



MARTA ACOSTA

*The
Shadow Girl
of
Birch Grove*

*"A modern day gothic treat for
vampire fans. Bloody brilliant!"*

LoveVampires.com

THE SHADOW GIRL OF BIRCH GROVE

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Der Vampir

And as softly thou art sleeping
To thee shall I come creeping
And thy life's blood drain away.
And so shalt thou be trembling
For thus shall I be kissing
And death's threshold thou' it be crossing
With fear, in my cold arms.
And last shall I thee question
Compared to such instruction
What are a mother's charms?

Heinrich August Ossenfelder (1748)

Prologue

ON THE NIGHT that I die, the storm raging outside is not as fierce as my step-father raging inside.

His hand is so sweaty that I am able to pull out of his grip. I run through the kitchen, past my mother's body. My foot slides in the pool of scarlet blood on the cracked yellow linoleum floor. I wrench open the back door and run outside.

The darkness is unfathomable and rain beats down and I am small and terrified.

"Come back here!" my step-father bellows and his heavy steps splash through the mud as he comes after me.

The neglected yard is fenced, and he is closer to the gate leading to the street than I am. I slosh toward my secret place among three enormous trees at the far end of the yard. It is too dark to see, yet I know when I have reached the largest, and I creep around it, hiding behind the wide trunk.

"Jane!"

Though, I can't hear his movements, I know he's somewhere near. I peer around the tree-trunk as lightning flashes, briefly illuminating the monster that he's become.

His face is contorted by madness, and his sweatshirt is soaked with my mother's blood and rain. The dark metal of a gun glints in his hand.

I shake uncontrollably with fear. I move behind another tree and grip the rough bark, struggling to climb, but the smooth soles of my sneakers slide and even the lowest branches are beyond my reach.

An earsplitting blast stuns me and throws me back against the third tree. I think it's lightening. A second later, pain radiates from below my shoulder to every part of my body. My knees buckle with the agony. I know that if I fall to the ground, I will die.

I twist my body toward the tree as blood seeps from my chest, to the trunk and the rain washes it down to the soil, the tree's roots. *Help me, I think, help me.*

As I begin to black out, I feel arms – no, *not* arms. I feel *something* take me and lift me high into the wet green branches.

Lightning explodes, deafening me and cleansing the air with pure ozone. In that flash of brilliant white light, I look far down to the yard and see my step-father's body jerk violently as the bolt of electricity rips through him.

Later, I hear the sirens approaching and then the voices amplified by bullhorns. The storm has passed and the rain falls through the branches in a soft drizzle. I want to sleep.

"The girl, the neighbors said there's a kid here," someone says.

They call my name and I hear them rushing through the house and into the yard. "Jane! Jane!"

I don't answer because I am safe.

"Here," a man says. "A shoe."

They are close now and they move below me. A woman says, "'On the tree. Blood. Oh, God, a lot of blood."

"Where does it lead?"

"Up. Is there something up there? Turn the light this way."

"Where?"

"In the tree! Way up there."

I nestle closer to the trunk, so they won't find me. I feel as if I'm drifting somewhere.

Then the pain in my body vanishes. I can't hear the noise or the voices any longer.

I open my eyes and I'm in a glorious shady wood. I inhale air that smells of green things – pine, cedar, newly cut grass, the delicious anise scent of wild fennel. I want to stay here forever.

I see someone coming toward me. I know she's a woman by her gentle movements, but she's not human. Her dress falls down to the brown earth and tendrils of the hem reach into the soil. I can feel her kindness and she begins leading me out of the lush world.

"I don't want to leave," I tell her.

“We will always be with you,” she tells me without words. “Breathe, Jane.”

I gasp and open my eyes. Pain suffuses my body. I’m lying on a hard surface and a cloth is covering me. Through it, I see flashing lights. I hear the cackle of voices on police radios, and someone is crying nearby.

I tug the cloth away with my right arm and a man shouts, “She’s alive! Oh, my God, she’s alive!”

Bright lights shine in my eyes and people in uniforms rush to me.

“How in the world did she get up there?” someone says.

“The trees,” I answer.

“She’s in shock.” A oxygen mask is clamped down on my face.

“You’d be in shock, too, if you just came back from the dead.”

THE FOLLOWING weeks are as vague as smoke. Painkillers are pumped into my body to make me sleep while I heal. Those times that I’m awake, I’m groggy and confused. I already have difficulty remembering that night, my mother’s voice, the wonderful green place.

Faces become familiar. A doctor who has a tiny teddy bear clinging to her stethoscope is often there. When she talks to me, her words are a pleasant hum.

One day, I open my eyes and my mind is clear.

The doctor smiles and says, “How are you feeling today, Jane?”

“Better,” I try to say through chapped lips.

She lifts my shoulders and holds a glass with a straw to my mouth.

“You’ve been awake more. We’re delighted with your recovery.”

“My mother,” I say and I realize that I’ve cried for her over and over in the days that I’ve been here.

“I’m so sorry.” The doctor lets me back down on the pillows and then checks my eyes, my pulse, and the machines around me.

She brushes the hair back from my forehead. “Do you know that you climbed twenty-seven feet into a tree, Jane? You’re such a strong little girl.”

I know that I didn’t climb. “How long was I dead?”

“Your heart stopped briefly, and they *thought* you were dead, but they were wrong, weren’t they?”

No, they were right.

On the day that a caseworker from Child Protective Services is to take me from the hospital, the doctor comes to goodbye.

