

Chapter One

“Dylan, I absolutely cannot believe that we’re doing this!” My girlfriend, Monica, was sitting across from me in the rowboat with the widest smile on her face. “I mean, do you know how *long* I’ve been dreaming about it?”

I tried my best to smile back at her as I fumbled with the oars. We had just set out from the dock in a beat-up rowboat. Why did Monica’s mom have to

have a friend who lived in a cottage right on the water? *And* had an old rowboat we could borrow? Why, Fates, *why*? I'd never rowed a boat in my life, which was only one of the many reasons I'd been dreading this stupid floating picnic along the shore of the lake.

Another reason was the bird-watching part. Monica had her bird book on her lap, a pair of binoculars around her neck and an actual bird-call thingy in her hand. Her mind was set on studying ornithology at university in a couple of years. I could barely even pronounce the word, let alone give a crap about watching birds!

Kill me now, I couldn't stop thinking. But I knew it was really mean.

"We're so lucky to be living in a small town like Bridgewood that's surrounded by water and trees and sky," she reminded me way too often. "There's wildlife everywhere! Doesn't it make

sense to be able to identify at least some of it? It would make me really happy if you would at least give it a try, Dylan."

So now I was trying, with a fake smile plastered across my face. At least it was a nice day. But it was my day off—this was the last thing I wanted to be doing.

"Look! Cool, it's a catbird," Monica said, pointing at some bushes along the shore. "I've never seen one before. Can you hear the mewling sounds it's making?"

"A bird that sounds like a cat?" I said, straining my eyes as I aimed the lens of the awesome digital camera Monica's folks had let me borrow.

I was saving up for a camera of my own. I was hoping to take Media Studies at college, if I ever got there, and maybe make movies someday. The way I saw it, at least I could practice my photography on this boring bird hunt. But I was still wishing

I could be with some of the guys right now, practicing throwing and batting for the pick-up baseball league we'd formed this summer. Monica had promised she would come to my games if I would bird-watch with her. What a trade-off.

"Pay attention, Dylan," Monica said. "I need you to try to row in a little closer to the shore. But don't clunk the oars too much or you'll scare it away."

"Seriously?" I said. "You realize I can barely steer this thing, right?"

"Try," she said. Somehow I managed to guide the rowboat up to the shoreline where there was a nice flat rock to glide up onto. Perfect landing—except for when the bottom scraped against granite, and the bird fluttered away.

"Darn it! Oh well. Thanks for trying." Monica leaned over and patted my leg. "You're actually not so bad at this." Then she sat back and posed for a photo. I caught her awesome smile as she held up her binoculars and grinned.

"This is a good spot for our picnic anyway," she said. "Maybe if we're really quiet the catbird will come back. Keep your eyes on the bushes."

I wasn't really listening. Again.

"*Picnic*, Dylan," she said, nudging me with her foot. "Let's see what your good old gran packed for us in the basket. Your gran rocks," she added. "Did I mention that?"

"Yeah," I told her. "Way too often. But you don't have to live with her and have her in your face all the time. It's like living with two moms, my life with Mom and Gran. Not as much fun as it sounds." I made a goofy face at Monica, and she laughed.

As promised the picnic basket was stuffed with goodies. Gran's trademark tuna-and-apple sandwiches, chocolate-chunk brownies and a bunch of juicy, sweet cherries.

"It's a wonder she still has time for this," Monica said. "Ever since she hooked up with Buddy—"