

College freshman Paige Moore discovers secret societies and a hundred-year-old architectural mystery, realizing that there is more to the New England college town and its 19th century architecture than anyone could ever imagine.

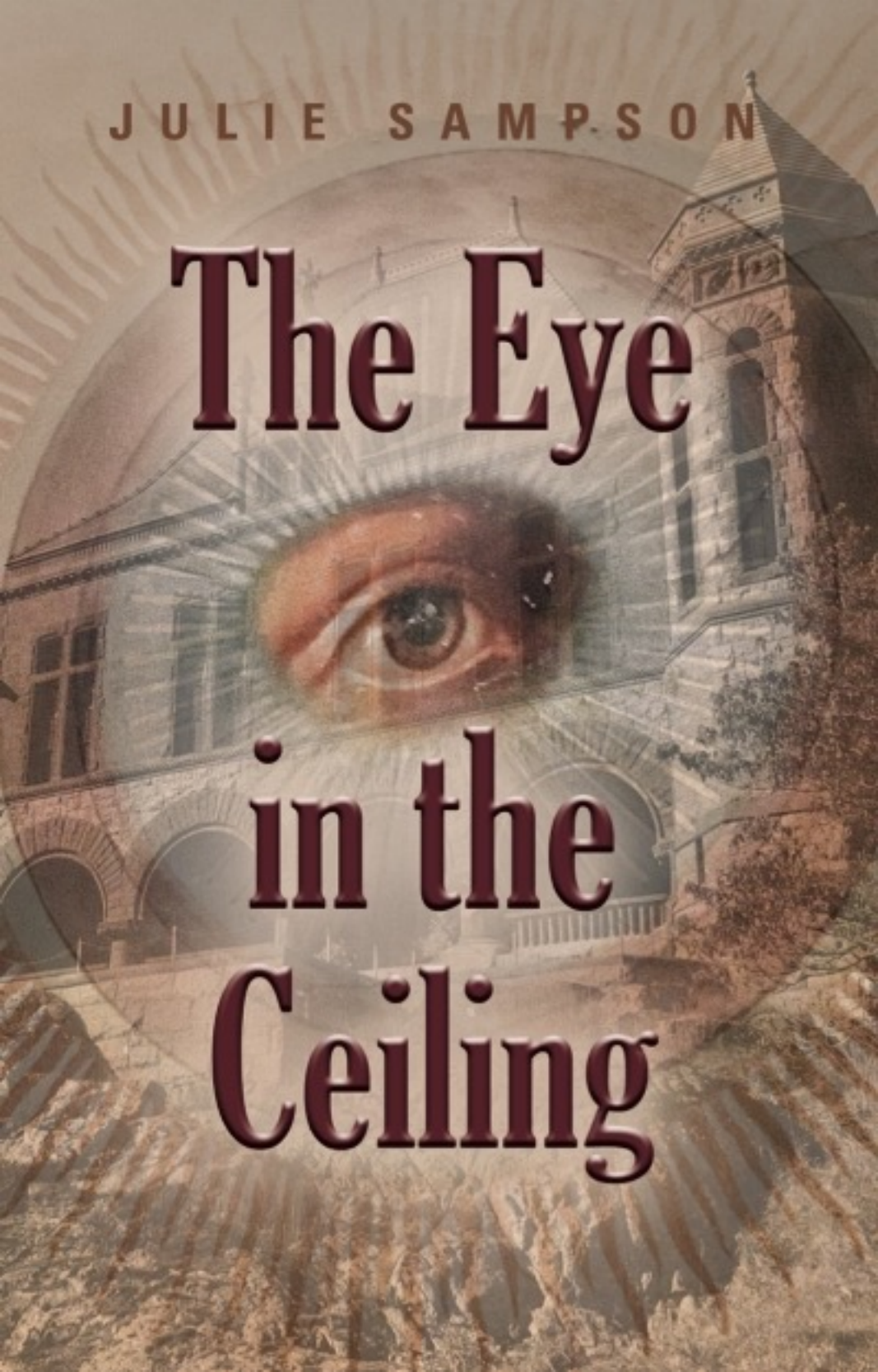
The Eye in the Ceiling

By Julie Sampson

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JULIE SAMPSON

The Eye

in the
Ceiling

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1. The Break-In

Everything began the night of the break-in at the Ames Gate Lodge. I was out walking Hobson when the black Land Rover appeared. I had volunteered to take the dog for his evening walk — well, I didn't volunteer exactly. Ms. Montgomery emphasized that exercising the English springer spaniel was a vital aspect of my library internship duties, although that part of the deal wasn't written up in the college catalogue.

