

# PRAISE FOR BENJAMIN DEAN

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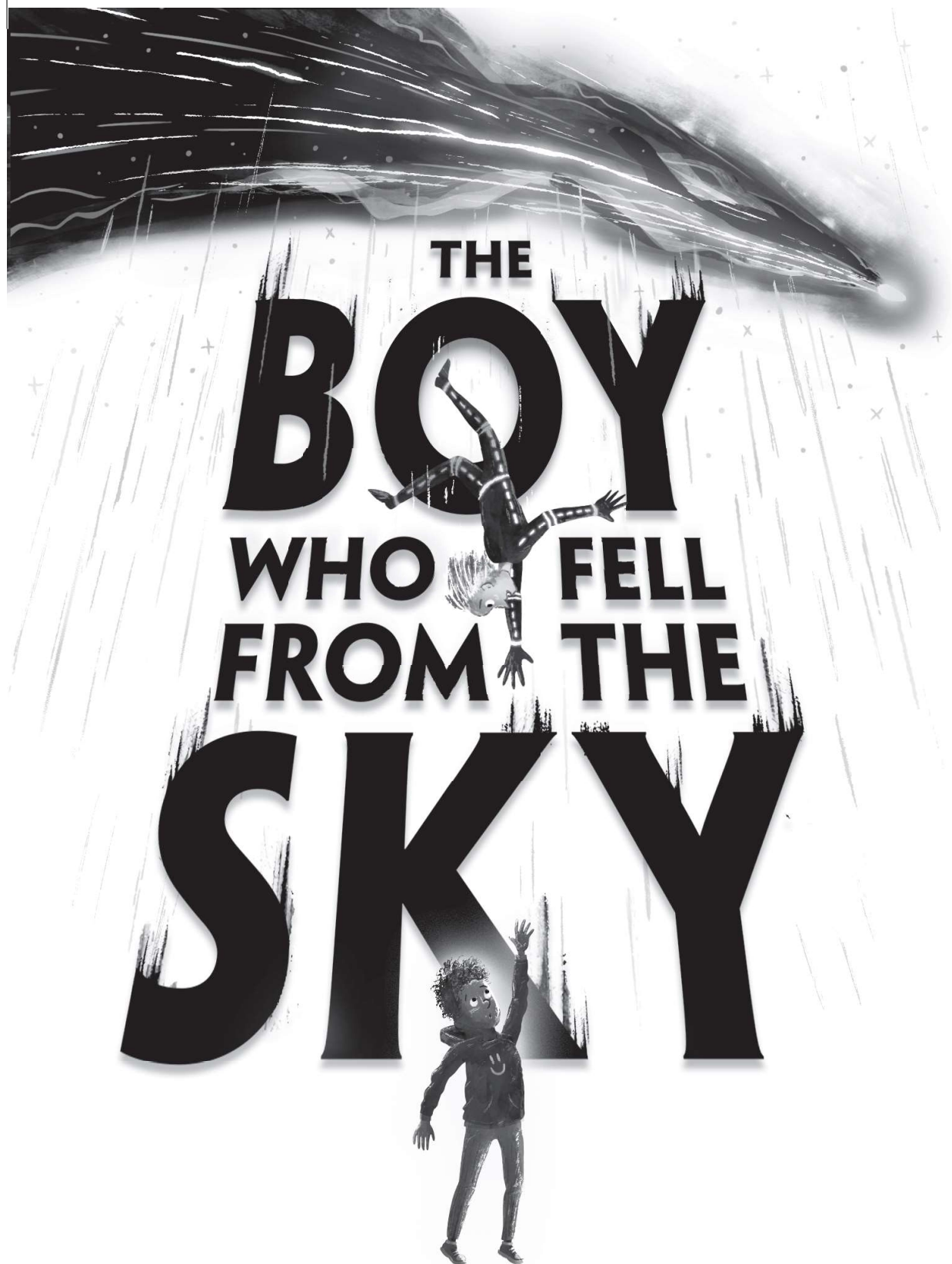
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**BENJAMIN DEAN**

**SIMON & SCHUSTER**

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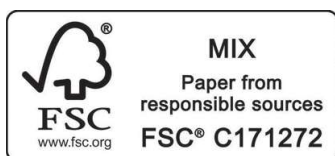
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As he started to give Selena a hushed lesson on how to capture a Demon, I took my cue and got quietly to my feet, edging further into the woods and away from them. That had been way too close. I didn't want to think about how much trouble I'd have been in if Dad had seen me. Only slightly relieved, I started off in the direction of home, using the very faint lights in the distance to guide me. This had been a stupid idea. If I stayed out here any longer, I was going to get caught. Or worse.

I was *so close* to relaxing – well, as relaxed as you can be when you're in the woods in the middle of the night with a monster on the loose nearby – when it happened.

A sound.

