly. How could she have been looking forward to meeting him? She shouldn’t have known he existed.

“If I’m not mistaken, you must be related to Veronica Laird,” Charlotte continued.

It felt like the woman had shoved a hand into his chest, grabbed his heart, and squeezed. “She’s my mom.”

“I knew her once, a long time ago,” Charlotte said. “I was sorry to hear that she passed away.”





“It’s okay,” Charlie said. Though it wasn’t. And it never would be. He wished the lady would change the subject. He could already feel his cheeks burning.

And just like that, it seemed as if Charlie’s wish had been granted. Charlotte raised her eyebrows and nodded at the moving van. “So what do you say? Want to earn a few bucks?”

“I don’t know . . .” Charlie hesitated. He’d always been warned not to talk to strangers—and this woman with her blazing orange hair and portable jungle was nothing if not *extremely* strange.

Charlie looked up at the house behind her, his eyes drawn as always to the tower. The lady was weird, but he hadn’t been this close to the mansion in years. Everything he’d always dreamed about was on the other side of the front door. It would be torture to simply walk away.

“Then maybe I should sweeten the offer,” Charlotte said with a sly grin. “Five bucks—and I throw in a tour of the house.”

It was like she’d read his mind. Charlie’s curiosity was an itch he was desperate to scratch. Was the house as ugly inside as it was on the outside? Why did the tower glow at night? And who was the person he’d seen standing at the window? A thousand questions bounced around in his brain.

“What’s in the tower?” Charlie asked eagerly.

Charlotte cackled again, and Charlie had to resist the

urge to stick his fingers in his ears. “Things that go bump in the night.”

Charlie should have turned away as soon as he heard that. He should have hopped on his bike and hightailed it to Alfie’s house and never looked back. He’d never had such a bad case of heebie-jeebies before. But Charlie didn’t leave. He couldn’t. He didn’t know if it was curiosity or some kind of magic that pulled him inside, but he moved the woman’s plants to the porch. He accepted five dollars for his trouble. And then he followed Charlotte inside for his tour.

An overfed tabby cat met Charlie at the door. It took one look at him, hunched its back, and hissed. Charlie stepped over the orange beast and caught up to Charlotte just as she was pointing out the mansion’s parlor and library. The heavy old sofas and sagging armchairs in both rooms were upholstered in lilac, magenta, or mauve. Even the shelves in the library were painted the color of ripe eggplant.

“Wow. Your place is really grape.” The word slid out of Charlie’s mouth before he could stop it. The closer he got to the tower, the more jittery he felt. “I mean *great*. Your place is really great.”

“Good one,” Charlotte replied, cracking a grin. “The crazy furniture came with the house. But I’ll probably have everything painted or covered. I had my fill of purple when I was a kid.”





She reached a wide wooden staircase that twisted up toward the top of the house and started to climb. Charlie found himself stalled on the first step, his eyes fixed on a portrait that stared down at him from the landing. It showed a young man dressed in an old-fashioned jacket and high white neckerchief. He looked rich, and he would have been handsome if not for his hollowed-out eyes and anxious expression.



“Who was he?” Charlie asked his guide. He’d seen circles that dark around his own mother’s eyes, and he suspected the man in the portrait had been sick.

Charlotte paused on the stairs. When she turned to face Charlie, she seemed to study him for a moment as if he were a scientific specimen. “That’s one of my great-great-grandfathers. His name was Silas DeChant,” she said. “He’s the man who built this place.”

Charlie shivered. He’d had been searching for Silas for years. The lady who ran the Cypress Creek library had sworn there were no paintings or photos of the town’s mysterious founder. And yet here he was—and he’d been here all along.

“What was wrong with him?” Charlie half whispered, gripping the banister beside him. He was feeling a bit wobbly—like his knees had gone soft and the ground was made of Jell-O. “Was Silas sick?”

