

The Dead Ringer: Sample

Chapter 1

A tiny sliver of light from a gap in the curtains cut across a faded linoleum floor. The linoleum had been white at some time, but it was grimy now, turning to a light grey. The kitchen was small and the appliances a pea-soup green.

Susanna was young, though she didn't know what age. She could tell by her small hands and footie pajamas, and the way the woman towered over her.

The woman had a bright smile and white teeth, though her face had that fuzzy quality that dreams had, where facial features bleed together and make people unrecognizable. There was a vague impression of light brown hair and a round face. She held her arms open to Susanna.

"Come here, baby. Give Mommy a hug."

At this point in the dream, Susanna always figured out that she was asleep. Wake up, she would urge herself. But the dream kept playing no matter what she said.

"You're not my mommy," child Susanna said. She held her stuffed rabbit to her tiny chest. She was filled with an emotion she was too young to understand, something beyond terror. Some hopeless feeling of entrapment. That the world was wrong and would never be righted again.

"Of course I am," the strange, smiling woman insisted.

Even a little girl could feel the desperation radiating off the woman. She took a step back as her lip started trembling.

"I want Mommy," child Susanna said as tears started sliding down her small apple cheeks. "Where's Daddy?"

"You're home now, sweetheart. This is your home, don't you remember?"

There were voices outside. A child's voice and a man's. It was impossible to make out what the words were, but the child had a high pitch of confusion and fear. The man sounded soothing as he spoke to the child.

He didn't sound soothing as he spoke to the woman. Before little Susanna could blink, a tall man with dark hair barged through the creaking door. His face was as blurred as the woman's, but his voice was clear as crystal.

"What the hell is going on? What did you do?"

The dream always ended there, and this time was no different. Susanna's eyes shot open as she sat up straight in her bed. Heart pounding, covered in sweat. She rolled out of her blankets and shivered as her soaked t-shirt hit the cool air.

Miles sat up moments after she did. His sleek dark hair was tousled around his sleep-lined face.

"Everything okay?" he mumbled, scrubbing the sleep out of one eye.

"Just that one dream."

"You haven't had it in a while."

"I was hoping it was gone forever."

Miles threw an arm around her and squeezed her to him.

"Maybe that was the last hoorah or whatever."

"Hoorah?" Susanna eyed Miles as he gave her that grin that had melted her from the first time she'd seen it at the movie theater after she'd tripped and spilled her entire popcorn and soda. She'd stood next to the scattered kernels and soaked carpet and fought tears, until the tall boy with the beautiful smile, wearing the uniform of a movie theater employee came up to her with a new popcorn and another soda. The rest was two years of history.

"What? It's a great word. I'm gonna bring it back."

"Well have fun with that," Susanna grabbed her phone from the bedside table and glanced at the screen, groaning when she saw the time.

"Six in the morning and I'm wide awake," she sighed. "Try to go back to sleep. I guess I'll go work on that chem lab report. If I can get that stupid nightmare out of my head."

Miles kissed the back of her neck, sending shivers down her spine.

"Maybe you should go talk to someone experienced in that kind of stuff," he said. "Maybe you keep dreaming about it because it means something."

Susanna shrugged and grabbed her hoodie from where she'd thrown it on the floor the night before. Her mother would have fainted at the sight. If you tossed a piece of clothing on the floor in her mother's home, you needed to prepare for a long explanation on how organization and cleanliness are some of the most important parts of adulthood.

She'd asked her parents if they had any ideas why she had the nightmare. She'd been about ten, and when she'd asked her parents exchanged inscrutable looks.

"You probably saw something on television that was too old for you," her mother had answered. "This is what we've told you before. Once you put something in that noggin of yours, it never comes out again. Even if you think you don't remember it."

She had rapped Susanna gently on the dome of her head with a knuckle and smiled. Susanna had giggled at her mother's silliness, but privately she knew that her mother's reasoning didn't hold true. She'd felt certain she had never seen such a thing.

"My parents think I saw a movie with that kind of stuff," she said. "They think it just imprinted or traumatized me or something. It's no biggie to them."

"They aren't experts in dreams. Your dad works in cardio. Hearts don't dream."

