

# Imaginary

Poppy Jackson

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Summary: Seventeen-year-old Charlotte Todd hasn't seen her imaginary childhood friend, Benjamin, for nine years. When he mysteriously returns, he brings with him both true love and a deadly secret.

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For Mystic

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*I'm a believer  
Nothing could be worse  
All these imaginary friends...  
- Breaking Benjamin  
"Evil Angel"*

*The imagination may be compared  
To Adam's dream - he awoke and found  
It to be truth*

*- John Keats in a letter to  
Benjamin Bailey*



# CHAPTER 1

I stared out the window from my desk chair and watched the sun come up over the rows of houses. I blinked multicolored dots. I did so glumly, legs pulled against my chest, chin on knees, arms wrapped around my legs.

My parents were fighting again this morning. You'd think that if two people were getting a divorce and didn't live in the same house anymore, it would cut back on the fighting and they would actually have less to fight about. That's how I saw it, but every time Dad comes back for another box, it's like the bombing of Pearl Harbor all over.

I know that at seventeen years old, you should be able to brush it off like it's nothing and move on, but no matter how old you are, you never want your parents to split up. But the wheel is already in motion; the divorce is almost final now.

Of course, I wasn't surprised when they finally sat me down and told me what was going on. By this time, they didn't even like each other anymore. Dad hadn't been sleeping at home most nights and when he did, he slept on the brown, leather couch in the living room.

I guess it all started last spring when Mom found women's underwear in Dad's pickup - that weren't hers - and Dad denied that he had any knowledge of them being there. He tried to blame it on one of his

friends at work borrowing his truck, which later Mom found out was a lie as well.

Because it is very obvious that I can't stop them from getting a divorce, I wish that life would go on normally for Mom and me when he's gone. That sounds cold and indifferent, sure, but I'm resigned. I wish for Mom to be happy again, even if that means without Dad. I wish I could provide some kind of comfort for my mom... that I knew what to say.

I wasn't aware how late I was running until the knock at my bedroom door. I wasn't even dressed yet. I still had on my long nightshirt and tube socks.

It was my best friend Moody Johnston, talking through the door, yelling actually, telling me to hurry up even though he could honestly care less if we were late or not. I rolled my eyes and slipped on black cargo pants and a white t-shirt, then threw on my East Ridge High School hoodie. I pulled on my Vans deliberately slow just to bug him.

"Charlotte, so help me, if you don't hurry up, I am going to break down this door and toss you over my shoulder and carry you out myself."

I knew Moody, and while I could plainly hear the joking edge to his voice, he really would do all of those things; Moody was a man of his word.

This whole routine isn't new either; he does his drill sergeant bit at least once a month. I only laughed, smeared on a little eyeliner and fluffed up my short, brown, gold tinted, curls.



"You swear?" I asked, grabbing my bag off of the floor.

I paused before opening the door to see if he would respond. He didn't. I opened my door and found him leaning against the wall staring at nothing.

"Hello, earth to Moody," I said on my tiptoes, waving a hand in front of his pale face.

Moody's an albino, and 'Moody' isn't even his real name. He decided to legally change it to something that is as special as he.

"Yeah, I'm here," he said with a curved grin.

I checked my watch. We were so late. I was glad my mom, Evelyn, left for work at the crack of dawn after having another blow out with Dad, or I would be in serious trouble. She'd been cracking down a lot harder lately. Last week, she grounded me for borrowing her car and leaving the takeout bags from Magoo's in it overnight. I could have only imagined the smell.

"Do I look okay?" I asked, patting down my loose curls.

Moody rolled his eyes and offered that sarcastic grin of his.

"I've seen better," Moody said.

I punched his arm, smiling anyway.

"We're late," I announced the obvious, after shoving him.

Moody pouted.

"But what about my perfect attendance record?"

Moody did his best hound dog impression. He has pink irises due to some color pigmentation distortion that happens when you're an albino.

"I think you'll live," I said, heading for the garage.

On my way out, I noticed there were boxes of my dad's stuff on top of the kitchen table with a few of Mom's work samples next to them.

Mom works as a biology professor at UTC and tells me, "If you love your job, you never work a day of your life." What a load of crock. Moody and I work at Magoo's - a tavern in town. I'm a waitress, and he's a bus boy. There's nothing to love about standing on your feet for hours and having to deal with crappy customers and their crappy tips, or the occasional weirdo that calls me "Sugar." Still, Magoo's has the best French Dip sandwich and sweet tea in town. I should know; I've been dining on that combination since I was nine years old.