“Let’s just say he was stuck in a very dark place,” Charlotte replied. “But he found his way out. My grandma told me Silas had that portrait painted to remind him that there are places some people go where they aren’t meant to stay.”

“Like where?” Charlie asked.

“Detroit,” Charlotte said with a wink. Then she turned her back to him and began climbing the stairs again. “Are you coming?”





Charlie had to take several steps at a time to catch up with the mansion's new owner.

On the second floor, the pair passed through a small door and climbed a set of stairs so narrow that even Charlie felt squeezed. When they finally reached the top, Charlotte stepped aside and held her arms out wide. "Welcome to my lair," she said proudly.

The place was every bit as magical as Charlie had hoped. And so much bigger on the inside than it looked on the outside. Most of the room's walls were cluttered with shelves and pictures, but one had been left entirely bare. Sunshine poured in through the lair's two large windows, turning millions of dust motes into glittering specks of gold. Glass jars lined the room's shelves, and every container was filled with a different kind of seedpod or dried flower or shriveled mushroom. A huge wooden desk took up most of the floor space. Its surface was cluttered with colored pencils, paint tubes, and drawing pads.

An illustration stuck out from beneath a pile of crumpled paper. Charlie could see only a bit, but a bit was enough. Three snakes—one brown, one red, and one emerald green—looked ready to slither right off the page. He could almost swear he heard them hiss—and then, when he began to look away, the green one seemed to bare its fangs.

"Those snakes are amazing," Charlie breathed. "Did you draw them?"

Charlotte snatched the picture and slapped it facedown on the desk.

“That’s just a rough draft,” she said, sounding oddly embarrassed. “What do you think of the room?”

“It’s . . .” Charlie struggled to find the right word.

“The perfect place to work, right?” She finished the sentence for him. “You know, I might have a use for a kid your age”

Might have a use for? Charlie shivered. Why did it sound like she was going to grind up his bones to make paint? He felt something soft brush against his ankle and looked down to see the giant orange cat weaving between his legs, staring up at him wickedly as if she had a few plans for him too.

The doorbell chimed, and Charlie jumped. Thankful for the interruption, he watched Charlotte rush down the stairs. He should have taken the chance to escape, but he stayed behind, too overwhelmed to move. It felt as if he’d been frozen in place. Two floors down, he heard the front door squeak open.

“Hiya!” Charlie heard Charlotte say.

“Ummm . . . hello, my name is Andrew Laird, and this is my son Jack. This may sound a bit odd, but is my other boy, Charlie, here? I was driving by and I saw his bike out front. I hope he hasn’t been causing trouble.”

“Absolutely not! No trouble at all. You’ve got a great





kid there, Mr. Laird,” Charlotte replied. “He just helped me move a few things, and now he’s upstairs. Would you like to come inside for a cup of coffee?”

Charlie was certain his dad would say no. He never went anywhere but work anymore. Since his wife’s death, sadness had turned him into a hermit. Once, Andrew and Veronica Laird had been the most popular couple in town. Now Charlie’s father turned down all invitations. He never seemed to run out of excuses. Charlie waited to hear what the latest one would be.

Then came the word that sealed Charlie’s fate.

“Sure.”

Eleven months later, Charlotte DeChant became Charlie’s stepmom. And by then, Charlie had vowed to never set foot in the tower again.



