

E.G. Young

Novel Sample, YA Paranormal Fantasy

CHAPTER ONE

HOT DOGS

One hot dog, please. Mustard. Lots of it. Ketchup, in bright red zigzags down the middle. Pickle relish, too. And a scoop of banana peppers.

That's what I'd order. I can almost taste it, that smoky, comforting flavor that says you're the kind of person who goes to Friday night high school football games with your friends. You're the kind of person who gets invited to neighborhood cookouts on hot summer nights. You're the kind of person who eats hot dogs, which is to say, you are a person.

So I stand in line. Every day. The hot dog cart is always busy because it's right in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Tourists stagger down the steep marble steps, exhausted from looking at watercolors and etchings and acrylics. A waste of time. You can't eat a painting. And it doesn't matter how important the artist was. They're dead. Couldn't even ask for a side of fries if they wanted to.

Besides, isn't this art? Sunlight glints on stacked soda cans. Stella slaps down a ketchup bottle and grabs the mustard—always in that order. Her nails are painted orange for Halloween. She must like Halloween, because she's taped a poster for a block party to the stainless steel side of the cart. *Bring Your Boo*, it says, with a cute little cartoon ghost. If I were friends with Stella, maybe she would invite me. She's about my age. I don't know how a teenage girl can run her own hot dog stand, but it's one of the coolest things about her.

"Fries?" she asks the businessman in front of me.

“No,” he says, not looking up from his phone.

“Toppings?”

I cross my fingers. Order banana peppers, order banana peppers, order banana peppers. Once it actually happened. It was a five-year-old girl, with a unicorn backpack, and she ordered exactly six banana peppers.

“Just a little relish.”

He does not deserve hot dogs.

Stella looks at the next customer. “What can I get you?”

I step up. Hot dog. Lots of banana peppers. Give it to me deep fried. I want to feel the grease dripping down my fingers. I want it to burn my tongue. I want to open my mouth so wide, I eat the whole thing in one bite.

Banana peppers.

I don’t have an effect on most people. But on Stella—I can feel it. The way her mouth tightens. She has a friendly mouth, wide and almost always smiling. But when I get close, her lips pinch together like something is sealing them shut. Sometimes, the hairs on her arms stand up.

I don’t know why it’s different with her. I just know that I spent a long time drifting. And then one day I was here. Pulled into orbit around her like an exoplanet, invisible against such a brilliant light.

“Excuse me?” The customer behind me is pushing forward. “Didn’t you hear my order? One hot dog, just mustard?”

Stella’s eyes snap back into focus. “I’m sorry,” she says to the woman, who is wearing a gift shop T-shirt that says *Take All My Monet*.

An exoplanet is invisible to humans. Scientists only know it exists by how it blots out the brightness from its star. If this tourist knew anything about exoplanets, she would understand why Stella's hand is shaking as she squeezes the mustard bottle.

"I did not order that," the woman says, pointing to what Stella has just scooped onto her hot dog.

Banana peppers.

Something inside me—the thing I imagine to be my heart or where my heart would be if I still had a heart—surges. I am right next to Stella now. I can count the hairs on her arms.

"Babe, a hot dog is just a metaphor, right?" Stella says. "So does an exact order really matter?"

"I paid," the woman says, firmly, waving something in her hand that looks less like money and more like a scrap of paper. This is how Stella runs her hot dog cart. People pay in secrets, not cash. It might be an art installation or Stella might be a mobster.

"This is a lesson in capitalism," Stella says, and she hands the customer the order with banana peppers.

Then she looks at me. Well, not at me. Nobody can look at me. But her gaze is pulled in my direction. She presses her tongue against closed lips.

I am here. I am here. I am here.

But it is taking so much energy. I feel it. I feel myself beginning to flicker out.

I am—

Gone. Again.

I hear the ghost crabs before I see them. Little pockmarks of sound in the sand. There are so many of them. They've crawled out of their holes just to look at me. Small, pale bodies. A lot of eyes.

They are pulled by instinct to me, another thing like them, a thing that is under the ground. Except I have been buried there such a long time, I cannot get up again like the crabs.

Sometimes I feel the sand in my mouth. The grit. Sometimes I think maybe it is not sand, maybe it is dirt. Sometimes I think, maybe it is not a mouth anymore. If it was a mouth, I would use it to scream and the scream would tear open a window and I would open it and cross into a world where I did have a mouth again. Sometimes I think if I could count my teeth, it would be a sign that I am still here.

I am a thing with teeth and eyes and hair but only in my own mind. I am a thing between things. I am a thing that happens after everything else is sucked out. So I am not a thing that can scream.

But if I could. If I could. It would change everything. It would bend back the rules. Time would fold in on itself. The clocks would stop, like they did on the day I left my body and became me.

I don't really remember that day. All my memories are gone, pieced out in other things. The crabs carry them in their legs. The grains of sand carry them on the shore. It's impossible to know if anyone will ever collect all those little pieces of memory and put them together again. If they did, maybe it would sound like my scream.

And then I'm back.

It's night. Stella has gone home, so I can't wait in line for the hot dogs. Fine. I'll collect things.

I am very good at collecting things.

I collect midnight laughter on street corners and the spiny underside of graffiti stars and the big-eared purple dog, painted so high on the brick wall of that warehouse, only I can touch it.

I collect the unlocked church door, the yawning darkness under pews, the snuffed-out candles meant to burn with prayers.

I collect the song of a train in the tunnels down below.

I line them all up in bottles, blue and purple glass shot through with moonlight. I can unstopper them whenever I want. See, I've just drunk the *Sound of Summer Jazz on Garden Rooftop*, part of my vintage collection from ... well, whenever I bottled it.

The night is so long. Even after I collect everything, line them up and admire how pretty, I feel the edges of myself prick and tear. If I'm not careful, I will imagine something next to me, plucking at my seams. Something I can't see. Something worse than crabs.