"Well, better late than never," I said, as we sneaked through the empty halls of our school.

We decided to hide out in the library for homeroom when we figured it was too risky to try to get in.

We sat on the back wall of the library listening to Breaking Benjamin on Moody's iPod. My mind started to drift back to the night I first met Moody. It

was a night that neither of us - no matter how much we might want to at some point - would ever forget.

I was twelve, in my first year of middle school, when we first met. A couple and their adopted son finally bought the house across the street. It didn't really make a difference to me, but Mom and Dad and a lot of other nosey people in the neighborhood wanted to welcome them to our lame little cul-de-sac on Justine Lane. About a month after they moved in, a get together was planned. Which basically meant they would be invited to a party and asked all kinds of personal questions that made them feel uncomfortable.

The strange thing is, I'd never seen their son at school. Of course, he was there because I heard the other kids make fun of him. I didn't feel good about it, but at least the teasing wasn't directed at me anymore.

Around midnight, the party was still going on at Mrs. Bate's. I was sitting at my window staring at the two-story, stucco house the Johnston's had moved into. There were lights on in an downstairs bedroom that I later learned was the son's room, so I figured he was still awake, but his curtains were drawn. If they weren't, the way their house is angled, I'd be able to see right into his window. He could probably see into mine right now.

I'd been trying to get to sleep for the past hour, but it just wasn't happening. I knew what I needed to do to relax. It was something that Benjamin had told me; well not in so many words, but it always helped just

the same. I highly doubt Benjamin would approve of me lying down in the middle of the road.

I slipped on my old ratty sneakers and big hoodie, because it was really cold for September, opened the window and crawled out into the azalea bush. Since I was home alone, the front door was an option, but it was a lot more fun this way.

Ducking low behind the bushes at the edge of Mrs. Bate's yard, I headed westward to the center of the cul-de-sac.

There were no street lamps in the middle of the cul-de-sac, which is why I liked it so much; it was easier to see the stars. I stepped into the very center, looked heavenward and dropped to the ground. I sprawled out on the cold cement with arms at my sides and tried to relax every bone. The stars were in perfect alignment around the waning moon.

I do this a lot - just lay in the middle of the street - sometimes in the middle of the day. It scares my mother to death to watch me lying motionless. And I know that I'm the talk of suburbia. They call me an unhealthy freak; which is probably why I didn't get very many babysitting gigs. As a kid hearing that, it does something to you.

I was in my own world for only a short time before feeling someone's eyes on me. At first, I thought it was a neighbor warning me that they were backing out, but when I looked up it was the albino kid, the one whose face I'd never seen. He was staring down at me perplexed. He was ridiculously handsome for a

twelve-year-old - much less an albino - he just looked very old for his age, and I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to make fun of him. He kneeled down next to me.

"Are you okay?" he asked uncomfortably, eyebrows pushed together.

"Yeah, I am. Why?" I asked, forgetting that I was lying in the street like roadkill.

The boy seemed intrigued by my lack of caring.

"Well, when I see a random girl laying in the middle of the road, I tend to want to ask these questions," he said.

"Do you come across many of us often?"

"Surprisingly no, I don't, but when I do come across such a rarity, I never remember to ask why they do it."

"It's relaxing when I can't sleep. I like to watch the stars."

"In the middle of the road?" he asked incredulously.

"You know they make these things called telescopes?" he laughed.

But when he laughed, it wasn't at me exactly or to make fun of me. I couldn't help but join in.

"Yeah, you know I've heard of those things, but I have no use for them; come on, try it," I said, patting the cement next to me.

He wavered, looking around.

"I don't think so," he said uneasily.

"Are you chicken or something?" I asked, conveying the most seriousness.

His face hardened.

"No."

I believed him. There was something in his young-old man face that convinced me of that right away.

"Then stop acting like one."

"And we won't get run over?" he asked.

I laughed again.

"Do you see any cars?"

I saw a little smile and then he laid down rigidly, ready to jump up at any moment. He reminded me of a giant cat.

"So what's your name?" he asked casually, eyes darting towards the open road.

"Charlotte Todd. Nice to meet you," stretching my arm over my torso for him to shake.

He took it; his hands were clammy and cold.

"I'm Moody Johnston," he said, dropping my hand. I peered at him out of the corner of my eye.