I was a freshman at Kew College in North Easton, Massachusetts, and it was my first week of classes. The library internship was part of the requirements of my Library and Information Science major. It was an Indian summer evening in the grassy town outside of Boston, and it felt amazing to be out in the fresh air. I had never heard of H.H. Richardson or the Porcellian Club that evening as I clipped the leash onto Hobson's collar, but those names and the mysteries which surrounded them would dominate the next three months of my life, and nearly kill me in the process.

Shovel Town, that's what the locals call North Easton, is a perfect place for dog walking. Usually, that is.

I remember that early autumn night so clearly...I hear the SUV coming before I see it, the engine roaring, the tires screeching. I pull Hobson onto the lawn away from the road just as the SUV peels around the corner. The car barrels across the lawn right up to the side entrance of the building. I crouch behind a rock wall to watch. Four men wearing ski hat masks, dressed all in black, jump out of the car and bash crowbars into the large arched wooden doorway. The aged wood splinters into chunks as they gouge a jagged opening. They bust through and the sounds of smashing glass follow from inside the building.

“It’s over here,” one guy yells. “Let’s go, move it.”

The men grunt as they drag furniture out of the way, slamming objects into the walls. Stacks of boxes thud onto the floor. They burst outside, hauling a metal filing cabinet into the back of the SUV. They slam the doors so hard it resonates like a round of gun shots. The SUV blasts past me but the dark-tinted windows make it impossible to view anything more as they roar out of sight.

Part of me wants to walk away, ignore the whole thing, because I have to get back to the library. But I can’t just blow it off. It’s my civic duty to report this intense activity. So, I call the cops — become the lone eyewitness to this epic caper — and here’s where things turn weird.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

At first, I can’t find the right words, then I manage to say, “There’s been — a break-in.”

The operator takes the address and dispatches the police.
“Is an ambulance required?”

“No. Nobody got hurt.”

“The police are on the way. Wait for them.”

I feel stupid standing in the dark driveway with the dog. Hobson has soulful brown eyes and long, curly brown ears that drape like symmetrical chandeliers. He is the library mascot owned by the head librarian Ms. Montgomery. Hobson howls at the police sirens racing toward the lodge.

The officer jumps from the cruiser. “Are you the caller?”

“I’m Paige Moore. Yes, I’m the one who called 911. I saw the break-in,” I say, settling on the word *break-in* instead of robbery or burglary because stealing a filing cabinet seems more like a misdemeanor than high crime. I hold my hands up to show I’m not armed, other than holding Hobson’s leash.

The cop approaches me and adjusts his peaked police cap. His thick black eyeglasses slide down his sweaty nose. He pushes them back with his finger. The lights on the cruiser flash a blinding red across my face. A second police vehicle pulls into the driveway and kills the siren. Hobson jumps toward the cop, barking at him.

“Don’t worry, he’s friendly,” I say.

He keeps his eyes focused on me while the other cops use high-powered flashlights to survey the damage. “What happened here?”

I review the details with him while the other cops mark off the investigation area with yellow caution tape. I feel like a lousy eyewitness — not too many details to report — a black SUV, four men in black wearing ski masks, crowbars.

He pushes up his glasses. “Did they say anything?”

“One guy inside the building found whatever they were looking for. He said, ‘It’s over here. Let’s go, move it.’”

“Were there any sounds when they moved it?” The cop is writing down everything I tell him in his wire-bound pocket notebook.

“Sounds? Some clunking around. Maybe dragging sounds, at first, but then they picked it up and carried it out.”

“How heavy would you say the cabinet is?”

“I can’t even guess. Three of them carried it while the other one, the driver I think, went ahead of them and opened the car door.”

“Did you smell anything?” The cop flips to a fresh page.

“Smell?”