CHAPTER THREE

THE MIDNIGHT MEETING

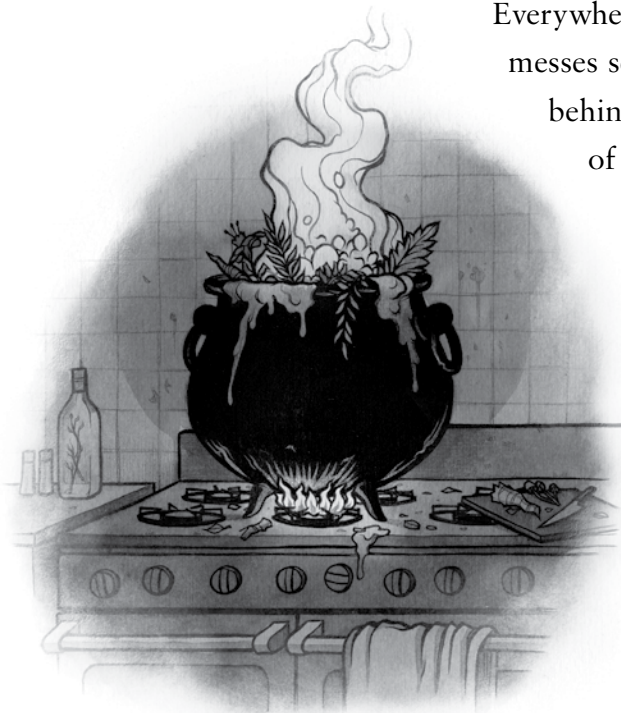
In the three years since his mother had passed away, Charlie Laird had learned not to trust appearances. His mom had *looked* healthy—almost up to the month she died. Charlie himself appeared totally normal—while the truth was, his life was anything but. And everyone thought Charlotte DeChant made a perfect stepmom. Only Charlie knew that she wasn't at all who she appeared to be. He could tell it was all a disguise.

Charlie stood in the doorway of the mansion's kitchen, hunting for the blinking green light on the coffeemaker. He let his eyes adjust and scanned the rest of the room.



It looked safe enough, but seeing wasn't always believing these days. He took a cautious step inside. The only light in the room came from a weak blue flame that flickered beneath Charlotte's favorite black cauldron. The kitchen had been renovated, and the brushed-steel stove was brand-new, but Charlotte's pots and pans looked like they'd been forged in the Middle Ages. And whatever ointment or potion she was cooking smelled like a mixture of dead rodents and dog farts. Charlie didn't need the light to know that the floor was probably slick with roots and leaves that hadn't made it into the bubbling pot.

Everywhere Charlotte went, messes seemed to sprout up behind her. The jungle of plants on the mansion's front porch made leaving the house seem like a trek through the Amazon. Inside, the rooms were all cluttered with half-empty herb jars and gunky old beakers. You couldn't sit on a



couch without squishing a mushroom or being poked in the rump by a shriveled root, and it drove Charlie crazy. He'd tried tidying up once or twice, but Charlotte's cat, Aggie, would just follow him, knocking over everything he'd put in place. In Charlotte's world, Hazel's Herbarium was the only place where order was allowed to rule. Charlie's stepmother kept her shop perfectly organized. Every pod, seed, or fungus that nature produced was stored in a glass container and labeled precisely. More than a thousand such jars lined the store's many shelves.

Hazel's Herbarium was a sight to behold—and no one in Cypress Creek had ever beheld anything like it. For a few weeks after the store's grand opening, some of the older kids at school had teased Charlie about his dad's weird girlfriend, who dressed in black and cooked up smelly potions. The jokes ended when Charlotte cured one of the bullies of the pimples that were eating his face and helped the mayor get rid of his goiter. After that, Hazel's Herbarium was always busy, and nobody whispered when Charlotte walked by. The whole town had fallen under her spell.

The kitchen was too dark to navigate, so Charlie opened the refrigerator for a little light. Stepping over a mysterious puddle on the floor, he made his way to the coffee machine on the far side of the room. There was usually a bit of cof-





fee left over from breakfast, but today, someone had gone and cleaned out the pot. Charlie dragged a chair to the counter and climbed up to grab grounds from the top shelf of the cabinet. He put a filter into the coffeemaker, the way he'd seen Charlotte do. He added ten scoops of coffee and a potful of water. He'd just pressed start when something warm and hairy brushed against his legs.

Charlie's heart nearly flew out of his chest. Stepping back from the counter, he tripped over the creature lurking behind him and landed with a thump on the floor.

"Meow," said Aggie triumphantly. She lifted one paw and gave it a leisurely lick.