"That's a strange name," I whispered, mostly to myself.

I had never met someone with an interesting name. I had grown up in a sea of cookie cutter names like Brittany and Ashley.

He laughed.

"It's not my real name; it's more of a... nickname."

"How did you get that nickname?"

He ignored the question and it wasn't until later that he told me.

"Well, then, what's your real name?"

"It's a stupid name," he sighed.

"I won't tell."

He looked at me and smiled; it was brief and more like a twitch at the corner of his mouth.

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"Yeah, I promise."

"William."

His face turned suddenly serious waiting for me to laugh.

I had a feeling if I had laughed then, he would have gotten up and never talked to me again. But I kept my face smooth and emotionless until the moment passed.

"I've seen you at school," he said after a long pause.

"Really?"

"Yeah, you sit alone at lunch."

I looked at him and he was looking at the sky. How was it that I had never seen him, only heard about the "weird albino," yet he had seen me? I decided to hold off on that question, but it gave me both an uneasy and pleasant feeling inside.

"I guess it's not a secret that I don't have any friends."

People tended to avoid me. It's been that way since I was eight when I had my breakdown. Kids are cruel, and they never forget anything.

"Well, that's over," he said boldly.

I glanced at him again, and he was looking at me this time.

"Why is that?" I asked slowly.

"Because I'll sit with you."

It was like he forgot I was a bigger social reject than he was and if he ever had any chance of being normal, he wouldn't be seen with me, the freak that flipped out when she was told she was too old to have an imaginary friend. That didn't matter to him. Or better, he didn't know, which meant I could have a fresh start with a new friend.

"You don't have to," I flushed.

"It's what friends do."

We've been best friends from that night on. We were always together, and we always looked out for each other. We had to; we were the freak show of the school - the Albino Guy and his quiet little friend.



People underestimate Moody; they think because he's so pale and lanky that he'd be easy to beat up. Those people would be wrong. If anyone said anything to me, he would mess him or her up. And trust me, if anyone even looked at Moody wrong, I would do the same, no matter how small I am.

The day went by slowly, like all school days do. Moody begged for us to skip today, but I had a test in history I couldn't miss. And since Moody can't drive until he's twenty-one, I didn't have to worry about him trying to steal my keys and drive my car.

The things he couldn't do had to do with his past. Moody didn't grow up in a happy home until the Johnstons adopted him and what happened before they came into his life couldn't be reversed.

His birth mother had been an albino, and she was very sick with leukemia and died giving birth to him. His father had hated him for it and reminded him of it daily, sometimes with his fists, until one of his teachers noticed the bruises and called Child Protection Services and his dad went to jail.

He was given to his only relative who lived in New Mexico. Well, it turned out that Moody's uncle was smuggling drugs into Mexico and using his three kids to do it. Josie, Matt, and Sean didn't like their cousin much either. Moody had been vague on the details and I didn't pry. But on his first Mexican mission, Moody decided to do a righteous thing. He pulled out a brown ruffled bag from beneath his jacket and shoved it into the border guard's hands. His uncle

flung open the car door and started to run, but the guards quickly caught him. The next time Moody saw his uncle he was being led out of a courtroom in handcuffs.

He was only eight. Moody didn't have any other relatives, so he was put in an orphanage. In less than six months, the Johnstons adopted him. He said they were the only family who ever really loved him. He wanted to show them that adopting him changed his life forever, so he took their last name. Maybe his story did have a happy ending after all.

I often envy his courage and admire how strong he is. I wish I were confident like him, the kind of confidence to rise above and treat the world better than it has treated him.

Today was one of those hard days. Then again, all gym days are hard ones. Moody and I walked to the track that wrapped around the football field. We went our separate ways to change into our gym clothes and met back at the track.

The sun was much too hot for the beginning of autumn, but Moody had to wear a sweatshirt and pants to cover his arms and legs so he wouldn't get sunburned. He doesn't think he has to run, so he doesn't and neither do I, just because I hate to run.

"I think we should go to the cemetery tonight," Moody said suddenly, as a pair of blond, magnificently bronzed girls, Cammy Fisher and Tara Groves, passed us and rolled their eyes as they jogged by.

"Why?" I asked, drumming my index finger on the cap of my water bottle.

"Why not?" he said, grabbing my bottle from my hand and taking a sip.

"Well, for one, if Rick catches us again, he'll call the cops." Rick is the caretaker at the Mount Olivet Cemetery.

