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Opening extract from
The Key To The Golden Firebird

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“Chome on,” Palmer said, her words dulled from numb-tongue syndrome caused by the Icee she was slurping. “You haff to admit it *wash* funny.”

May, who was sweating profusely and peering longingly through the bottom of the screened window at a swimming pool, turned and stared at her little sister.

“No, I don’t,” she said.

“It wash . . . ambhishious.”

“Ambitious?” May repeated. “Looks like you got a new vocabulary word.”

“It *wash*.”

“They didn’t play ‘Wind Beneath My Wings’ for *you*,” May said. “Just be quiet for a minute, okay? I’m trying to listen.”

She turned back to the window.

“I shtill can’t believf the Oriole pickhed you up,” Palmer went on, grinning at the thought. The Icee had turned her teeth a faint blue, which looked even creepier against her braces. It was as if the disguise was being dropped and thirteen-year-old Palmer was revealing herself to be a monster with blue metal teeth.

May wasn’t smiling, because the memory wasn’t funny

to her. She was here for a reason. She was getting revenge—revenge that had been a long time coming. Peter Camp was going down.

Pete was the son of her father's best friend and had been eleven months old when May was born. There were pictures of him lurking above her as she was swaddled in baby blankets, unable to move. He looked surprisingly the same—brown curly hair, body covered in head-to-toe freckles, a slightly goofy, yet predatory expression as he reached for her stuffed duck.

Right from the beginning, May had been the unwilling straight man in Pete's ever-evolving comedy routine. There was the lick-and-replace sandwich gag from kindergarten. The yo-yo spit trick at the bus stop in third grade. The terrifying "lawn sprinkler" (don't ask) from fifth grade. The dribble holes in her milk, the lab worms in her lunch, the bike-by Supersoaker attacks . . . There was nothing too low, too stupid, too disgusting for him to try. Then Pete had moved on to Grant High, and they'd been separated. The next year May had ended up going to a different high school—to Girls' Academy, in downtown Philadelphia. Aside from the occasional whoopie cushion at holiday gatherings, she believed the menace had ended.

Until last weekend, when the Golds and the Camps had taken their annual trip to Camden Yards.

The Camden Yards trip was one of the major events of the year. Even May, who didn't like baseball, was able to work up some enthusiasm for it—if only because her father and sisters were practically humming with excitement. Also, May's dad always saw to it that she was entertained in one

way or another. He'd let her choose some of the music in the car. (Along with the obligatory Bruce Springsteen. Her dad had to blast "Out in the Street" and "Thunder Road" as he tore down I-95 in the Firebird. *Had to*. As if the earth would explode if he didn't—or worse yet, it might rain and the game would be a washout.) He'd glance at her through the rearview mirror and make his "big tooth" face, pulling his lips back in a horselike grimace that always made her laugh. As a reward for sitting through the game, her dad would slip her some cash (he had developed a very slick move, which even Palmer couldn't detect) so that she could buy herself an extra snack from the concessions. So May had come to peace with the event.

On this last trip she had been biding her time during the seventh-inning stretch, staring absently into the depths of her cup of lemonade. The next thing she knew, a pair of huge and fuzzy black wings embraced her. Suddenly she was being lifted out of her seat by someone in a black bird costume and was on her way down to the field. Once there, she was immediately set upon by five members of the Baltimore Orioles, all of whom shook her hand. One gave her a signed ball. The crowd began to cheer her. Then, just when things couldn't get any weirder, she looked up and saw her own face—big as a building—stretched across the Jumbotron.

Underneath it was the caption *May Gold, formerly blind fan*.

She didn't even have time to react before she was escorted back to her seat.

It had taken over an hour to get an explanation because

that was how long it had taken for Peter Camp to stop laughing. He revealed at last that he had told one of the public relations staff that May had been born blind, had just been cured by surgery, and was fulfilling her lifelong dream of seeing a live baseball game. It was an incredibly weird story—so weird that they'd actually believed him.

The audacity of the stunt had kept Pete from getting into any trouble; in fact, the Gold-Camp contingent now ranked Pete among mankind's greatest thinkers. May's father had immediately claimed the baseball and held it carefully with both hands for the remainder of the game, as though it were his very own egg that he was protecting until it hatched.