I wonder what a person might smell in moments like this. I’m guessing the cop was trained to cover the five senses in witness interviews along with the five Ws — who, what, where, when and why. “No smells that I recall. Maybe the dog picked up on something though.”

“Could you tell what age these guys might have been?”

“I’d say mid-to-late twenties. They moved so fast.”

“Height?” he asks.

“Tough to say. They were hunched over carrying the cabinet. The other guy I’d guess is 5-foot-10ish.”

“Accents? Boston accent, for instance? Foreign?”

“I didn’t notice.”

“The SUV, was it a late model or a clunker?”

“It looked high-end. Brand-spanking new. All shiny.”

He glances at Hobson who is antsy because this is supposed to be his walking time. The cop softens when he scratches behind Hobson’s ears and says, “The captain will want to talk to you in person. Where can he find you?”

“I’ll be working at the town library until it closes, then back at my dorm,” I tell him and give him my phone number.

The cop points his pen toward my hooded sweatshirt — it has *Kew College Saints* silkscreened across the chest with a graphic of the college St. Bernard mascot.

“You go to Kew?”

“I’m a freshman there.”

“Okay, Miss Moore, the captain will be in touch with you to follow-up,” he says and adjusts his glasses again. “You’re free to leave.”

Back at the library, Hobson laps up a fresh bowl of water. Ms. Montgomery pokes her head in to see who is bustling in the back room. Punctuality is a non-negotiable as a library intern and Ms. Montgomery keeps a close watch on the whereabouts of her staff.

I am still out of breath from rushing back with the dog. “Ms. Montgomery, you’re not going to believe —”

“This isn’t story time, miss. There is work to get done, chop-chop,” she says and slices her hands through the air.

“But —”

“No buts, miss.”

I slip a few extra pumpkin flavored treats to Hobson before I put him into his crate. I pull off my hoodie and stuff it in my backpack in the coat closet. I have less than half an hour to set up chairs in the community room for Ms. Montgomery’s town history class. I dim the overhead fluorescent lights, because they’re adding to the headache that started with the flashing police lights. I am prone to migraines — the aftermath of a concussion last year — and I am aware of the various triggers such as bright lights and loud noise that cause my brain to rebel.

Ms. Montgomery bounces around the library like an aerobics instructor. Her spiked hairstyle swoops upward like a dandelion you could blow across the lawn, an efficient style that won’t slow her down. She boasts that she is up early each

morning for her power walk, suited up in a bright swishy nylon jogging outfit.

Once the class assembles, Ms. Montgomery makes her grand entrance up the center aisle with me shadowing behind her. I am the youngest by forty years at least.

“There are two things you should never try to figure out,” announces Ms. Montgomery, pausing while the silver-haired senior citizens wonder what those two things are. Politics and religion? Death and taxes?

She scratches the answer on the portable chalkboard and wipes the chalk dust from her fingers. “Love and traffic,” she declares. A collective chuckle fills the room.

I’m surprised there are so many retirees taking a night class about this small town. Ms. Montgomery teaches at a rapid-fire pace. I wonder what vitamins this woman uses and if she would be willing to give some to me. Ms. Montgomery requests that I sit front row and center in case she needs assistance. I think my time would be better spent helping the library patrons instead of passing around photocopies. Ms. Montgomery has taught this local history class for years, gaining the reputation as an expert town historian.

North Easton’s industrial history began with the discovery of bog iron, Ms. Montgomery explains, which made the town an important late 17th and 18th century iron-producing region in Massachusetts. The first commercial steel generated in the colonies was made in Easton by the Ames Shovel Company, established in 1803. Ms. Montgomery speaks with pride that

the Ames Shovel Company provided the shovels that dug away the earth that formed the Union Pacific Railroad.

“The Union Pacific Railroad made the states truly united,” she announces. “Most Americans overlook North Easton, our wonderfully historic town. The Ames family shaped the town’s economy, its geography and architecture. Our town is fortunate to have several Henry Hobson Richardson masterpieces, which we will discuss when we take our field trip.”

She assigns an essay to the class on the history of the Ames Shovel Company. She nods in my direction indicating that I am expected to write this paper as well, because part of my internship is helping her write material for the official guide to North Easton.