"That's simple, we won't get caught," he said with a smile.

It was hard to resist smiling too.

"Fine. What time?"

"The dead walk at midnight," he teased.

"You're weird," I said.

"You say that like it's something new."

"Are we going to walk?" I asked.

"I'd love to see you get your car out of your garage without your mom hearing. We'll just get our bikes out of my garage," he said.

Sometimes he can have a bit of an attitude.

"Or we could go to the Memorial Gardens, they're closer and no Rick."

"Fine by me," he shrugged.

"Okay then," I said.

That night I climbed out of my window with a small flashlight in my hoodie pocket. I don't hate cemeteries, I actually find them quite beautiful,

peaceful even, and Moody likes them as much as I do. Moody was waiting for me on the street. I clicked the flashlight off and on in front of his face.

"Stop that," he said, grabbing my hand.

He looked at me long and hard for a moment before releasing me. It wasn't a scolding look at all, just very intense. Like he was about to say something, but couldn't. I put my light back in my hoodie.

"I hope you don't expect me to walk the whole way," I said.

I looked up at the sky and it felt like being in the middle of a large dome. Protected and concealed by it. At that moment, I wished I had the old telescope my mother bought me in a failed attempt to get me off the road, my favorite place to stare at the stars. But I accidentally broke the lens.

"All right, then," he sighed. "Get on my back."

I just laughed.

"Moody, I would kill you."

"Oh, because you've never ridden on my back before."

"That was years ago, thank you," I said.

"Oh, so that wasn't you who insisted I carry you around Six Flags all day last summer? No, you're probably right, it had to be that other four-foot-nine, ninety-pound, seventeen-year-old girl I was with."

I barely contained a laugh.

"Still..."

"Are you going to get on or not, this is not an all-night offer."

I climbed on his back. He groaned.

"You are heavy," he laughed. I swatted him in the back of his head. "I'm kidding, come on, let's go."

When we arrived at Memorial Garden Cemetery, we went to our favorite spot, next to the Stanley family plot. We were lying on the grass with our heads close together, but we were sprawled out in different directions.

"So what was the reason for coming out here?" I asked, turning my head to look at him.

He shrugged.

"Do you ever just need to go somewhere quiet?" he asked.

I nodded to myself. I knew that feeling a lot more lately.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"People, that's all."

"You can tell me," I assured him. "If it's bad, I'll only laugh a little."

He knocked his head against mine.

"Did I tell you that I was in therapy before I came here? I mean I was fine, but not many people thought so."

"Yeah," I said.

He happened to tell me about the therapy on the same day I told him about Benjamin. The best and worst part about having a best friend is that they know everything about you and you about them.

"What about it?"

"Tina and David seem to think that you've been a good influence on me all these years," he said.

"So what's the problem?"

"Well, I heard them talking. They seem to think that I might need it again - therapy, I mean - but I think it would be completely pointless. My thoughts aren't that interesting. And I didn't mean to burn down the shed and I built a new one in its place."

I had almost forgotten about that. The famous summer shed fire had happened over three months ago. Moody had been trying to fix the grill in the back yard. Neither the shed, nor the grill survived.

"So what did you say?"

"That they shouldn't waste their money and I'm completely okay. It just seems like every little thing sets them off, you know. Like they don't trust me," he said and I could feel his breath tickling my neck.

"They do trust you, Moody, they're just worried about you."

"Worried that I'll set the house on fire."

"You're lucky they care at all. You could have been hauled off to live with some family that doesn't give a crap. They love you; you're their son and you know that," I said propping myself up on one elbow.

"I know," he said, his tone implying the conversation was over.

"So what was therapy like?" I asked.

"You don't want to know, kid," he said with no humor.

"I just needed a place to clear my head that's all. Don't worry after a few months of this divorce crap your parents are going through, they'll recommend therapy to you too," Moody said.

I sighed.

"I just can't stand it, you know. Why do divorces have to be such ugly things?"

Moody shrugged. "I don't know."

At that moment there was a howl in the wind that made my eyes bug out of my head. Moody and I sat up at the same time and looked at each other for a long moment, then we laughed.

"I guess the dead really do walk at midnight," I said still laughing.

In the morning Mom came in, fully dressed and ready for work. Her face was severe, her lips were pressed tightly together and her eyes were narrowed. She stood across from me as I sat at the counter, washing down my Cap'n Crunch with an Orange

Crush. I didn't like this look; it was the Mom Look. She had adopted that look nearly permanently about three months ago.