The rest of the night was ruined for May. She flinched whenever anyone came too close—even the waiters at the restaurant they went to for dinner. Her psyche was shot. Pete had finally gone too far.

The Camden Yards stunt had brought May to the pool house at the local swim club that afternoon after school. She and Palmer admitted themselves using keys borrowed from their older sister, Brooks, who was a lifeguard there. This was the day before the Memorial Day opening of the pool, so it was filled and ready but deserted.

Their accomplice was Diana Haverty, a fellow lifeguard and one of Brooks's friends from softball, who was known to be the current object of Pete's desire. Diana had obligingly asked Pete to meet her there for a private swim. Diana was going to dare Pete to disrobe. He would be ambushed by May and Palmer. From there, it was a simple

grab-the-clothes-and-run operation, taking as many pictures as possible with May's Polaroid camera in the process. It was a beautifully simple plan.

Except that Diana wasn't there yet. She was fifteen minutes late. This worried May a great deal—even more than the fact that it was over eighty degrees outside and it was even hotter inside the crowded office, which was also the storage area for several vats of pool chemicals. They'd been waiting there for over an hour, crouched on the concrete floor. The hot chlorine vapors invaded all of May's pores. The smell burned her nose, stung her eyes, and infected her taste buds. She wondered if it was possible to die from inhaling chlorine fumes. It would be a stupid way to die.

Palmer drained her cup loudly and launched it across the room at the trash can. Just then May heard the front gate creaking open. There were footsteps in the breezeway. Someone was walking toward the pool. May silenced Palmer by raising her hand, but Palmer had heard it too and was frozen in place. May got a little lower and kept watching out the window.

"Please be Diana," she mumbled under her breath. "Please."

But it wasn't Diana. Pete emerged from the breezeway, looking somewhat baffled. He stopped and looked around, then started patrolling the far side of the pool in his slightly slouchy walk, his crown of finger-length curls bobbing with every step.

"We're dead," May said. "Let's get out of here."

"No, we're not," Palmer replied as she crept across the

floor and joined May under the window. “Quick! Take off your shirt.”

May’s head whipped around in Palm’s direction. Her green eyes, so similar to May’s, were flashing maniacally. Her fingers were already clawing at one of May’s short pink sleeves, trying to tug it down her arm.

“I am not taking off my shirt,” May whispered.

“Just the right side,” Palmer said. “That’s all we’ll need.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just do it!”

It was moments like this that May felt that nature had been much too unfair. Palmer, like their older sister, Brooks, had gotten all the enviable physical traits the family gene pool had to offer—the golden blond locks, the endless legs, the slender, boyish hips. It didn’t stop there. From their father, an excellent baseball player, Palmer and Brooks had gotten exceptional athletic ability. They were all muscle and blessed with grace and speed.

May had hair that wasn’t quite blond and wasn’t quite red (she called the shade “anemic strawberry”). From her father, she’d gotten the high arch of her brow that made her look like she always thinking, *Huh?* From some unknown, less-evolved relative, she’d gotten shorter legs, pale, sun-sensitive skin, and a lack of coordination. The consolation prize was that she was supposed to have gotten intelligence, but intelligence doesn’t matter when your thirteen-year-old sister can just sit on top of you and take your shirt by force if she decides she needs it for something.

“It’s not enough,” Palmer said, looking at the shoulder

May had just freed from her shirt. “The strap is in the way. The bra has to go.”

“Oh my God.” May rolled her eyes. “I’ve wandered into a teen sex comedy.”

“Would you shut up and take off your bra?”

“Okay, now you just sound like a scary boyfriend,” May said, reaching under her T-shirt to unhook her bra. “Explain. Why am I doing this?”

“Bait.”

“Bait? My shoulder is bait?”

“Show more if you want,” Palmer said, flashing the blue teeth again. She really did look like some kind of otherworldly predator when she did that—one that wanted May’s bra for some insidious purpose and that now thought of May as “bait.” May yanked off the bra and covered the rest of herself as best she could by clutching her shirt against her chest.

“Is that better?” she asked.