Not like before. It wasn't the sound of movement but a whimper, soft and broken. I stopped dead in my tracks, trying to listen for it again. Had I imagined it? No, there it was! It was so quiet I could almost pretend that I hadn't heard it. But I had.

The edge of the woods was so close now. Home was just beyond that. The warmth and safety of my bed beckoned. But I heard the whimper again, and before I

could stop myself my feet were moving me towards it, my brain too curious to put up a fight.

It was coming from a bush. I crept closer, and as I did the whining stopped, like it sensed I was near. My head was telling me to run, but my heart said the opposite.

‘Wh-wh-who’s there?’ I stammered into the dark.

The leaves rustled but nothing else followed.

‘I . . . I promise I’m not going to hurt you.’ I let go of the slingshot I’d been gripping in my pocket. It sounded like someone who needed help.

I reached slowly towards the bush in front of me, grabbing a branch and moving it slowly aside. Every part of my body was alive and screaming, a fresh burst of adrenaline firing through me like a cannonball. What was it? With one last steadying breath, I whipped the branch away . . . and screamed. The sound ricocheted off into the woods and, in the distance, voices. But I wasn’t focused on that right now.

The thing in front of me screamed back, its face wide with terror. At the sight of it I fell backwards, letting go of the branch and stumbling over my own feet. I crashed

into the ground hard, the fall stealing the breath from my lungs and ending my shrieks.

I scrambled back, although by now I knew it was too late to run for safety. I'd seen its eyes. They weren't human. I'd looked into them for just a brief second, but surely that was enough. My end was near. All I could do was wait and hope that it'd be quick.

Its hand appeared first, slowly reaching out of the bush. I could almost fool myself into thinking it was human, except its skin shimmered like it was made of starlight. I shrank back as the arm came next, followed by a foot and then a leg. I wanted to scream but I couldn't find the air in my lungs. I was frozen to the spot, fear binding me in place. Finally the Demon completed its reveal, stepping out into the open almost reluctantly.

We took each other in for a moment, the electrifying silence bringing the night around us to life. Its eyes flitted over me, deciding whether I was an ally or an enemy. Mine did the same, searching for the answer. Or maybe I was searching for what I'd been taught about Demons all my life. Surely by now its jaws should've

opened wide to eat me alive, my head seconds away from being in its mouth, And yet it didn't move. It stood still, watching me carefully, its head tilted to one side.

Up close the Demon's skin glittered even more magnificently. Its hair was white like sun-kissed snow, so pure it was nearly blinding, and its eyes weren't black like in the textbooks I'd read in school – they glittered like stars, and they were looking right at me.

But the thing that struck me more than anything was that the Demon was just a boy. A boy who looked like he might be my age; who looked terrified of everything around it; who looked lost. This Demon wasn't a monster at all. It was different in almost every way, but somehow it was just like me.

It made a small movement, and I flinched in response, shrinking backwards and screwing my eyes closed. But when I dared to open them, I saw a hand reaching out into the space between us. Did it want to . . . help me? Or was this a trap? Was it simply figuring out which part of me to eat first?

But the same fear I felt was reflected in its eyes, and



I could tell it was just as scared as I was, its glance flitting around like it suspected a Hunter might be near. When its eyes rested on mine once more, the light in them seemed to shine even brighter. It nodded at its outstretched hand. Hoping I wouldn't live, or die, to regret it, I grasped it.

I'd expected the Demon to be cold, freezing even. The white of its hair, the shimmer of its skin, it all reminded me of winter. And yet its hand was warm. Safe. It pulled me upright, then took a step back, still looking for signs of danger that might be lurking just out of sight.

'You're ... you're a Demon, aren't you?' I asked quietly, scared every Hunter would be able to hear us if I spoke any louder.

It flinched, moving away from me, and began to tremble. 'We're not Demons,' it said. Its voice was soft, calming almost, like a familiar song.

But of *course* it was a Demon. It had to be. Sure, I hadn't known what one looked like before tonight, but what else could it be? Humans didn't walk around sparkling like stars in the night sky.

‘It’s okay,’ I murmured softly, taking a step towards it, and putting my hands up in the air to show it I didn’t mean any harm. It took another step back. ‘I’m not going to hurt you.’

The slingshot in my pocket and the trap in my rucksack reminded me that harm was exactly what I’d planned. Guilt and shame blossomed in my stomach. The Demon stared back, its starry eyes searching for something in my face. Its jaw, sharp and angular, was clenched as tightly as its hands, which were balled into fists at its side.

‘Maybe I can help you?’ I tried. ‘Maybe I ca—’

‘FREEZE!’

My blood ran ice-cold. The Demon jumped, its eyes darting over my shoulder to where the voice had come from. Then came the click of something metallic behind me. I knew immediately what it was. The trap.

I held my hands up. The fierce spotlights of a thousand torches blazed on my back, casting my shadow over the Demon. It looked at me, eyes pleading. I didn’t know what to do. We’d been caught.