

# DREAM BOY

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In memory of my mother,  
Nedra May Wade Crockett,  
an exceptional dreamer  
— Mary Crockett

For The Girls  
— Madelyn Rosenberg





I've always been a dreamer. Daydreams. Night dreams. Dreams of grandeur and dreams of escape. If I were an onion and you peeled back the papery outside, you'd find layer after layer of eye-watering dreams. And in the center, where there's that little curlicue of onion heart? There'd be a puff of smoke from the dreams that burned away.

It was all just brain waves, I thought—disconnected, like the notebook that my friend Talon keeps. She draws a line down the middle of the page; on the right she writes everything she remembers about a dream, and on the left she puts notes about the stuff that's happening in real life, things that might trigger her subconscious. Reality on one side, dreams on the other—a clear line between the two.

But it turns out there are no clear lines, just a jumble of what is and what might be. And all of it is real.





# Chapter 1

Will found me by the river.

It's not like it took a rocket scientist to figure out where I'd be—though it wouldn't surprise me if Will ended up *being* a rocket scientist. He's that smart. And nothing about him surprised me anymore.

I'm guessing not much about me could surprise him, either. He knew all of my usual reasons for sitting on my usual mossy rock, the water rushing by like it had someplace better to be.

But this time I wasn't on my rock for the usual reasons, which include but are not limited to Mom having one of her Marathon Bathrobe Days, my prepubescent brother Nick playing too much air guitar, and my great-aunt Caroline calling long-distance to see how Mom is faring since that no-good husband (meaning my dad) left her stranded with those kids (meaning my brother and me).

No, today I was here for Josh. I wanted to see him again. And for that, I needed the kind of noisy quiet that only the river can offer.

I watched the water and tried to remember. His face came to

me in outline at first. So handsome it was almost embarrassing. A dash of golden brown hair across his forehead. High cheekbones. Full lips. Eyes that were the electric blue of windshield wiper fluid, which is something I'd never thought could be sexy until now.

I'd brought my sketchbook and box of charcoals, so when his face appeared in my mind, I was ready.

Sometimes drawing seemed to be almost another way of dreaming. Not that they're exactly the same, of course. I'm awake when I draw, so there's that. But with either—drawing or dreaming—anything might appear, no matter how random. And it's not like I exactly get to choose what happens next.

Yeah, I can say "I will draw a house. I will draw a tree." Or "I will dream about marshmallows." But what actually occurs when I sit down to draw or I drift off to sleep has always seemed to me to be entirely out of my control. Like my art teacher says, sometimes the sketch has a mind of its own. For example, there was an intensity to Josh's face that made me feel—even while I sat drawing it—as if I were made of the most delicate glass.

"That your latest masterpiece?"

I knew Will's voice before I looked up.

He was wearing his holey jeans, the ones with last week's chemistry homework scribbled in ballpoint pen on the left knee, and a too-big ash-gray T-shirt that read "I listen to bands that don't exist yet." His smile was, as always, lopsided, and his dark brown hair had that just-woke-up messiness that generally lasted all day.

Flipping the sketchbook closed, I scooted over and patted the moss beside me. “Pull up a rock.”

He gave me a dubious look. The rock was really only big enough for one, maybe one and a half. “Come on.” I took his hand to tug him down beside me. It was close, but we fit. With any other boy I might be a little weirded out by the contact, but with Will it felt comfortable.

“So do I get to see?” He gestured to the sketchbook.

“I’m not done yet,” I said, which was a total dodge. Will knew I didn’t like showing my pictures to anyone until I was finished, but I never intended to show him this. I felt way too awkward about the whole thing, though I’m not sure why. Will had been my best friend since preschool and he already knew the most awkward parts of me. He was the guy who taught me how to flip my eyelids backward, the guy who talked me through being dumped by Daniel Kowalski *and* my parents’ divorce. He’d seen me crying so hard I had snot bubbles in my nose, and laughing so uncontrollably I started to gag on my tongue. Not a pretty sight, either one. So why couldn’t I tell him about Josh?