Charlie had always liked cats, but Aggie was a demon in an orange fur coat. "You evil little . . .," he growled. Then he heard footsteps on the stairs. In an instant, Charlie was on his feet.

"Charlie? Is that you?"

The stepmonster had appeared in the doorway, her robe pulled tight and her phoniest grin in place. She wanted Charlie to think she was surprised to see him, but the glimmer in her eyes gave her away. She'd been waiting to catch him.

Charlotte came closer, and her nostrils twitched as she sniffed the air.

"Does your father know you drink coffee?"

In the dim light cast by the refrigerator, Charlotte's

features looked perfectly ghoulish. Her cheeks were hollow, her nose seemed to have grown pointier, and her curly hair stuck out like a clown wig. Charlie's friend Rocco said Charlotte was pretty. Charlie thought she looked like a . . .

"Whew! That smells pretty potent. How much coffee did you put in there?" she asked, peering into the pot.

Charlie expected her to switch off the machine. Instead, she grabbed a mug from the cupboard and placed it on the counter in front of him. "Probably won't kill you, but it's gonna taste like mud."

World's Best Stepmom was printed on the front of the mug. The cup had been his little brother's Christmas present to the woman who'd stolen their father. There were a million regular mugs in the cupboard. Charlotte had picked this one on purpose.

"Really?" Charlie asked carefully. "You're going to let me drink coffee?"

"Would it really do any good if I tried to stop you?" Charlotte asked. "Besides, I started drinking coffee when I was right around your age."

While the coffee was still brewing, the stepmonster poured them both a mug. "Care to join me?" she asked, pulling a stool up to the kitchen island.

Charlie didn't budge. He stared at the coffee. He wanted it more than anything in the world, but he wouldn't give her the satisfaction. And who knew what she might have





slipped in it. He'd watched Charlotte haul crates of little glass bottles upstairs to her lair. Strange liquids sloshed in some of them; others contained powders or pills or goopy gels. These were her special concoctions—the ones she didn't sell in her store. Only Charlotte knew what they really were. She *claimed* the bottles held herbal remedies. But Charlie was willing to bet that at least one of them was filled with some kind of stepson remover. He was pretty sure Charlotte wanted him out of the way.

“Have a seat,” Charlotte said. “It's time we had a heart-to-heart.” There was still a smile on the stepmonster's face, but her eyes were serious. It wasn't a request. It was an *order*.

Charlie snorted to cover his nervousness. “You think we're going to be best friends if you let me drink coffee?” It shocked him a little to hear himself be so rude. He used to be able to keep his feelings hidden under the surface, but lately his anger seemed to have a mind of its own. He called it the darkness. It felt like black tar—the kind that swallows up anything that it touches. It had started bubbling up inside him around the same time the nightmares began. Now he couldn't seem to keep it inside.

“What's the deal, Charlie?” Charlotte asked. “What's got you acting so prickly?”

He could have recited a list of the stepmonster's crimes, but they would have been there all night.





“You’d be prickly too if someone stole your family,” Charlie replied.

Charlotte took in a sharp breath. Her eyes were narrowed when she spoke. “I haven’t *stolen* anyone. I don’t want to replace your mom, Charlie.”

She’d said it before and the words still got under Charlie’s skin. “You *couldn’t*. No matter how hard you tried. My mom was the nicest, smartest—”

Charlotte held up a hand in surrender. “Yes, I know. You’ve told me a hundred times. I remember her too.” She paused and stared at the contents of her cup. “I’m guessing a heart-to-heart isn’t in our cards, but there’s still a question I need to ask you, Charlie. Why do you keep coming down for coffee every night?”

Charlie crossed his arms. He refused to say a word.

For a moment, Charlotte studied him silently—the same way she sometimes did when she thought no one was looking. “You know, you’re just like Veronica. She could be every bit as stubborn as you.”