"I know you were out last night," she said cutting right to it.

I gulped. "I uh..." I said, looking down at my cereal.

"Where did you go?" Were you lying in the road again? You know I hate it when you do that," she said.

I went along with that. I didn't want Moody to get in trouble too.

"I know, but it relaxes me. I'm sorry, though," I said, staring her right in the eyes.

She came over to me and gave me a hug, obviously seeing what I wanted her to see.

"I just don't like it, sweetie, what if you get run over?"

"It's not like I go out onto the highway or anything," I argued.

She sighed.

"Just promise me you won't do it anymore."

I bit down on my lip and crossed my fingers under the counter.

"I promise."

I hated to lie, but there are things I can't sacrifice; there are some things I can't live without.



"Okay, then I'll see you after work Char... Love you," she said at the garage door.

Just because I said I was sorry, didn't mean I wasn't going to do it again.

There was a reason I did what I did, but I tried not to think about it.



## CHAPTER 2

After school, Moody and I crashed at his house before we had to go to work at five. I sat perched on the arm of his couch in the living room dipping a plastic spoon into a jar of Jif Peanut Butter with my math book balanced on my lap.

"You should really do your homework, Moody," I said, licking my thumb and putting the cap back on the jar.

Moody snorted.

"Please," he said rolling his eyes and continuing flipping the channels.

I elbowed him and sank down onto the couch next to him. I looked down at the math book and my mind rejected the numbers and symbols as if they were a different language. I chewed on the eraser of my pencil.

Moody's hand wrapped around my wrist and pulled my hand and pencil away from my mouth.

"Do you realize how gross that is?" he asked, only half teasing.

He plucked the pencil from between my fingers and set it on the coffee table. I tried to reclaim my hand, but he held on to it in a challenging way. I smiled at the game, pulling away harder as his grip tightened. He loosened his grip and dropped my hand.

For some reason I couldn't shake the thought that he wasn't just playing around, but that's stupid, right? Moody is just my friend and I'm just his, right? I knew where I stood, but at that moment, I couldn't say the same for him.

"Yeah, well, it could be worse. I could dip Oreos in peanut butter."

"You can't dip Oreos in peanut butter and... please don't tell me you just double dipped your spoon in the peanut butter; we eat out of that you know," Moody said as I licked my double-dipped spoon.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Okay, that's gross. That's your jar now; we'll label it Char's Double Dipped Jar," Moody said, and I was sure he was joking. We had been sharing food since forever.

On the way to work, Moody sifted through my CD collection. My mind was floating as we traveled through town. The little shops and gas stations cluttering the side of the road seemed as distant as the mountains on the horizon. The beautiful heat was blistering even though it was the beginning of autumn.

"So are we going to the Halloween dance?" Moody asked suddenly.

"Why should we?" I asked, pretending not to be horrified.

"Because we could dress like ourselves and not be a freak show for once."

I laughed.

"As tempting as that sounds, I don't think so," I said as Moody adjusted his sunglasses.

Moody needs special sunglasses because his eyes are so sensitive. The hood of his navy blue jacket was up to block out the sun. It's a wonder that boy hasn't died of a heat stroke.

"Don't be like that, Char. Your shyness is normally very cute, but at this moment, it's a little annoying," he said and his voice was irritated, there was no mistaking it.

"I'm not strong like you, Moody," I whispered, my eyes starting to sting.

"Charlotte, don't do that. You know I can stand anyone's tears, but yours," he shook his head slowly.

He could be harsh with anyone, but me. I'm his only friend and he would never take me for granted.

"And yes, you are, Charlotte, you're very strong. You would tear anyone limb from limb if they even looked at me wrong; you don't see how strong you are," he said as we sat in the parking lot of the restaurant.

"Thanks," I muttered. "But, this whole thing with my dad is really -"

"Char," Moody gave me a long suffering look, "everything is going to be okay. Trust me."

"You only say that because it's not your parents."

That comment sort of slipped out of my mouth.

Moody considered this.

"That's probably true. But you have to believe that everything will be okay."

We met around the front of the car and walked toward the back entrance of Magoo's. The outside of the restaurant is a red brick building with a patio on the front. Inside the dimly lit restaurant, sat a whole table of guys from school. They were in the very front making obscene animal noises. Boys.