"My dad did a psych rotation when he was an intern, I think. But it's not like it hurts me to have that stupid dream. Not worth wasting the time on talking to someone."

"It's your choice, I just think you'd feel better if you did." Miles flopped onto his back, pulling the covers over his bare torso. Disappointing.

Miles was out minutes later. He could sleep in an instant, like a cat, on any flat surface as far as Susanna could tell. Beds, benches, the floor. All the same to Miles. As opposed to Susanna who constantly tossed and turned, desperate for sleep but unable to turn her brain off. Anxiety sucked ass.

As battered as her brain was from disturbing dreams and little sleep, Susanna was able to successfully finish the chem report that had been nagging at her. She needed that out of the way. Statistics tests were harder than chem reports, and her stats exam was a week away.

A kiss on the forehead of the lightly snoring Miles and she was out the door for her 10 AM statistics class.

Oregon State University was a beautiful campus because Oregon was a beautiful place. In October, the leaves were still on the trees, turning their oranges, reds, and yellows interspersed between the evergreen trees. The fog of the morning hadn't dissipated yet, and Susanna felt the haunting feeling that the nightmare always left with her recede. It was just a normal day.

Susanna was used to walking into the lecture room for upper-level statistics classes with that "don't look at me, there's nothing unusual here" walk and seeing nothing but lines of male faces. Her last Methods of Data Analysis class had three women including herself. There would sometimes be a meeting of eyes between her and the others of her gender in those lecture rooms. That glance of "thank goodness I'm not the only one". Sometimes there'd be no other women at all.

This term there were five, including herself. Four weeks in she had already memorized the faces of the others.

All in all, it certainly wasn't unusual for Susanna's eyes to be drawn to other women in these advanced classes.

Today there was a sixth woman, immediately drawing Susanna's attention.

There was nothing particularly notable about the new young woman. Average dark brown hair, average height, and what looked like light brown eyes. Susanna really couldn't tell from this far away. She was seated across the hall from the other, with the lectern in the middle. The professor was flipping his way through his prepared notes and droning on in the background. She hadn't heard a single word. This was bad, because of that exam early next week and this professor was the annoying type who liked to load all the important exam information into lessons right up until the day before the exam. Susanna would swear on her own life that he did it on purpose to make things more difficult. Almost like it gave him some bit of pleasure in the daily doldrums of bell curves and p values.

Or maybe that was just her nerves. Data analysis certainly wasn't her strong suit, and spazzing out in class over some girl just sitting there minding her own business wasn't going to make up for that.

The other woman didn't seem to have the same problem concentrating. Her brow was furrowed as she jotted notes almost faster than the professor spoke. Her eyes never darted from the lectern. She never yawned or checked her phone. She didn't seem to sense Susanna's eyes trailing back to her over and over again. She simply sat there,

jotting notes, absently chewing on her lip and twirling a lock of thick hair around her finger in between notes.

Susanna couldn't figure out what it was that arrested her thoughts, that had her gaze drifting past the prof to watch this girl. All she could put her finger on was the sense of familiarity. It was like the girl was an echo.

When she was seven, her parents had taken her and her brother to the Lava River Cave over in Deschutes National Forest. She remembered being deep in the lava tube, and her dumb brother yelling out to hear his voice come back at him. It had taken a while for Gavin to convince his more timid little sister to try as well. Susanna remembered giving her best "hello", loudly projecting her voice as if expecting it to disappear deep into the inky blackness under the earth. But instead, she had heard herself repeating the hello, over and over. She had burst into tears, to her brother's dismay. Even now looking back it was hard for Susanna to put her finger on what had upset her so much at that moment. It was something about the voice being hers but not. As if the cave had stolen her words and used them without permission.

Looking at the young woman across the room now gave Susanna that same feeling. An echo, as if the girl was something familiar yet foreign. Something about the shape of her mouth, or the expression on her face as she bit her lip as she concentrated.

So lost in her daze, Susanna didn't realize everyone else had already stood to pack up their books and laptops and headed towards the door. She rushed to shove her blank spiral notebook in her backpack, knowing she'd regret the lack of notes when she tried to puzzle out the remarkably unhelpful slides on the class web page.