“Anyway, it’s just a sketch,” I said. “I’ll probably never finish.”

As I started to put my charcoal back in its box, my hand wavered, and the stick slipped from my fingers. Just before the charcoal tumbled to the mud at the edge of the river, Will’s hand shot out and nabbed it.

He sat back up, examining the stick in his palm. “You know, people used to burn sticks and smear the charred part on cave

walls—and forty thousand years later, here you are,” he tucked the charcoal back in my box and closed the lid, “doing pretty much the same thing.”

“I thought charcoal was just a charcoal-and-paper thing,” I said.

“Paper as we know it didn’t come around until around the second century in China.”

“So, what? People just drew on cave walls with burned sticks until the second century?”

Will looked at me as if he really couldn’t believe I’d actually said that. “Well...there were all sorts of other things in between. Like bone.”

“Bone?” I shuddered, thinking of etching Josh’s face on the femur of...what? A buffalo?

“Papyrus, bamboo, silk...”

“I’ll take the silk,” I said, dusting my smudged fingertips on the legs of my jeans. “Where do you even come up with this stuff?”

“Internet? I don’t know. I just sort of collect it.”

“I’m ignoring the Internet this week,” I said.

“Bold move.”

“I keep expecting to not get a note from my dad,” I said.

“So if you’re not on the Internet you can pretend that maybe you *did* get one?” he said. It seemed so simple, the way Will said it. And it was true: if I avoided getting online (which I was usually only able to do for about two hours at a time), I might have a dozen emails from my dad waiting for me, saying how much he missed us, that he was flying me and Nick to Alaska so we could

see his new place, that skipping school for a week wasn't a problem because Alaska itself was "educational."

Except.

Except that even if I wasn't online, I knew the truth.

I scowled. "Remind me to never get married."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because then you'd also be reminding me to never get divorced," I said. "Or how about this? *You* marry me. Like in that movie, you know. If we haven't married anyone else by the time we're thirty—"

"Didn't that movie end badly?"

"I don't know. I never saw it." But it had to end better than my parents' marriage. "Okay, forget marriage; save me from the other stuff."

"Like what?"

"Like...homecoming," I said, remembering last year when Daniel Kowalski spent half the night looking at other girls' butts and half the next morning telling me I was delusional. "If neither one of us is seeing anybody by then, we go to homecoming."

"That's like, what...ten days from now? I think I'll still be free."

I tapped out G-O-O-D in Morse code on his knee.

A-N-Y-T-I-M-E he tapped back.

It was something we'd learned during our secret agent phase. I like to think of it as "pre-texting."

Will grinned down at me. There were times his eyes seemed to say things without him saying them out loud. And right now was one of those times. But I wasn't totally sure what he wasn't saying. It was almost like in his mind, he was just saying my name. *Annabelle*.

“Anyway, I’m just asking you as, you know, as friends. Like this,” I said, feeling my mouth go dry.

“Of course,” he said.

It looked like poor Will was going to have to wear a tie instead of a T-shirt. Because the chances of me dating someone else by homecoming were less than slim.

There was Josh, of course. Only there wasn’t. Because he wasn’t just out of my league. He was out of my universe.

On paper—or papyrus or bone or whatever—it might seem like he was the perfect guy to whisk me away for a fairy-tale homecoming. But Will had one slight edge that made him the more viable candidate: Will was a real person. And Josh?

Josh was a dream.