"Hey there, Powder!" the big jocks called to Moody.

Moody didn't say anything and kept walking. Then, as we passed them, one of them stuck his foot out and tripped Moody. He didn't fall, only stumbled, but that was enough to make me angry.

"Cut it out, you idiot," I snapped.

They all laughed at me.

"We heard how you like to lay in the road, Charlotte. Why don't you go lay down on the highway," Donovan Scott said to me.

Donovan towered over me like a huge building with feet. Then Moody, my perpetual savior, jumped in front of me. He was an inch shorter than Donovan, but that didn't matter, Moody seemed to grow taller.

"Hey, back off freak," Donovan said.

It was clear in his voice that it alarmed him for Moody to be so close. To them, Moody was a freak, an alien, something that isn't human. But what do they know?

"Go to hell," Moody snarled.

I grabbed the hood of Moody's jacket to hold him back.

"Come on, we'll be late for work," I whispered.

At first, it didn't seem like he was going to, but then, he stepped down and backed away. The other guys started laughing.

"That's right, Powder, just keep walking," Donovan said.

Moody stepped in the opposite direction, his fists balled and I thought he was just going to let it go, but then, he turned back swiftly and punched him in the nose.

Donovan looked surprised, Moody looked angry, and everyone else just looked shocked.

"Moody!" I yelled. "Stop it!"

I tried to step in the middle of them, but just as Moody was about to shove Donovan, he accidentally slammed me into the wall. I hit my head and everything went black. Everything was fuzzy and I was sure that I was knocked out, and that, surely, what happened next was a dream...





## CHAPTER 3

My mind began to dredge up memories that I worked so hard to suppress: Benjamin had been more than my imaginary friend; he had been my best friend. An imaginary friend is sacred to a child and when he left me when I was eight years old, he made me question everything I had known to be true. Even if, at that young age, I didn't really know what was going on.

He had told me he would come back and for a long time I waited, but there's only so much an eight year old can do before her parents start throwing words around like therapy and medication. I had really lost something special when Benjamin left and I knew that even back then.

I couldn't stop wishing, if only to myself, that Benjamin would come back now and save me. Tell me not to worry like he used to.

Then, on my tenth birthday my parents laid it down for me, plain and simple, not being gentle or subtle, so they wouldn't be misunderstood: Benjamin isn't real.

At first, I didn't want to believe them, I had kicked and screamed and tried to run away from home. I wanted to find him and prove them wrong.

It wasn't until Mom and Dad found me on the side of the road, two miles from home, that something inside me... died. Ever since that car ride home, I used

those words like a mantra: Benjamin isn't real... Benjamin isn't real... Benjamin isn't real...

He's the reason I lie in the middle of the road at night. It was the only thing from him I held on to. Mom didn't know, if she did, I don't know how she would react. But I had always hoped that wherever he was, if he were with another child or whatever, he would be able to look up at the sky and think of me. It was the only thing we had that couldn't change.

I saw Benjamin's face now. His face, the one I had almost convinced myself wasn't real. Everything about it was so vivid. I could even make out the subtle textures of his complexion. His excited velvet blue eyes, jet-black hair and his pale skin. Long, lean, and elegant and so stunning it made me hurt to think about it.

I wanted the image to go away, but at the same time, I didn't. He was standing there smiling at me like an angel. Feeling this pain was better than feeling nothing at all, I realized.

"Benjamin?" I whispered, looking around me, finding that the place I was in, had four white walls and a white floor.

The light was coming from nowhere but everywhere at the same time, leaving gray edges around my vision. It was painfully clear to me this was all a dream.

"Hey there, my little spider."

I remembered when he used to call me that. Neither of us was crazy about the book, Charlotte's Web, nor did I like that nickname (or look like a black widow for that matter).

I used to get so mad at him because of it, but I wasn't going to waste time thinking about that.

"No, you can't be here," I whispered, shaking my head.

"I am," he nodded encouragingly.

I stepped towards him, but then stepped back apprehensively. What if he was a ghost I couldn't touch and my hand went right through him, or worse, if he disappeared. I couldn't handle that- I would regress. All the walls I had put up around my memories of him would crumble down like the walls of Jericho. All the work I had put into forgetting him would be obsolete. Nothing.

"I won't disappear if you touch me," he said, seeing my hesitation and reading it.

