

sammy KEYES

and
the BOYZ IN THE BAND

PART I

I'm not big on the mall. It's full of pricey clothes and poseur kids flexing their coolness as they cruise the halls.

Please. Like I don't get enough of that in junior high?

But my best friend Marissa *likes* the mall. She likes the stores, she likes the food, she likes annihilating electro-badguys at the video arcade...all of which add up to me being way more familiar with the Town Center Mall than I'd ever intended.

But that Saturday when we walked through the lower level doors, I knew I should have stayed home. "Marissa," I said, gawking at the sea of kids in front of us, "this is insane!" As we moved toward the crowd, I shook my head and said, "I can't believe there are even this many kids in Santa Martina!"

"They're almost all *girls*, too!" Marissa whimpered.

See, like the rest of the mob at the mall, Marissa was dying to get a glimpse of The Boyz—a boy band I had never even heard of until they became, as Miss Pilson said in English class, "suddenly ubiquitous." They were in the paper, on the news, on flyers that got passed out at school. . . . And why? Because they had chosen our mall as the place to shoot their video and had put out a call for "enthusiastic fans between twelve and sixteen" who wanted to be "extras" in the video.

Quicker than mosquitoes at sunset, all the girls at school were totally slurping it up, going, "They're so hot! I can't believe they're coming *here*." They even knew their names—Toby, Ace, and Jackson—and seemed to know everything about them. "Ace is into racecars,

did you know that?” “Toby’s way into pirates—I think that’s so . . . romantic!” “Jackson thinks golden retrievers are the best dogs—I *have* a retriever!” “Toby’s birthday is May twelfth—*my* birthday is May twelfth!”

Like, who *cares*?

But even though the whole thing seemed colossally stupid to me, I let Marissa drag me along. After all, we are best friends, and it was nothing compared to some of the places *I’ve* dragged *her*.

Anyway, Marissa was on her tiptoes whimpering, “We’ll never even get near the stage!” when a voice behind us snarled, “You losers actually think you’re going to get to see the band?”

Out of reflex I whipped around, but I already knew who it was. Worse than a regular mall rat, it was Santa Martina’s very own Rodent with Rattitude—Heather Acosta. I glanced around, looking for her brother Casey but didn’t see him. Which made sense. Like he’d want to see a teeny-bopper boy band?

But right beside her like little mimicking mice were Heather’s wannabe friends Tenille and Monet.

“Yeah,” Tenille said. “You losers think The Boyz are even gonna *notice* you?” She eyed my high-tops and jeans and snorted.

So *I* smirked at the gold stud sticking through her bellybutton and said, “Hey, look—you got your brain pierced!” Then I turned to Marissa and muttered, “Let’s get out of here.”

“Might as well,” Heather said with a shrug. “You’ll never get close enough to even see them.” She sneered. “Me? I’m gonna *meet* them.” Then she pushed through the crowd going, “Excuse me . . . excuse me . . . emergency, excuse me . . .”

“Oh!” Marissa growled as Heather weaved through the crowd. “She is the pushiest person on the planet!”

I noticed a group of mall security guards muscling their way through the crowd in front of us, stretching out yellow CAUTION tape. I pointed and said, “What do you think those guys are doing?”

Marissa looked, too. “Maybe someone fainted?”

It didn't seem like a medical emergency to me. It seemed like . . . crowd control. I turned and checked the big glass doors we'd come through. There were security guards shaking their heads at people yanking on the entrance doors. "Marissa," I whispered. "They've locked the mall!"

She turned around, saying, "You're kidding."

"See? I think they let too many people in here." I looked back at the guards with the CAUTION tape. "And I'll bet they're going to make everyone on this side of the tape leave."

"But . . . they can't do that! People are going to riot!"

"They've got to do something—there are way too many people in here." I pointed into the crowd. "Look! Heather's already on the other side of the tape."

"Oh!" Marissa growled again, and this time she actually stomped her foot. "She worms her way in and we get kicked out. This is *so* unfair!"

Well, there was no way I was going to let Heather win that easily. I grabbed Marissa by the arm and said, "Come on!"

I was dragging her away from the crowd, but not toward the entrance doors, so she didn't put up too much of a fight. "You've got a plan?" she asked.

I grinned and tilted my head toward an EMPLOYEES ONLY door. "You game?"

Her eyes got wide. "You know how to get over to the rotunda?"

Now, I didn't exactly. But let's just say I've had some uh, *experience* in places where I don't belong, and the back corridors of the Town Center Mall are definitely on my resume.

So I just grinned some more and said, "How hard can it be?" as I sidled up to the door.

"Well?" she whispered as I tried the knob.

"Be smooth," I said and pulled the door open.

In the blink of an eye, we were both inside.

"Cool!" Marissa whispered, slapping me five.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s head up this way and turn right.”

The trouble with the back corridors of the mall is that they’re a crazy maze. They’ve got steps in weird places, zigzagging turns, and sudden dead-ends. Plus, there are doors *everywhere*, some locked with a card-reader/combination-keypad-contraption, some not. Some labeled—like the back doors of the stores, and some not—like closets and storage rooms and stairwells to the roof.

The trick to the back corridors is knowing what direction you want to go and keeping your mind like a compass on that direction. If you don’t, you’re gonna get totally lost.

So there I was in compass mode, starting to lead Marissa up the corridor, when suddenly the EMPLOYEES ONLY door we’d just come through starts to open.

Marissa and I give each other wide-eyed looks, then dash around the corner and dive through the first door we find that isn’t locked. And when we’re safely hidden inside, Marissa catches her breath and whispers, “Do you think someone saw us?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper back.

The room we’re hiding in is completely dark, but my nose is picking up the smell of dirty dust mops, ammonia, and...a faint sort of stinky sulfur odor.

So I figure we’re probably in some kind of janitor supply closet, but then through the darkness Marissa and I hear a sound.

A gurgly, angry, *scary* sound.

And just as my heart tries to shoot through my chest, Marissa swallows a scream and shoots through the door.

Light from the corridor comes flooding in, and when I turn and see what’s making the sound, I know we’ve just found trouble.

Big, big trouble.

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mystery by cracking the code at SammyKeyes.com