## Chapter 2

*I'm sailing on a lake the exact color of a blueberry jelly bean. Josh is on the other side of the little boat, singing something that sounds Gaelic, and while I don't understand the words, I know in the way you know things in dreams that he's telling me I'm beautiful.*

*A pair of dolphins jumps through the water, even though it's a lake and there wouldn't be dolphins. Josh stands up and his eyes catch the light.*

*"Let's go swimming," he says.*

*We strip down to our underwear. Luckily I'm wearing my best bra, the one with little daisies, and my underwear is, if boring, clean. I'm not even feeling embarrassed about showing my body in the middle of the day to a near-stranger, because he's not a stranger. It's as if Josh were made just for me.*

*He dives in, and I'm about to follow when I feel someone watching. I can just make out on the bank the figure of a girl in a white tea-party dress. She's like something from the Impressionistic paintings we studied in art, all exaggerated bows. Behind her is an old brick pump house,*

*like the one by the river back home. Something about the girl creeps me out. It bothers me that she seems so alone. No, not just alone...abandoned. What is she doing out here by herself?*

*I don't want her to see me in my underwear, and I don't want Josh to know she's there, so I jump feetfirst into the water. Only the water doesn't feel like water; it feels like cloth, not wet at all.*

*"This way." Josh motions me after him, and starts swimming toward the shore, straight for the girl.*

*"You have to catch me first!" I swim in the opposite direction. When a dolphin passes, I clasp onto its fin and the dolphin pulls me to the opposite side of the lake, where he drops me off, like some kind of taxi.*

*I'm in the shallows now. I feel sandy grit and rocks beneath my feet. It's real water again, and as I walk toward the empty shore, minnows swirl around my legs.*

*When I look up, Josh is beside me. We're only knee-deep now.*

*"You're perfect," he says. His eyes look sort of watery, but I don't know if it's from emotion or the fact that we're soaking wet.*

*Either way, what he says makes me want to cry, because anyone who knows me knows I'm the furthest thing from perfect. Josh looks deep into my eyes and says it again, "Perfect."*

*And in that moment, I can believe nothing bad will ever happen, and no one will ever make me feel like that awkward little girl at the Halloween party where I knocked an entire cauldron of fake-intestine spaghetti onto the Beasleys' living room carpet. Josh's words wipe out every time I felt stupid or clumsy or ugly or wrong. It makes it somehow okay that my dad is on the other side of the earth and my brother is a*

*pest and my mom works too hard and comes home late to eat ravioli cold out of the can.*

*Then he leans down and puts his hands on my shoulders and kisses me.*

*It's the most perfect kiss you can imagine, the kind of kiss poets write about and rock stars sing about, the kind with just the right amount of tongue and skyrockets when you close your eyes.*

*When he pulls away, the look on his face is unlike any expression I've ever seen—a heartfelt pain and intense relief. He's looking right at me with his impossibly blue eyes.*

*“You know what this means, Annabelle,” he starts to say, only he doesn't move his lips; he's in my head. “This means—”*

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*“Yo, yo, yo—”*

My bedside radio honked to life, jerking me awake with the musical equivalent of a car wreck. A car wreck with a heavy bass line.

*Love is patient so they say in Corinthians*

*I say it too, can't find another synonym*

*They call me Mac Z but it's just a little pseudonym*

*I'm waiting for you; you know it's time to be through with him*

I hit the snooze, hard. It wasn't just that Mac Z wrote bad songs—it was that he wrote bad songs about *love*, as if he knew anything about it. In his videos, he always has these superhot women

plastered against him with their boobs popping out of black leather. I mean, no cow should have to sacrifice her life for that.

Still, I would've hated Mac Z this morning even if he wrote songs about rainbows and buttercups because this morning his rapping *woke me up when I was dreaming*. And okay, it was Friday, and I did need to get to school. But I also needed to be back in that lake.

I closed my eyes, trying to conjure the water, the dolphins, that look in Josh's eyes. Wasn't he trying to tell me something just as I was waking? I squeezed shut my eyes and willed myself back.

The radio alarm went off again. Not Mac Z, this time, though the sentiments were the same.