That was all I needed to throw myself into his arms. He didn't disappear and I felt his arms wrap around me. I couldn't explain the joy I knew at that moment or how my blood was singing in my veins.

Whole. That was it, suddenly I felt whole.

"Where have you been, Benjamin?" I asked, my face pressed into his chest.

I suddenly felt so much younger again.

"I wasn't on a vacation, trust me," he whispered.

I didn't imagine the sorrow there.

"When I wake up, you'll be gone," I said certainly.

He laughed a small, humorless laugh.

"That is true," he admitted reluctantly.

"But I will be back for you soon."

I looked up into his heavenly eyes.

"Really?"

"I told you I would and when you're ready, when you're old enough to understand... I will."

"Why not now?" I asked, helpless.

"Because I'm just warning you. I'm not really here yet," he said, which didn't make a lot of sense.

I shook my head. My mouth tasted dry and thick and my heart was vibrating throughout my whole body.

"Don't leave me, not again," I begged.

Benjamin wasn't smiling anymore, his eyes were pained.

"It won't be long, my little spider, and then we'll be together again."

Those words made my heart explode.

There was so much I had left to ask and I wanted to get some of it out before he disappeared again. There were so many jumbled thoughts in my head, but the only thing that came out was:

"Why?"

"I'll explain everything, I promise."

"Soon?" I whispered, desperately feeling this coming to a close.

I wasn't ready for him to leave; I wanted to stay here forever.

"Soon. I love you," he said, and then, he was gone.

When I started to come to, I felt something touching my forehead and my eyes flew open hoping it was Benjamin. But it wasn't him; it was Moody.

Moody looked relieved when he saw my eyes open. I was back in the real world and I didn't belong, not without him. I had completely forgotten all about Moody and the fight when I was with Benjamin for those few wonderful moments.

"Oh crap, Charlotte, I'm so sorry I didn't mean to..." he said.

I sat up and realized I wasn't where I had fallen. I was in a booth. My head hurt and Moody handed me an ice pack. I smiled and took it.

"I'm okay... where's your friend?" I teased, looking at Moody's busted lip.

He smirked ruefully.

"He won't bother you again."

"You know I can't condone violence just for the sake of violence."

"Maybe I was defending your honor."

"You didn't have to do that," I told him.

"If I didn't take care of you, who would I take care of?" he asked. "Well, I didn't do such a good job today," he added painfully.

"I don't want you to feel like you have to protect me, Moody," I said, my voice small and not as forceful as I wanted it to be.

"I don't feel like I have to do anything Charlotte, I want to."

He had an intense look on his face that I had only seen a handful of times. Most of those times were when I would glance at him and catch him off guard.

"So how much trouble are we in?" I asked, grabbing a napkin from the dispenser on the table next to the condiments.

Moody's bottom lip began to bleed again. I grabbed his chin gently and pressed the napkin to my tongue to make it a little wet. At first he resisted, but then he sighed and gave up. I dabbed his lip.

"Well, do you want the good news or the bad news first?" he asked, licking his upper lip dryly.

"Start with the bad. It'll only get better from there."

"We're fired," he smiled grimly.

"Why am I fired, I wasn't even in that fight?"

"You caused the fight," he joked, "or at least that's what that jerk said to our wonderful ex-manager, Mr. Spade."

"I'm almost afraid to ask for the good news."

"We're not going to jail," he said.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"No Charlotte, don't be sorry. You didn't do anything. It's my stupid temper... I'm sorry I pushed you. You know I didn't mean to. But next time I'm defending you, don't try to stop me."

I started to laugh, I couldn't help myself.

*Benjamin... I thought. Benjamin was real. He was coming and I hadn't been dreaming*

I knew this like I knew nothing else. I was so happy I could just faint. But I wouldn't tell Moody, he would think I was a raving lunatic.

My eyes drifted towards a man sitting several booths behind us. When I saw him, my heart stopped. He had dark hair and a pale face. I dropped the bloody napkin from my hand and gaped open-mouthed.

"Are you okay, Char?" Moody asked, seeing that I was.

"I just need to go see something," I said, scooting out of the booth like I was in a trance.

I walked down the aisle of booths slowly, feeling like a zombie.

"Charlotte, where are you going?" I heard Moody say behind me, but I didn't turn around.

The guy had his face turned to the window as I slid into the seat across from him. He looked at me and my world came crashing down.

*It wasn't Benjamin. Of course it wasn't him, how could I have been so stupid?*

Maybe it was just wishful thinking, he looked nothing like Benjamin. The stranger smiled at me.

