

sammy KEYES

and
the BOYZ IN THE BAND

PART V

It takes a certain level of cunning to work forward through a crowd. For example, if you're pushing ahead saying, "Hey! Let me through! I want to get up front and see the band!" well, nobody's going to budge. They'll push your sorry tush right back where it belongs.

But if you're nudging through, going, "Excuse me . . . excuse me . . . emergency, excuse me," in a sweet little voice full of desperation and despair, people will let you through. And if they ever realize that you were really just conning your way to the front of the crowd, chances are they won't physically throw you out. They'll probably just grumble to their friends about you while you ignore them and enjoy an excellent view of the show.

Not that I would ever employ such tactics. Well, unless there was something serious at stake, and then it'd be more like, Excuse me . . . I think I'm gonna barf!

But Marissa and I know somebody whose every breath is inhaled in fortification of lies—Heather Acosta.

So I guess I shouldn't have been surprised to spot Heather, Tenille, and Monet right up front against the crowd-control blockade when The Boyz hit the stage.

Anyway, all the girls in the mall—including the three of them—start screaming as the backing track pumps through the sound system and Ace grabs the center mic off its stand. Toby and Jackson snap up the other two mics, and the three of them start dancing a poppy-hip-hop routine, trading lines as they sing, "*Girl, you know I always think about you, Wanna build my world around you. Girl, can't believe you've gone away, There's so much I have to say to you, girl. . . .*"

Marissa is right beside me in the wings, absolutely swooning. And really, I just don't get it. But instead of saying, Gee, Marissa, get a grip, I point to Heather and her friends and say, "Look at those idiots."

Tenille especially is in a state, crying and reaching and looking like she's either going to dive for the stage or faint as Ace sings, "*And I . . . will love . . . you . . . forever, will ne-ver be better . . . , until I have you back in my arms . . .*"

Marissa's face totally falls when she sees them. "They got all the way to the front? How'd they do that?"

I grin at her. "How'd *you* get backstage?"

She blinks at me, then breaks into a smile. "Oh, yeah."

Then I hear a voice behind me talking over the music, saying, "I wouldn't call them hip-hop."

I turn and see that it's the record label guys, talking to each other.

"We knew that," the Ponytail says back to the bald guy. "But I'm not getting a bead on their style, either."

"Like, what's up with those scarves on the mic stands?" the bald guy says. "They think they're Aerosmith?"

All of a sudden Ace's dad joins them, his voice squeaking, "What'd I tell you? They're crazy for him!"

Vanessa appears with two angry boy-band moms by her side. "Aaron, stay out of it!" she says.

But as she's dragging him away from the record label guys, Ace's dad's face pinches up and he waves at the air, saying, "You've really got to get that under control!"

Vanessa's eyes pop. "It wasn't me!"

Then the bald guy swipes the air and pinches his face, and the Ponytail grimaces, too, saying, "Good God—who's *doing* that?"

And then I smell it, too—another rotten egg stink bomb.

Marissa, though, doesn't seem to notice. "They are so tight!" she gushes as The Boyz do some spinny move. "Unbelievable!"

So okay. I have to admit—they are good dancers. And Ace is a good singer. And yeah, the guys are really cute. But still. The whole thing seemed so . . . fabricated. So when they start the song up again with Ace singing lead for a second time, my mind wanders off to something real.

The stink bomber.

Did this new bombing eliminate anyone from the possibilities of people who'd been in the supply closet with the Amazons? I shook my head. Amazons—brother. For rabid fans, they sure were making themselves scarce. But wait a minute—what if the Guard Boss had—

"Sammy?" Marissa was shaking my arm.

"Huh?"

"I said, let's go back over where we were."

She was pulling me toward the area Vanessa had specifically told us to keep clear, so I said, "But we're not supposed to be here!"

She turned to me and dropped her jaw. "You? Following rules?" She glanced over her shoulder and said, "Come on, she's not even looking," then dragged me along.

We could see a lot more from our new vantage point. Two video cameramen were moving around below the stage. One was shooting the crowd, one The Boyz. And there was another cameraman up on some kind of crane, shooting footage from above.

There were also big press cameras in a cordoned off section to the side and when Marissa saw them she said, "Ohmygod, what am I thinking?" and scrambled through her bag for her camera.

So *click, click, click* she starts taking pictures of The Boyz. And with each shot she steps out of the wings a little farther. And I'm just thinking, Uh-oh. She's gonna get herself booted, when I notice a very scary sight.

Heather Acosta noticing us.

I yank Marissa back into the wings, but I can tell that Heather’s mind is already going *click-click-click*, just like Marissa’s camera: How did *they* get back there? If those losers are back there, why can’t *I* be back there? Better yet—why can’t I be *up* there? They think they’re so hot getting backstage, well what’s stopping me from getting *on* stage? A couple of barricades? An unarmed guard? *Forget* it!

And then, like a Vegas act gone terribly wrong, the Tyrannical Tiger of Santa Martina unleashes herself, clawing over the barricade and around the guard. And Heather’s just about reached the stage when The Boyz hit the last line, “*And I . . . will love . . . you . . . forever,*” holding a pose with their arms out to the audience.

Then a whole bunch of things happen right in a row: Guards dive for Heather and keep her from climbing onstage. Press cameras click like crazy. The Boyz eat up the moment, then prance behind the curtain. And then, right near us alongside the stage, a narrow door opens and two of the biggest, most beautiful women I’ve ever seen step out into the rotunda.

And before Marissa and I can cry, “Amazons!” they’re charging our way.

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mystery by cracking the code at SammyKeyes.com