*I see you walking in the club, wearing that tight sweater  
Make me lose my mind, girl, we got to be together*

No go. Dream over. It was time to haul myself up and prepare to face another day in Chilton, Virginia, where there is no perfect guy, no perfect kiss, and nothing halfway resembling a dolphin. Where the town's only lake (which was more like a pond to begin with) dried up completely about five years back, leaving behind fissured earth and, swear to God, the skeleton of some guy who fell out of a rowboat during the Great Depression.

I pulled my hair out of my face and sighed. Sometimes I don't think I'll ever get out of this place. I'll end up stuck here like my mom, playing board games with old people all day.

Will says I just have to be patient, like the song. (He claims he doesn't like Mac Z, either, only I caught him singing "Patient Love" by his locker once and he knew almost every word.) Two more years of high school, he says, might as well enjoy it. But two years is one eighth of my life so far.

And time goes slower in Chilton than anywhere else on earth. It should be the town motto: Two years in Chilton is eternity.

Because isn't that what eternity is? It's your own high school. Where the good girls are always good, the stupid boys are always stupid, the marching band always plays some lame tribute to whatever Broadway musical was big twenty-five years ago, and the hands of the hallway clock just keep plodding the same tired loop day after day. That sort of sameness has pretty much ruled my whole life so far. I keep waiting for eternity to be over, to wake up one day and suddenly I'm in control of my own life and everything is different. The sky isn't gray, and my parents aren't divorced, and my brother Nick is a rock star, and Will is at Harvard or someplace, and I'm majoring in art at VCU *and* in the middle of a passionate love affair at the very same time.

I'm not convinced it'll ever happen, not in two years, not ever. Will says sometimes you don't have to wait for two whole years; sometimes, if you're patient, you could just open your eyes and see everything in a whole new way.

But so far I only see those things when I'm sleeping.

## Chapter 3

The Chilton High School cafeteria is ruled by a social order that is, to be fair, no more ruthless than any other culture that engages in slavery and human sacrifice. We're not cutting off our enemies' heads and displaying them on fence posts, exactly. But there are other ways to claim ownership of human flesh and to torment those who resist.

There is, for example, Stephanie Gonzales.

Captain of the Cheerleading Squad, a member of the Model UN, French Club, and Devils Are Angels, our high school's team of ostentatious do-gooders, Stephanie is the undisputed queen bee. With her sleek black hair and almond eyes, she looks like Cleopatra, accessorized with pompoms instead of an asp. She moved here at the beginning of last year, and she's ruled our class with a golden fist ever since.

There are some advantages to being noticed by Stephanie Gonzales, but there are *more* advantages to being ignored. Luckily my friends and I are, for the most part, invisible.

Stephanie sits in the center of the room with the Beautiful People. Her BFF Trina Myers sits on one side and her jock-du-jour (actually, for many jours) Billy Stubbs sits on the other. To either side of them is a roster of the best looking and most athletic people at the school.

Beside the Beautiful People sit the Preps and Second Tier Jocks, including the late, great Daniel Kowalski, whom I rarely see because I sit intentionally facing the opposite direction. Not that seeing him is such a big deal anymore—in the same way it’s no big deal to pluck my heart out of my chest daily so it can be trampled on by a boy who never really got me, even when he had me, and never really wanted what he got.

But on the up side, Daniel has apparently decided his new look involves both a sparse goatee and an excessive amount of hair gel, so looking away is smarter all around.

Orbiting out from the Beautiful-Preppy-Jocky center of our high school universe are tables for the Wannabes, the Geek Squad, the Band, the WWJDs, and the Unredeemables.

I sit at a self-proclaimed table of Nobodies with Will, my other best friends, Talon Fischer and Serena Mendez, and Will’s other best friend, Paolo Langit. Paolo moved to Chilton last year from the Philippines. He and Will immediately bonded because they both owned T-shirts with a bastardized quote from Jack Kerouac: *“Great things are not accomplished by those who yield to trends... like this shirt.”* Our spot is on the far end of the cafeteria, next to the station where people dump their trays. We talk, eat, and have

attacks of major angst while we watch the hormones and humanity that swirl around us.