The girl was just now standing up, and Susanna noted with a tingle of something undefinable that they would be exiting the class at the same time.

She tried to act natural but was sure that she looked like a complete idiot as she pulled abreast to the young woman, who was texting and walking in that expert way some people did. Where they appeared to avoid obstacles by sonar instead of using their eyes and their fingers never stopped moving over the phone screen.

Susanna made a show of looking over her shoulder so it would look like she was taking a glance at the clock to the left of the double doors they were about to exit out of. She could see that the girl was pale and freckle spattered, just like Susanna. Her hair was the same shade as Susanna's as well, and they were roughly the same height. There the resemblance ended for the most part. This other was rail-thin, with tiny sharp pixie features and her eyes were hazel at a closer look. Susanna was thicker, rounder, and her eyes would never be mistaken for anything other than plain old brown.

Still couldn't place her.

"What's wrong?" Miles' smile had instantly died as he came close enough to see the expression on her face, and Susanna smiled despite her off-balanced thoughts. He always picked up on her moods, sometimes before she had even identified them herself.

"Nothing, just something weird," Susanna said, keeping her tone light. She'd tell Miles the strange feeling she had about the girl, and he'd say something reasonable and sweet and she'd feel better. She quickly filled him in.

"Maybe you *have* seen her before, and you just can't remember?"

"I'd remember," Susanna said, but would she? She remembered the dichotomous feeling of certainty and confusion on whether she recognized the girl, and goosebumps raised on her arms.

"It's probably no big deal. Your brain is probably just giving you bad vibes because you can't remember exactly where you've seen her. Maybe you went to kindergarten together or something."

"Maybe," Susanna agreed. "You agree it's nothing, just weird, right?"

"Yup," Miles smiled and put an arm around her shoulder as they began to walk.

"But what if it is something?" Susanna wanted to drop the subject, let them move on with their night, but the girl's familiar stranger's face kept flashing through her brain.

"Well, we could always get to know her." Miles glanced down at her and slowed, as he realized that his lanky stride was too fast for her. "Invite her to the next game session. If you get to know her you might discover what you have in common. But I don't think it's a big deal."

"What's not a big deal?" It was Shannon, sidling up to them in that disconcertingly silent way she did. The graceful athletic girl always seemed to walk so lightly her feet barely touched the ground.

"Suze is having a horror movie moment." Miles grinned as Susanna scowled at him. "What? Isn't that how a lot of movies start? You get a weird feeling from someone, then they're inside your house and murdering all your friends?"

"We don't live in the Scream universe, Miles," Susanna muttered.

They brought Shannon up to speed on the girl in the stats class. Shannon brightened.

"This could be fun," she said. "Miles is right. We just befriend her and figure out where she came from."

It sounded the exact opposite of fun to Susanna. It sounded stressful and awkward.

"I don't think that's a good idea." Susanna hoped that would be the end of it, but Shannon persisted.

"Why not? It's not like it would hurt anything. She might even be cool. And you're doing the thing."

"I'm not doing the thing."

Shannon shrugged and turned the subject to their upcoming game session, as they meandered through the quad towards the library. Susanna silently fumed, mostly at herself rather than Shannon. Truth be told, she *was* doing the thing. The thing where she obsessed and made herself miserable over something, even when nine times out of ten it would turn out fine.

Once a week their friend group reserved a block of time at one of the larger study rooms at the library. And contrary to the belief of Susanna's parents, they actually did study at their game sessions. A half-hour of review or homework, switch to some board game stress relief, then back to the books. Susanna had tried to show her parents the evidence that cramming for hours did her grades no favors, but they still looked

down their nose at the “waste of time”. To them her other hobbies of volunteering at the humane society and journalism were useful. They would make her a well-rounded person and look good on a grad school application. Game sessions? Not so much.

She didn't know why they didn't have any understanding of her letting off steam with her friends, especially considering her dad's golf habit and all the little projects that her mother liked to come up with to keep herself busy now that her kids had flown the coop. They called it networking. Sure. She had a sneaking suspicion that her parents just didn't believe that she studied during these game sessions. In high school, she'd been caught doing anything other than studying so often it became a family joke. *How was your study session, Susie?* Her brother Gavin would joke as she came home from a football game or anything else where he knew that there was zero way she'd been studying.