“That’s good.” Palm nodded. “Now stick your arm out the window so it looks like you’re naked. Then wave him into the water.”

“*That’s* your idea? He’ll never fall for that.”

“Don’t doubt the power of a little suggested sex.”

May looked over in disbelief. “Who are you?” she said. “What have you done with Palm?”

“Either you get him to strip and wave him into the pool or we go out there, hold him down, and get the pants. What do you want to do?”

Faced with this dire choice, May sighed. She took a moment to try to invest as much come-hither mojo into

her bare arm and shoulder as she could. She imagined Nicole Kidman—how would *she* beckon someone with her bare arm? Slowly, she thought, with a little wrist action. Gracefully. Slight rotation in the shoulder. That's what she would try.

She put out her limb and waved. Her move didn't seem very seductive. It was a bit more ground-crew-guiding-in-the-plane in flavor.

"Diana?" Pete called to the arm.

May looked down at Palmer in panic. Palmer had to shove her fist into her mouth.

"What do I do?" May whispered.

Palmer replied by taking May's bra from the ground and shoving it into her sister's hand.

"Wave it," she said. "Like a flag."

May flapped the bra around. Pete stared at it but did nothing.

"Come on, Camper!" Palmer suddenly shouted in a remarkably good imitation of Diana's high, twangy voice. "Get in the pool!"

"Get in?" he called back.

"Wave the bra again!" Palmer hissed. May shook it around once more. It got stuck in a nearby bush and she had to pull it free.

"See? I'm getting undressed," Palmer yelled, her face turning red from the effort of holding in her laughter. "Come on! Take it off!"

Palmer pulled May down next to her. They waited, just under the window, unable to breathe. May expected Pete to come to the window at any minute. Something awful

was definitely about to happen. This was going to end badly.

A very long minute passed.

Splash.

Palmer and May peeked out of the bottom of the window. Pete was in the pool, and his clothes were on a chair.

"I don't believe it," May whispered.

"See?" Palmer said. "Showtime! Come on!"

May pushed her arm back into her shirt, shoved the bra into the pocket of her long khaki shorts, and fumbled for her bag. Palmer was already slipping out the door. May followed her into the breezeway and concealed herself behind the soda machine.

Palm crept to the edge of the breezeway and crouched down to evaluate the situation. She nodded her readiness to May, and May nervously nodded back. Even though Palmer seemed as ready to go as a trained commando, May was not. But she was here, and it was happening.

Palmer counted down from three on her fingers and bolted for the pool. May heard Pete yelling, and Palm barreled back, grinning crazily, with a pile of clothes in her arms.

"Now!" she yelled as she passed.

May readied herself and raised her camera to her eye. Pete was about to come charging right at her, in his *natural state*. Yes, May knew what to expect. Yes, she knew what to look for and where to look for it. Still, she decided to just shoot straight ahead and not focus too much on what she was actually seeing.

And around the corner he came. All of him. May started snapping away.

On seeing May and the camera, Pete had the good sense to immediately turn and run back around the corner to the pool. Faced with the choice of running after him (and possibly being overtaken by a wet, naked nemesis) or running to the car and getting away, May opted for the latter. She turned and ran toward the lot. Brooks had already pulled up in the minivan, and Palm had the door open. May scrambled in, her hands full of still-gray Polaroids. Brooks peeled out of the lot and down the street.

The three Gold sisters were convulsing from laughter in the minivan as they drove away. The images on the Polaroids were blossoming. Many were blurry, a few were interesting studies of the ceiling or the wall, but there were a few promising ones in the bunch. These were examined closely and critically by Palm.

“She-male,” she said, holding up a streaky image.

“Cut the guy some slack,” May said graciously. “He was just in a very cold pool.”

“I don’t see any slack to cut,” Palm said with a shrug.

“Come off it. These pictures are too blurry to tell. He was moving too fast.”

“I saw it.”

“You didn’t see a thing.” May shook her head. “He was in the pool when you saw him. But he ran right at me. I saw it. And it was what you’d expect. Regular.”

As she squealed to a stop at a red light, Brooks turned a questioning gaze on May.

“And you’re comparing him against . . . what?” Brooks asked, one eyebrow raised.

