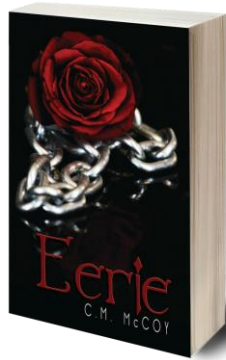


An Eerie Excerpt

(To read more, see the free Kindle edition preview on Amazon by clicking the book cover at the following website: <http://amzn.to/2cv3KFJ>)



chapter 2

A Guarded Girl

“Of all forms of caution, caution in love is perhaps the most fatal to true happiness.”

Bertrand Russell

Hailey stared at the empty can on her tray, silently willing the caffeine to kick in. The last thing she needed was to fall asleep, dream of monsters, and have an “episode” in front of her 200 closest non-friends.

No way she’d let that happen.

Now if only her droopy eyelids would cooperate, because the hard plastic chair under her butt sure wasn’t. The dang thing was teasing her and feeling

mighty comfy, like a puffy armchair, and she was sinking fast. Thankfully, though, just as her head bobbed, the bell rang, jolting her into a wide-eyed, full-body spasm.

Great. Real smooth, she thought, rubbing her face with both hands as a few gigglers shuffled past.

She groaned, rising with all the enthusiasm of a mushroom, not at all looking forward to another two hours inside the social torture chamber, or as everyone else referred to it, South Side High School.

She was so intent on avoiding the students there for the rest of her senior year that she rarely looked up from her books anymore, and those last two hours dragged. When three o'clock finally rolled around, she bolted outside, took the first open seat on the bus, rested her head against the window, and let it bounce there. She was just about to make it through another day of school very happily unnoticed, when Tage Adams smacked her on the back of the head.

“Ah!” she yelled, startled from sleep.

The bus was waiting at their stop, like normal, and Tage was waiting for her in the aisle, politely—not normal.

Tucking a wayward strand behind her ear, she hurried off the bus.

Tage followed.

“What’s up with you today?” he said nonchalantly, adjusting his pace to walk next to her.

He’d never done *that* before.

“Nothing,” Hailey said, surprised Tage was talking to her. They’d been catching the bus at the same stop for four years, and he’d never so much as looked at her.

“You’re usually not like that, that’s all.”

“Like what?”

“Nodding off in class, falling asleep on the bus...you know, slacking off. It’s just, you know, you usually have your nose in a book.”

He watches me?

“Oh,” she said, unsure.

“Guess you were working late last night...St. Paddy’s Day...”

“Yeah.” Of course she was working late. Her family owned the most popular Irish pub in Pittsburgh. Hailey pressed her lips together. Small talk was *not* her thing. Especially not with him.

Her mind went blank.

Searching the pavement for a thought, she chewed her lip as too many seconds stretched the silence. Finally the pressure forced her good sense aside and she opened her mouth to say...anything.

“What’s—”

“Well, see ya ‘round, Dancing Queen.”

She snapped her mouth shut and waved as he peeled off and trotted down Bridge Street. She tried to form the word, “bye,” but all that came out was “buh—”. Standing dumbfounded, she stared after him. She hadn’t realized Tage knew she existed, let alone the fact that she waitressed. And danced.

Stunned, Hailey walked, then jogged, then stopped dead to puzzle over what had just happened. Then she jogged again until she finally reached the pub.

Nobody at that school “chatted” with Hailey. Not since the fourth grade, not since the day a particularly mean girl concocted a particularly ugly rumor—that Hailey had started the fire that killed her parents. The whispers and sideways glances lasted close to a year, and in trying to defend herself, Hailey only made things worse. By the time she figured out that nobody else believed in pyromaniac-nightmare-monsters, it was too late. She’d already earned the label, “weirdo,” which, unfortunately, stuck.