She couldn't even return the joke, because all Gavin did was concentrate on school work. And when he wasn't studying, he was volunteering at the hospital and the nursing home. The perfect child.

She managed to lay aside thoughts and worries as they entered the library and took the elevator to the second floor.

It was Shannon's turn to choose the game, and for some unknowable reason, she had chosen Monopoly. To everyone else's dismay.

“First off, boring,” Cora said. “Second, it takes forever. Third, it destroys friendships. Fourth, boring.”

“It's not boring, you just don't have your strategy down.” Shannon was unperturbed by the others' grumbling and was already divvying up the brightly colored Monopoly money. “And anyway, it's educational.”

“Educational?” Cora raised an eyebrow as she reluctantly accepted her portion. Cora was a tall thin girl, with a haughty expression whether or not she wanted to convey disdain. She was actually very kind, and Susanna always found it unfair that people assumed she was a snob.

“It's a lesson in capitalism. One person gaining all the money and land and everyone else being bankrupted by rising rent costs.”

Cora just rolled her eyes.

Susanna's heart wasn't in it tonight. She felt unsettled, a quavering feeling deep inside her that wouldn't let up. She attempted to keep it off of her face, but she could tell by the concerned glances from Miles that she wasn't succeeding.

“I didn't know it was possible to suck as badly as you at Monopoly, Suze,” Cora said with a snort, as Susanna had to sell her last property to afford rent.

“There's a reason I've always hated this game,” Susanna said with a laugh. She almost physically cringed at how fake the sound of her laugh was, and by the slight frown from Cora, it seemed as though she picked up on it.

“Everything ok?” Cora asked.

“Suze is dealing with a glitch in the matrix,” Shannon said as Susanna rolled her eyes at her.

Cora raised an eyebrow, as Susanna hastened to explain.

"Well, I agree with Miles and Shannon," Cora said after being brought up to speed. "Just get to know her."

"You guys keep making it all sound so easy," Susanna complained. "You really want me to just march up to some chick and interrogate her until I figure out where I know her from?"

"I swear you go from zero to sixty in like five seconds. It's normal to say hi to new people and get to know them. And two thousand bucks from you, loser. You're on Boardwalk," Shannon grabbed the begrudged handful of bills from Miles, who glared at her as she grinned.

"It can't hurt to introduce yourself and invite her for coffee or whatever. If she's new to the school she might even be grateful." Cora rolled the dice and sighed as she too landed on Shannon's hotel-strewn group of properties.

"I know you think that your very presence is an imposition, but I promise that she won't immediately pepper spray you," Shannon put in. Susanna felt her cheeks grow red and she looked away, rejoinders forming and flitting away in her brain before she could make herself say them. She loved Shannon to death, but that girl didn't understand any type of hesitancy or fear.

"Knock it off, guys." Miles frowned at them after a glance at Susanna. "She doesn't have to do anything."

"No one said she did," Cora said, sounding repentant. "Sorry, Suze. We're just saying that you should probably put yourself out there more."

"It's fine," Susanna said shortly. "You're right. There's no reason I can't invite her to hang out or study or something."

"Yes, exactly." Shannon agreed. "It'd be more like you're doing her a favor than anything if she's new in town. You're always afraid of how people see you, but most people are just self-absorbed and worried about their own lives."

"Speak for yourself," Miles put in, and Shannon laughed as she began packing up the board after Cora finally threw the rest of her money.

"I give up, I hate this game!" She said with a laugh. As she grabbed her bag and shoved her books, she looked at Susanna, a soft smile on her lips.

"We tease because we care. Put yourself out there a bit."

"Whatever," Susanna mumbled, but smiled as Cora gave her a quick hug and took off.

"Well, I tease because it's funny. I don't know what Cora is talking about," Shannon said as she waved at Cora, and shot a mischievous smile at Susanna.

Miles laughed at this, and Susanna's shoulders relaxed while she felt her indignation recede. They were right. It was time to step out of her comfort zone and figure out what it was that disturbed her about this woman.

What's the worst that could happen?