“I’m . . .” Now Palm had fixed May with a stare as well. Unless May had been withholding important information, they knew she didn’t have a clue what she was talking about. “Guesstimating.”

Palm snorted and fanned the photos out on the backseat.

“Here’s one of his butt that’s pretty good,” she said, plucking out a picture taken during Pete’s hasty retreat. It caught him midrun and was elegant, nearly classical in composition. Pete had the naked flair of an ancient Greek, but his butt was highlighted by the red glow from the Coke machine. Palmer named it *Naked Running Rudolph Butt*, which triggered the laugh attack all over again.

“Okay,” May said, catching her breath. “We have five minutes to get home.”

“Not a problem,” Brooks said.

As Brooks cranked up the music and went into hyperspeed, Palmer and May examined the spoils of war: one pair of jeans (with wallet—that would need to be returned right away), one gray T-shirt, one red-and-white short-sleeved cotton button-down, one pair of boxers imprinted with pictures of chickens (very strange), one pair of gray socks with a thin red stripe. Palm hadn’t had enough time to get his shoes, but they could live with that.

Brooks turned down the entrance to their road. The Golds lived in an old suburban development outside of Philadelphia. Back when it was new, it had probably been the neatest, most uniform community in the world, with its six different models of houses randomly and endlessly repeated down meandering tree-lined streets. But in the half century since it had been built, everything had been

overgrown, and all of the houses had deteriorated or been altered or rebuilt. Their little corner in particular was the forbidden forest of mismatched additions and sagging garage porticos. They passed the Camps' on the way to their own house and gave a triumphant wave.

As May was in the middle of putting on Pete's shirt, Brooks suddenly turned off the music. May looked up from her buttoning.

"Why did you . . .?"

May never finished her question because she soon saw what had caused the disturbance. In front of them was a parked police car with a silently pulsing siren light. It was next to an ambulance and a fire truck.

"What's that?" May said.

At first, May would remember, she thought that something had happened to their elderly neighbor, Mrs. Ross. But as they drove closer, they saw that the ambulance was in their driveway and that the fire truck and squad car were in front of their house. But there was no fire.

Though Brooks accelerated toward the house, to May it felt like the minivan was moving slowly. Now she could see the activity in their garage. Her father's Firebird was neatly parked in its spot, richly reflecting the late afternoon sun from its deep gold exterior. Three or four people in blue uniforms were calmly standing around the car. Some of their neighbors were on their front lawns, watching all of this.

Brooks brought the minivan to a jerky stop and killed the engine. Palm and Brooks ran out. May moved more

deliberately, gathering her photos, picking up her purse and locking the doors. Then, when she was ready, she turned and walked toward the garage.

There was a large orange kit in the garage entrance. It sat open, revealing white sterile packages and plastic tubes from unseen devices. There was a stretcher set up by the tool bench. As May and her sisters approached, one of the EMTs pulled a sheet over it. One of their neighbors, Bonnie Stark, was in the driveway. She ran toward the girls, ushering them back. Bonnie had been crying.

“Girls,” Bonnie was saying, “something happened . . .”

May never remembered what it was that Bonnie told them; she only recalled that when Bonnie finished speaking, Brooks ran into the house. May looked down and with complete presence of mind counted every single one of the geraniums in the flower box by her feet. There were thirty-six. There was a whistling noise in her ears as she sat down in the driveway. Palm clung to her. Palm was crying—screaming, actually. May absently stroked her hair. It was slightly oily. Her poor little sister. She was so long and skinny, and she was clinging on to May like some violently terrified baby animal grabbing on to its mother’s fur. Howling.

May started counting the tiles on the roof of the garage.

The next thing she remembered was walking into the kitchen. This must have only been a few minutes later. Pete’s dad, Richard Camp, was there, on the phone. He was tall and thin like Pete and he was slumping a bit when May walked in, so he looked a bit like a drooping plant. He straightened up when he saw her and rapidly finished up

his phone call with a curt, “Okay,” and, “I’ll call you back.” She didn’t really question why he was in their kitchen, on their phone; instead she wondered whether or not to tell him that Pete was stuck at the pool and that he had no clothes.