“Miss, please distribute,” she says, handing me a batch of stapled photocopies. As I pass around the sheets, my eyes jump past the rows of senior citizens where I see a guy my age doodling in his notebook. His bent legs press through the rips in the knees of his jeans. His t-shirt has the word Tool swirled across the chest. He must have arrived late to class because I definitely would have noticed him when I came in.

“Thank you, miss,” he says, mimicking Ms. Montgomery.

I feel my face turning chili pepper hot as I restrain from laughing. On the way to my seat, I feel his eyes on me. I should have done something with my hair other than pull it into a ponytail. I look down at my wrinkled black pants and

ink-stained white blouse — I must look like a waitress at the end of her shift.

As the class labors on, I glance to see his flip flops out in front of him with the frayed hem of his jeans pressed against the floor. His head is turned as he focuses on the teacher, his dark hair is slicked into a tight man bun, and his skin looks tan from the summer.

Ms. Montgomery finally dismisses class. The back-row guy pops a handful of gummy bears into his mouth before getting up.

“You’re the only one in this class that doesn’t have gray hair,” he says to me.

“And you’re the only one with a man bun.”

He lets loose a loud snort. “My professor is gaga over this town’s early American architecture. H.H. Richardson is his idol. A legend according to my professor. He’s the only American with a style named after him, Richardsonian Romanesque.” His breath smells like the gummy bears and the green color in the corners of his mouth looks like toxic waste. “What’s your excuse?”

“Internship.”

“What’s a library intern do?”

“Basically, I’m the old lady’s bitch.”

He laughs harder than I expect, so I tell him about her do's-and-don'ts list, including how to properly exercise the library dog around town.

“I’m Christopher, by the way.” He reaches out to shake my hand. “My friends call me Stoph.”

“I’m Paige. I’m a freshman at Kew College. You?”

“Sophomore at Harvard, studying architecture. Which you probably guessed already.”

He mentions Harvard off-handedly. I’m thinking, one, good looking; two, smart; three, funny; four, humble.

“See you next time, Paige, the main bitch.”

“See you, Soph.”

“It’s Stoph, not Soph.”

“I know.”

I head over to the reference desk where Ms. Montgomery nods toward the archive department. She plucks a thick ring of keys from her top drawer, some regular-sized and some antique looking brass keys that she jingles with authority. She unlocks the door and I follow her down to a musty smelling dungeon. Weak light exposes cracks that run like veins in the cement floors and walls. The basement has lengthy rows of shelves and old metal cabinets. There is a solitary desk positioned against the far wall.

“Return this stack of material to its proper location. Don’t touch anything else. I do not generally allow staff down here, so make it snappy,” she orders and shuffles back up the stairs.

I examine the desk. Its legs are made from old shovels with the shovel blades bent to serve as feet to steady the desk. The shovel handles are screwed into the front of wood beams as leg posts. Old wooden shovel handles are welded together in snug rows to form the desktop. A thick piece of glass tops the shovel handles to make a flat work surface.

The desk is littered with scribbled notes, yellowed blueprints of buildings and piles of old books. I flip through one of the musky smelling tomes.

As I shelve the books, I notice an antique cabinet, the metal doors ajar. I open it snooping for any out-of-circulation vintage books. The cabinet is packed with old notebooks that have aged oxblood leather covers and bindings. I thumb through the yellowed pages of one notebook — it’s filled with calligraphy handwriting with words and symbols, equations, arrows and slash marks. Some drawings have animal heads emerging from wild scrolls of oak leaves, ivy strands and braid patterns; there are elaborate ink drawings of fish creatures with gaping mouths, owl heads, ram heads and goat heads.

“Young lady. I believe I instructed you not to touch anything. There is a level of trust when you work as my student intern.”

“Sorry,” I say, my heart skipping a few beats. “I was just admiring this —”

“It’s not yours to touch or admire. Put it back and finish up.”

Ms. Montgomery folds her arms in front of her chest. I scurry around trying to figure out where the books belong. It is an uncomfortable five minutes where she stares in silence until I slide the last book into place. “I’m finished.”

I follow her up the stairs where a police officer waits by her desk.

“Captain Biff, what a wonderful surprise. What brings you here this evening? Need a new crime novel to read?”