"Hello," he said.

I felt a little embarrassed and very awkward.

"Um, hi," I whispered.

"Can I help you with something?" he asked while looking me over in a way that made me feel even more uncomfortable.

I fidgeted, and looked back at Moody, who was giving me the *WTF* look.

"Um, no I - you just looked like someone. Sorry," I said and slid out of the booth.

"What the hell was that all about?" Moody asked when I got back to the booth.

I rubbed my forehead with my knuckles.

"I thought I recognized someone. I think I just need to go home."

Moody probably thought I was out of my mind, which I was. But who knows, I could have a concussion.



Later that night I was feeling stronger but restless, so I headed out to the cemetery a half-mile from my house.

"Hey," Moody said, leaning over the small crypt I was lying on.

This was the place I came if I was too restless to go to the middle of the cul-de-sac and I needed to walk for a bit, if nothing else than to tire myself out.

"Hey," I yawned.

It's like once the sun goes down, I'm unable to relax. I had dreamt about Benjamin, off and on, all night. I drifted into a state of non-sleep and actually believed Benjamin was here, only to wake up so excited, but then realized he really wasn't. It was like losing him all over again.

I turned my head to look at Moody. I needed to tell someone. And if he didn't understand, no one would.

"Moody, if I tell you something, will you promise not to think I'm crazy?"

Moody looked at me with a confused expression. He laughed.

"Sure, kid. But you are lying on some dead person's crypt, it doesn't get much crazier than that."

"Be serious," I said.

"Okay."

I took a deep breath and let it all out.

"You know how I had an imaginary friend when I was younger? Well, I'm beginning to think that he wasn't made-up."

I could feel his eyes on me, but I continued, this time only looking up at the tree branches that eclipsed my view of the night sky.

"When I was eight he left and it broke my heart. I hardly ate or slept for months. But he had promised to come back to me."

My words came out in a rush now, as I lay otherwise still, looking up at nothing. I felt like I was in a morbid version of a therapist's office. I had told Moody I freaked out, but I hadn't gone into detail and he hadn't pressed me about it.

"I had nearly forgotten about it ... or I had suppressed it enough to the point I didn't think about it all the time. And then when I was knocked out this afternoon, I saw *him* and it was so vivid, and I knew I wasn't dreaming or anything like that. There were details of his face I hadn't forgotten, so I know that I didn't just make it up. He said he was coming for me, coming soon, and I think he will. I know this sounds crazy, Moody, but I just know. It's this feeling inside me that tells me it's true," I said, finally braving a glance in his direction.

He was staring at me with fathomless eyes. We said nothing for a long moment, just looking at each other. I looked away first and stared up at the sky.

"You think I'm stupid don't you? You think that I'm out of my mind. I don't blame you. If you had come

to me telling me these bizarre things, I would think so."

"You don't know what I think and that's not it," he said.

"What do you think then?"

"Well, that's not all the way true. I've always thought you were out of your mind. No one in their right mind would want a friend with as many emotional bandages as I have."

He sighed, grabbing my hand and pulling me upright.

"If you believe Benjamin is your great white buffalo, I'm behind you one hundred percent, Char."

His face for once wasn't hidden almost completely by his moon pale hair.

"My what?" I sputtered a laugh.

"Great white buffalo. You know, it's something that was really great in your life, but then it got away."

"Thank you," I whispered.

I gave him a hug. I was thanking him for more than just listening, but also for not judging me, and for making me laugh.

"I have to ask, though," he said, pulling away.

I forget sometimes he doesn't really like physical affection.

"Yeah?"

"Today when you went over to that guy, you thought he was Benjamin didn't you?"

I reddened and tried to hide my face hoping that he wouldn't see.

"Did I mention that I hit my head today?" I said teasingly.

He laughed.

"Come on kid, let's go home and get some sleep."

I nodded, feeling like a great weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I just needed someone to know. I particularly needed Moody to know, even if he didn't understand.

That's what is so great about Moody. He was a judge when I needed him to be and an observer when I needed that. I couldn't have a better best friend.

I let Moody gently pull me off of the crypt, landing on my feet with a light thud. He looked over his shoulder as we headed back to the entrance of the cemetery.

"How can you stand laying on one of those things? It's creepy," Moody said cringing.

"I don't find them creepy."

"That's because you're creepy."

"Am not."