He hung up and walked over to her and tried to put his hand on her shoulder.

“May,” he said, “I’m so . . .”

She moved away.

“Can you tell me, please,” May said, reaching back and holding on to the kitchen counter, “can you tell me what’s happening?”

“Your father . . .” he began. He was speaking in an unnaturally precise manner, and he gripped the top of one of their heavy kitchen chairs until his knuckles were white. “He had a heart attack, May.”

“When?”

It was the only thing she could think to ask.

“About forty-five minutes ago.” Forty-five minutes. You could save someone in forty-five minutes. That sounded reasonable. You hit them with the electric paddles or you gave them some medicine. Aspirin. She’d heard that aspirin could save you if you took it while you had a heart attack.

“Where is he?” May asked, surprised to hear the low insistence in her own voice. “Where did this happen? Here?”

“In the garage. In the car. He parked it, and then it must have happened.”

“Have they stopped trying to . . .” May didn’t know the words. “Those people, are they going to keep trying? You know. To help him?”

Mr. Camp didn't say anything for a moment.

"It was too late when they got here," he finally managed.
"Do you understand?"

"Too late?"

"He was already gone, May."

No. He wasn't gone, not literally. He was out in the garage.

"He's dead, May."

May swallowed a few times in an attempt to get the whistling, air-suction noise in her ears to stop. It didn't work.

"Can I go see him?" she asked.

Mr. Camp sighed and ran his hand through his hair. It was straight, unlike Pete's, and turning a steely gray. Her dad had no gray hair.

"I wouldn't. Stay here with me, okay?"

"Where's my mom?"

"She's coming home now."

"Does she know?"

"She knows something is wrong."

"I'll call her." May walked toward the phone.

"She's on her way. She's not at work anymore."

"Cell . . ."

"Why don't you wait?" he asked. "I think that would be better. Safer. She's driving. Is that okay?"

May stopped halfway to the phone and thought about this.

"Safer. Okay. She's driving."

"Right." He nodded.

There was a lull. Neither of them moved.

“May,” he finally said, “I’m so sorry.”

“I have to go look for Palm,” she replied. “I’ll come back.”

Halfway to the door, May realized that her bra was still dangling out of her front pocket. She yanked it free and threw it on the stairs as she passed. Stepping out the front door, she was shocked at how achingly sunny it was. Somehow she felt like it should have suddenly gotten dark. The paramedics were still there. They gave her sideways glances as she wandered to the quiet street, looked to the left and right, and wandered back toward the house. Another neighbor approached. So many neighbors. They were coming out of the woodwork.

The buzzing in her ears was getting louder.

“Have you seen my sister?” May asked anyone nearby. “Palmer?”

“She’s over at the Starks’, honey,” one of the neighbors replied.

That’s right, May thought. Bonnie had taken Palm to her house. The neighbor was reaching out to her, trying to embrace her.

“Oh, right.” May nodded, backing away. “Thanks.”

She walked around the house, straight to the back of the yard, to the narrow, secluded space behind a bush that separated her sisters’ pitchback and the shed. It was a damp, spidery spot, but it couldn’t be seen from the kitchen window. She sank down into the grass and leaned up against a pile of cinder blocks that someone had stacked there six or seven years ago and never bothered to move. She started to laugh. It was completely automatic and spastic and so forceful that she actually gagged once or twice. She wasn’t

sure how long she sat there. It could have been five minutes or two hours. She didn't hear anyone approaching.

"May?"

May looked up to find Pete, now dry and dressed, standing next to her. He must have followed along to their house with his mother; she would have gotten the message as well. And of course Pete would know to look for her here. This had been a long-standing hiding spot in all kinds of games when they were kids. As for the incident at the pool . . . that had been sometime in the distant past or in another dimension.

Pete watched her. No jokes this time. Somehow having Pete standing next to her with a serious look on his face made the whole thing a little more real. And the real was horrible. The real made her panic. The pressure of his stare caused her laughter to evolve into a different, more logical emotion. She wanted to run, but she knew that she couldn't. Her legs, her arms—she didn't really know how they worked at the moment.

"Hey, Pete," she said as the last of the laughter died out of her voice, "I have your wallet."