He puts his hands on his hips, broadening his stance. He has trimmed sideburns that fade into a buzz cut on his block-shaped head that reminds me of a Lego character. The gold captain’s badge on his shirt reflects the overhead light. “I’m here to talk with Paige Moore about the break-in. She around?”

I step forward. “I’m Paige.”

“I need to ask you a few questions about the incident earlier this evening.” He takes his spiral-topped notebook from his chest pocket and twists open his gold Cross pen. I notice he doesn’t wear a gun holster or handcuffs like the other officers investigating the break-in.

Ms. Montgomery whips her head around. “Incident?”

“B&E at the Ames Gate Lodge.”

“Beeee and eeeee?”

“Breaking and Entering. Moore is reported as a witness.”

“Oh, my word!” She squints at Captain Biff as if she just bit into a pickle. “How extensive is the damage? What did the criminals take?”

“Place was ransacked,” he says, looking toward me. “What exactly did you see?”

I tell him about the four men, the black SUV, and the filing cabinet.

“You didn’t think to come back and report this to me?” Ms. Montgomery narrows her eyes at me.

“I started to tell you when I got back, but then you did that chop-chop thing —”

“In the future, miss —”

Captain Biff clears his throat. “Can you describe any of the perpetrators?”

“No, it was too dark and it went down fast. I just heard one guy tell them to take the whole thing which I assume meant the whole filing cabinet.”

Captain Biff pulls out a pair of gold wire-framed reading glasses from his chest pocket and adjusts them on the bridge of his nose. He jots a quick note and asks, “Did you see the make of the car?”

“It was a black Land Rover.”

“Did you see the license plate?”

“It was a Massachusetts plate, but I didn’t see the letters or numbers.”

“Were there any other cars around, parked or moving?”

“None that I noticed.”

He glances over the top of his glasses. “You said a file cabinet? You sure that’s what you saw? Not a safe, a desk or storage trunk?”

“I’m positive. It was a light color, like gray or beige, had silver drawer pulls on five drawers, it was metal and about five feet tall by eighteen inches wide with deep drawers.”

“And you say four men. Not women?”

“They were big athletic looking guys.”

“Were they young or old?”

“Young. They looked like pros. You know, like *Ocean’s Eleven*. They were fast. I mean, it was like a military operation, it seemed, almost. Experts. The whole robbery only lasted three minutes, maybe less.”

“Did they use any names?”

“None that I heard.”

He flips to a fresh page. “Did you notice anything else unusual?”

“I thought the whole thing was unusual. That’s why I called the police.”

He nods and stuffs the notepad in his shirt pocket, then buttons it closed. He hands me a business card with his name above an embossed gold badge. “Okay, if you think of anything else or hear anything give me a call. Sometimes a witness will recall details a day or two after the trauma.”

“It wasn’t actually a trauma. I mean, I hid behind the wall. They didn’t even see me.”

“The event,” he says, stressing the word, “if you prefer that term.”

I look to Ms. Montgomery. “Do you need anything else taken care of before I leave for the night?”

“That’s quite enough for today, miss.”

When I get my backpack, an old man hobbles in the rear entrance. His steely eyes glare into mine as he limps past me. I hear Ms. Montgomery say, “Homer! What on earth happened?”

He lowers his voice and says, “Cut my damn foot steppin’ on broken glass at the lodge. Evening, Captain. Any leads?”

I move closer to the door to eavesdrop.

“I think the perpetrators are sniffing out North Easton again. They’re probably canvassing for the compass.”

“With all due respect, Captain Biff, that filing cabinet has critical research —”

Ms. Montgomery cuts him off. “Enough with your research, Homer, should we call for a meeting?”

“Definitely,” says Homer.

Hobson starts yapping in his crate, so I hustle out before I get caught eavesdropping.

Back in my dorm, an ice cream social is in full swing on the first floor. The resident director lures me in and slaps a name tag on my shirt. I step into line because I love ice cream — it helps my migraines somehow — and I want to go unnoticed so she forgets the fact that my roommate never showed up. I’m hoping she neglects to arrange for a new roommate assignment to fill my double. I scoop a chocolate cone topped with colorful sprinkles.

A petite girl with straight strawberry-blonde hair and a face full of freckles points to the sprinkles. *My Name is Sheila* announces her name tag. “Just curious, what do you call those?”