When he heard his mother’s name, Charlie couldn’t hold his tongue. “Stop pretending that you knew my mom.”

“I never told you this before because I know the subject is sensitive. But for your information, Veronica and I met right here in this house when we were both twelve years old,” Charlotte shot back, her green eyes daring him to disagree. “Didn’t she ever tell you any stories about the mansion?”

“What kind of stories?” Charlie replied, faking a yawn. He wanted to look bored, but the conversation had taken a turn for the weird, and Charlotte had him hooked.

The stepmonster leaned forward with an arched eyebrow. “If you’d heard your mother’s stories, you wouldn’t have forgotten them.”

The answer rattled Charlie. He remembered his mother warning him to stay away from the house. Then it hit him. Something must have happened to his mom in the mansion—something bad enough to scare her for years. And it had to be Charlotte DeChant’s fault. “What did you do to my mom?” he demanded.

Charlotte sat back with a huff and a roll of her eyes. “Did she *say* I did something to her?”

Charlie leveled his eyes at the stepmonster. “She never got the chance, Charlotte. “But she did tell me to stay away from this mansion, and now I know why. There’s something very wrong with this house.”

Charlotte was so still that Charlie wondered if she’d suddenly frozen solid. “What exactly do you think is wrong with the house?” she finally asked.

Charlie considered telling her everything—but caught himself before he did anything stupid. “You’re in it,” he said with his meanest smile.

He could have been mistaken, but Charlotte seemed almost *relieved*. “Look, I don’t know much about kids, and





I've never been good at the warm, fuzzy stuff. So forgive me if this sounds a bit blunt, but it's time for you to pull it together. Otherwise things in this house could get worse than you ever expected."

Charlie laughed at that. "How could things possibly get any worse? I live in the town dump with a crazy woman and her evil cat."

Charlotte flinched, and Charlie could see that his insults had hit their mark. But he didn't care. He hated the stepmonster. And he hated her most for turning him into someone so horrible. Charlie could remember being a nice person once. Now he was always mad. Sometimes he didn't even know why. It was as if the day he'd moved into the purple house, his heart had shriveled up inside his chest.

Charlie slid down from his stool, picked up his coffee cup, and dumped its contents in the sink. "Look, I don't want to talk to you. I just came down for some coffee. Now you've managed to ruin *that* too."

"Charlie, coffee won't help." Charlotte reached across the kitchen island to grab Charlie's arm, but he ducked away. "If your problem is what I think it is, there's no point in staying awake."

Before Charlie could ask what she meant, she was on her feet. "Wait right here a sec while I run upstairs," Charlotte said, as if struck by inspiration. "I have something in

my office that you might want a look at, and I think it's probably time to show you.”



Charlie didn't want to see anything the stepmonster wanted to show him. As soon as he heard Charlotte's footsteps on the tower stairs, he sprinted up to his room and quickly pushed a half-dozen boxes against the door. Then he crawled into bed, pulled the covers over his head, and hoped his anger would keep him awake.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Jack



Charlie



Paige



Rocco



Alfie



Two (seriously) scary guys



Learn more about Charlie, his friends, and the seriously scary nightmares at NightmaresNovels.com.



JASON SEGEL used to have nightmares just like Charlie, and just like Charlie, he's learned that the things we're most afraid of are the things that can make us strong . . . if we're brave enough to face them. Jason likes acting, writing, making music, and hanging out with his friends.



MICHAEL MULLER

Sometimes he writes movies. Sometimes he writes songs for movies. Sometimes he stars in those movies and sings those songs. You might know him from *The Muppets* and *Despicable Me*. Your parents might know him from other stuff. *Nightmares!* is his first novel.

KIRSTEN MILLER

grew up in a small town just like Cyprus Creek, minus the purple mansion. She lives and writes in New York City. She's the author of the acclaimed Kiki Strike books and the Eternal Ones series. You can visit her at kirstenmillerbooks.com.



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SLEEP TIGHT, JACK.
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