Will, who *never* has angst, just likes people watching. It's some kind of anthropological study for him. But this particular Friday, he wasn't people watching. This Friday, he was watching me.

My cell phone beeped.

Are we on? It was Will.

On what? I sent back.

Talon and Serena were talking about some trig equation they couldn't figure out and Will took a bite of burrito instead of typing. I had to resist the urge to reach over and wipe the refried beans from the corner of his mouth, but he caught it and went back to his phone.

Homecoming, he typed.

Oh, right. Yikes.

My phone beeped again. Remember?

!! I wrote back. I was stalling, I knew. But I needed to have a rethink. I'd made clear that this wasn't a date-date. We were going as friends, Will knew that. But what if, after an evening under crepe-paper streamers and cardboard stars, I ended up *like*-liking him and he still only *friend*-liked me...or what if he *like*-liked me and I only *friend*-liked him? I didn't want to bring any weirdness into what I had with Will. It was too important for that.

We can laugh at the DJ, he wrote.

Ha, I wrote, at the exact same time Will asked Serena, out loud, "Are you going to homecoming?"

“I’m going camping with my parents,” she said.

“You’re not staying in that rat-infested cabin again?” asked Talon.

“They weren’t rats. They were mice.”

Talon and I had accompanied the Mendezes on their last camping trip, and Serena’s dad found some traps in a wooden storage box. He set them up, after reading in the cabin guest book that it was “ABSOLUTELY VITAL.” The traps snapped all night. In the morning, the cabin was full of dead mice and before breakfast, Serena insisted that we wrap the small, furred bodies in toilet paper and bury them. Part of me was surprised she hadn’t sewn them little suits first. She led us into the woods, looking for a place with enough solemnity for a mouse funeral.

What we found in those woods, though, was more strange than solemn—possibly the strangest place I’d ever been. At the end of a random trail, we came to a grassy clearing, almost perfectly round and edged with moss. In the very middle of the opening stood a single tree, maybe fifty feet high, with wild branches that sprawled toward the sky.

It reminded me of something Salvador Dalí would have painted, only without the eyeballs and melting stopwatches. But in their place was something equally peculiar—bottles, dozens of them, in different sizes and colors. Some had been tied to the tree with cords; others had been jammed mouth-first on the nubby ends of branches.

Serena took it as a sign. She buried the mice at the base of the tree, as the bottles above our heads clinked in the wind.

“Same cabin,” Serena told us. “I’m making my dad bring the Havahart traps from home this time.”

We all rolled our eyes and said things like “that sucks.” But in a way Serena didn’t mind camping with her parents and a bunch of mice because she didn’t have a date to the dance. And in a way the rest of us were jealous. Will’s dad was too busy for camping. Paolo’s mother had malaria as a child and harbored an irrational fear of mosquitoes. Talon’s parents were divorced like mine, but unlike my parents they were trying to one-up each other, so she spent nearly every weekend doing cultivated things like going to the opera in Roanoke. My mom didn’t have the energy for much more than watching old movies on cable. And my dad, well. Anyway.

“You got any homecoming offers—you know, since yesterday?” Will asked me.

“I think Ronny Lobman was checking me out in French,” I said.

“And English, too,” added Talon.

Will smiled. “Yeah, that’s only because you look like Queen Amidala when you wear your hair up.” Ronny Lobman is obsessed with *Star Wars*.

“She really does.” Talon tilted her head, examining me. “If we dyed your hair black and slabbed on some face paint, you could rule entire galaxies.”

I knew Talon, whose dark hair didn’t have to be dyed, looked ten times more Amidala than I ever could, even with her asymmetrical bob and fishing-lure earrings. But I also knew that she got

snarky whenever I complimented her looks. So I just gave a solemn half-bow and quoted, “My place is with my people.”

My phone beeped again. I was no good at having two conversations at once. When I looked at the screen, all it said was: Stph alert.