Two other girls — *Melissa* and *Jill* according to their name tags — lean in to hear my response. “Ummm, sprinkles? Or is it a trick question?”

Sheila turns to her friends. “Fine. You two win.”

“Win what?” I ask, licking my ice cream.

“Name game.”

A girl from a different cluster says, “In Maine we call them shots.”

Melissa flips her salon-fresh brunette hair from her shoulder. “Yeah, well, we’re in college now and shots has a whole new meaning. Let’s not confuse things.”

Sheila says, “I grew up in Massachusetts and we call those jimmies. Melissa and Jill are from New York and they call them sprinkles. Are you from New York, too?”

“Connecticut,” I tell them. “I’m Paige. Room 401.”

Melissa, who is wearing more makeup than I wore to the prom, says, “You’re at the end of our hall. Jill and I are in 417.”

Sheila, from room 202, keeps the conversation rolling. “So, what do you call a long sandwich? Sub?”

Melissa shakes her head. “In New York we call it a hero.”

I add, “Connecticut says grinder.”

The eavesdropper from the other group says, “Hoagie.”

The resident director stops by. “Good times, ladies. Just so you know, there is a new coffee shop opening in town if anyone is looking for some part-time work. My friend Tanya is the owner. She’s a super cool lady. You can find a job application on the Goforth’s Daily Grind website.”

“Thanks, I’ll check it out,” I say.

“Paige, I need to find a roommate for you. It’s on my list.”

“Oh, it’s okay. I don’t mind,” I tell her.

“Wait, what? You don’t have a roommate?” Melissa dabs a napkin on the corner of her red-glossed mouth.

“Nope.” I polish off my ice cream and think about going for seconds, but I don’t because I am still up ten pounds since I stopped training for soccer.

“That’s so awesome. Alone in a double! Think of the possibilities!” says Jill, who has an exotic look, half-Korean and half-Caucasian, I’d guess.

I like the idea of having the room to myself so I can read and study in quiet solitude.

Jill bumps knuckles with Melissa, then asks, “Would you mind if we hit you up to crash in your extra bed if one of us has company?”

She says “company” and makes air quotes.

“Sure, anytime.” I toss my napkins in the trash and notice that Melissa and Jill throw out their half-finished cones.

We head up to the fourth floor together. At my door I say, “See you around.”

“Wait, can we see your room?” Jill asks.

I swing open the door and they step inside. My dorm room is blasé in comparison to some of the other rooms that have matching comforters and pillows, posters of Monet paintings, well-stocked mini-refrigerators, televisions and stereos. The plaster walls are off-white, probably the residual grime from former occupants. My walls are bare other than a bulletin board with my class and library intern schedules. I stacked crates filled with my favorite books against one wall.

Melissa surveys the room. “Have enough books? Total fire hazard.”

“They’re like old friends. I can’t part with them.”

Jill picks up *Infinite Jest* and fans the pages. “Did you read this? It’s a million pages.”

Melissa sits on my desk chair. “You should take a page from each book to wallpaper an accent wall. Anything but these cinder block prison walls.”

“I was waiting for my roommate, figured we’d go pick stuff out together,” I say.

Melissa eyeballs the closets. “We can do it with you. I love decorating.”

My bed is made in simple white sheets with a purple comforter tossed on top. I positioned high-riser blocks under the legs of the bed to create storage space for my plastic containers filled with winter clothes. Other than a few cable-knit sweaters and some soccer hoodies, my wardrobe consists of jeans, t-shirts, sneakers, flip flops, and sweats. I notice that

Melissa and Jill look stylish in designer jeans, crop tops and hard-soled mules. I should buy some new clothes when we go shopping for dorm décor, but I don't have much extra money.

“Sounds great. Saturday?”

“For sure.” They respond in unison. After they leave, I wonder if that's what happens when you have a roommate: instant bonding.

I flop onto my bed feeling good that I've made some new friends. In high school I was a total *futbolista* — playing soccer every day — as if my life depended on it. My obsession with soccer started in grammar school when I discovered I had a natural nose for the goal. By the time I was a sophomore, college coaches were scouting me at all the showcase games.