“Stph?” I asked Will. “What’s Stph?”

He didn’t have time to answer. Stephanie Gonzales, the queen bee herself, buzzed by our table with her tray. At first I thought she was going to stop and I tried to think of a comeback before she even said anything. But she just murmured, “poor creatures,” and walked on.

I yawned. The big, embarrassing kind of yawn that takes over your whole body and ends with an audible sigh.

“What’s with you?” Talon asked.

“Just spent,” I said.

“Let me guess: Your mom kept you up watching *Gone with the Wind* again.”

“No such luck.”

Talon gave a fake shudder. “What you southerners see in that movie I will never understand. The whole hoopskirt and magnolia thing is so...hoopskirt and magnolia.”

Talon said “you southerners” but she’d been born in Chilton like pretty much everyone else. Her dad, though, was from New Jersey. Apparently, that was enough for Talon to consider herself on the other side of the Mason-Dixon line—in spirit, if not in body.

“Fiddle-dee-dee,” I said, fanning myself.

“You really do look tired, Annabelle,” Serena said. “I can see little

moons under your eyes again. My mom says almond oil works, and cucumber slices.”

“Thanks for the tip.” I loved how she said “moons” and not “bags.” Leave it to Serena to make total exhaustion seem somehow romantic.

“Well, if that doesn’t work, there is this new thing called sleep you might try,” Will said. “People lie down on stuffed mattresses and close their eyes. It’s all the rage in Europe. Spain has even started a national competition for afternoon napping.”

“Sign me up!” said Talon. “I could totally go for a nap during P.E.”

“It’s not sleep that’s the problem,” I said. “I keep having these crazy dreams. I can’t even remember half of them. One minute I’m running down the hallways in an abandoned hotel, looking for lightning. The other...”

“What?” Will asked.

“Uh, more...stuff,” I finished, lamely. The other I’d been on that boat with Josh.

I yawned again, crumpled up my bagged lunch, and tossed it from my seat into the nearby trash can.

It seemed sometimes like sleeping had become my real job, and the waking hours—school, homework, family—well, that was just me resting up for my dreams. Which maybe wasn’t so bad, in the grand scheme of things. At least my dreams got me out of Chilton, if only for the night.

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I was still yawning through pre calc...U.S. history...chemistry.

“X-ray crystallography captures the distinct lattice pattern of the crystal, so we can see how the electrons that surround the atoms interact with the incoming X-ray photons...”

Mr. Ernshaw might as well have been speaking Xhosa, which is the only language I know of that begins with an X. It wasn't that I didn't like chemistry, or even that chemistry didn't like me. It was just...Friday. And last period. And COME ON, MR. ERNSHAW CAN'T YOU GIVE US A BREAK?

To keep myself awake, I opened my dream dictionary app and read once again the entry for “lake.” According to dream guru Cynthia Rêve, a lake meant either I was unable to express my emotions freely or I had serenity and peace of mind. *So which is it, Ms. Rêve?* I thought. *Because repressed emotion doesn't exactly scream “serenity.”*

There was nothing for “blue eyes,” but under “blue” was “birth and unavoidable change,” while “eye” was (duh) “vision.”

“Annabelle?” said Mr. Ernshaw. “Are you with us?”

I put the phone away, and to make it look like I was taking notes, I sketched a stinkbug that was dead on the windowsill. Then I copied a list of the ingredients in diet soda. Mr. Ernshaw was great about letting us bring drinks into the classroom, as long as it wasn't a lab day; plus, the list looked chemical-y, so I figured that was *like* paying attention.

Caffeine

Aspartame

Citric Acid

The lab door opened then and I looked up and promptly stopped breathing. There *he* was, standing right by the door of the classroom, smiling, talking to Mr. Ernshaw, like an ordinary person.

Only he wasn't ordinary. He wasn't even a person.

He was Josh.

My Josh.

The guy from my dream.