The concussion happened during an elite travel game in the summer before my senior year. I was cruising toward a hat trick — pissing off the defenders with my slick juke moves — when I jumped for a head ball inside the goalie's box. Instead of driving the ball into the back of the net, I smacked heads with a defender and was knocked unconscious.

Everything after that is a blur, a heavy fogginess that lingered for a year. A neurologist diagnosed post-concussion syndrome. I suffered persistent headaches, mood swings and hypersensitivity to light and sound. The impact of the concussion trashed my senior year and the doctor determined

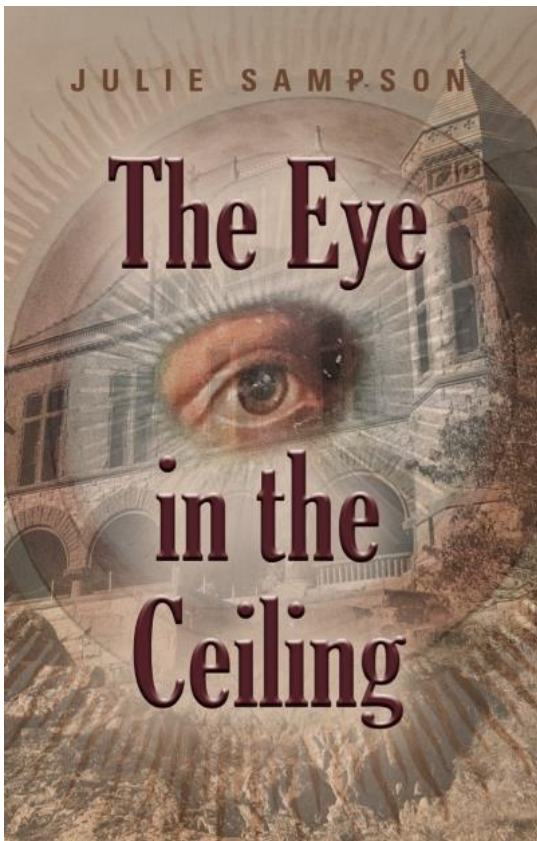
the head injury meant the end of my soccer career. I could never play again, he said.

I went from being a top-college recruit to being a high school senior with a B-average and not much else. The college coaches dropped my name from their recruiting lists. My former teammates and friends gradually stopped socializing with me because I became a drag. I couldn't blame them. I couldn't do much. I had horrible headaches, dizziness, blurry vision. I couldn't even go to the mall with friends because the lights gave me instant migraines. I tried toughing it out, went to some house parties, but the music pounded inside my head. I couldn't think straight — my mind would tell me to smell colors and taste sunshine — and I'd know it was time to leave. I had no cast or crutches to show how hurt I was. It was an invisible injury that no one could see, and I had to deal with it alone.

I was a total jock in high school, but that didn't deter guys from asking me out. I went steady with Luke for two years before my concussion. He was the 6-foot-3 stud quarterback on the football team. Our friends joked that we were going to get married someday and make bionic babies. We felt like the Snoopy and Woodstock balloons in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade — all eyes on us — the popular couple holding hands in the hallway. Then — bonk — I noticed a million stupid things about him that annoyed me, like how loud he chewed his food and how he bounced his knees with nervous energy all the time. I struggled with sleep, so I was often tired and snappy with my comments. He tried to be supportive in

the beginning, but after a while, I was too much of a drag with my headaches and rotten moods. We broke up. I went to the senior prom with a guy named Melvin, an AV geek, but I was just going through the motions.

My parents made me see a therapist. The therapist told me depression is common with post-concussion syndrome. Plus, without soccer, I didn't know who I was anymore. As I slowly recovered in my quiet, dimly lit bedroom at home, I read day and night, mainly because it was the only thing I could do without getting a headache. Screens are the enemy of a concussed brain, so I read every classic from *Anna Karenina* to *A Tale of Two Cities*. I read the Bible — not because I'm religious — but the Old Testament tales intrigue me. My life without soccer became a life filled with books. That's how I chose my major and ended up at Kew College with this student internship at the Ames Free Library. Now I'm a book geek destined to be a librarian.



College freshman Paige Moore discovers secret societies and a hundred-year-old architectural mystery, realizing that there is more to the New England college town and its 19th century architecture than anyone could ever imagine.

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