“I don’t know if you want this,” she said, holding a small white envelope. “It’s the bullet. I want you to remember that you’re stronger than it was. You’re a brave girl.”

I take the envelope, feeling the hardness inside. I don’t feel strong or brave. I’m scared and alone.

Chapter One

WHEN I was seven, I became a ward of the state and was entered into the foster care system.

At first, I hoped. I'd hope that my mother's death was a nightmare and I would wake and find that she was alive and well. I hoped that my real father, wherever and whoever he was, would come to take me home. I'd dream about a family adopting me and loving me.

My need for love was piercing pain that lived on the left side of my narrow child's chest, by the scar that was still healing.

No one ever came for me. I learned to extinguish my hope like you extinguish a fire, by piling dirt atop it, depriving it of oxygen until it suffocates.

When human children lose our families, we learn that the world is a place where love has no power, except to break our hearts. We can't trust adults who tell us to believe that there is a reason for everything. They haven't lived in hell and seen that it is being alone in a heartless universe.

We revert to our essence, our animal selves, to survive. Some kids were like cobras, rising large and hissing loud to scare off threats. Some were like possums, so still they didn't attract attention. Some were chameleons, mimicking those around them.

Some young creatures have spotted fur, allowing them to blend in with dappled light and dark, hiding in plain sight. The girl I had been was lost, and I became a shadow, slipping quietly in those dark places where no one noticed me.

My very plainness, my straight brown hair and brown eyes, my smallness, was my camouflage. I saw others, but was not seen.

No one wants a plain, small seven-year-old child. I was moved from place to place for years, and finally I was put in a group home. It was like the army, except that I had never signed up. It was like jail, except that I had committed no crime.

I shared a room with three other girls, and two boys shared a smaller room

down the hall. The house was in a run-down neighborhood where security bars covered windows and front yards were paved over for parking.

The Eskimos have over one hundred words to describe snow, and we should have had as many to describe gray, because everything in our landscape was gray, from the dirty cement sidewalks to the grimy cinderblock walls to primer on beat-up cars.

We had regimented meal times and lots of rules, all of which started with “no.” No cursing. No radios. No talking back. No raising our voices. No dating. No slang. No friends visiting and no visiting friends. No chewing gum. No sleeping in. No popular music or television shows. It seemed easier to sit and do nothing than do something and get screamed at.

We had to call adults sir or ma’am, turn our lights out at 9:30 p.m. and get up at 5:30 a.m. except on weekends when we could sleep in until 7:00. We couldn’t wear makeup, and we each had one pair of jeans, one pair of “nice” pants, three t-shirts, and a few sweaters.

Our foster mother, Mrs. Richards, claimed she was strict because otherwise we’d follow in the ways of our parents, who were so irresponsible that they died or were imprisoned.

“There’s bad blood running through your veins,” she told me. “You’ll never come to anything. Good thing you’re nothing to look at and the boys won’t be chasing you.”

No, the boys didn’t chase me. I could see all the pretty, laughing girls living real lives and the boys who sought their attention, but no one saw me moving in the shadows by the walls.

When I think of myself then, I see an almost feral creature, without the words to understand or describe her emotions. My only goal was to survive day by day.

My obedience didn’t matter to Mrs. Richards. She took the money the state gave her for our care and gave us the cheapest of everything. We had no treats or money to go out, yet she bought new clothes, ate out often, and had regular appointments to bleach her hair and maintain her fake tan.

“Nobody likes a spoiled child,” Mrs. Richards said. “Besides when you’re 18 and age-out of the system, you’ll have to know how to do without.”

She was a miserable excuse for a human being, but I had no where else to go.

When I was fourteen, an older boy moved into the home, and I gravitated toward him as naturally as a satellite moves into orbit around a significant planet. Hosea’s mother was in prison for drugs, and I liked him because he didn’t chatter. He spent his days thinking about the purpose of life.

I often found him lying on his bunk bed reading the Bible. I’d sit on the thin carpeting by his bed and hear him sigh. “Hosea, what are you reading now?”

“*Leviticus*. Why did he hate things that crawl on the earth? Why did he hate pigs? He thought faith was hating.” Hosea sighed again. His skin was the color of melted chocolate, and his voice was a compelling low rumble. “God made all creatures. I love me some spareribs.”

“I’ve never had them. I smelled them at the block party, but Mrs. Bitchards wouldn’t give me any fucking money for a dinner plate.”

“Don’t cuss, Jane – it’s ugly,” he said. “They’re like heaven in your mouth, all spicy and meaty. Someday, I’m going to take you out to a rib joint and feed you so many that you have to sleep for two days after.”

I smiled and said, “Why do you need to understand why Levit...that guy hated things? How is an old book supposed to tell you anything?”

I chewed off a hangnail while I waited for Hosea to answer.

“This is like a game of telephone, where the story gets far away from the honest truth. But God gave us a brain to figure out things,” he said. “It dishonors Him if we don’t use it. You’ve got a fine brain, little sis, and you should use it and step into the Lord’s sunshine instead of hiding in the dark like a crazy, angry little mouse.”

“I wish I was a rabid mouse, because at least then I could bite,” I said with a laugh. “If I stepped into the sunshine, someone bigger would step right on me, because that’s how they do.”

“That’s what I mean – crazy. If you was rabid, that would kill you. Hate

kills.” He patted my arm with his warm, thick hand. “Jesus loves the poor, Jane, and your reward will come if you let out the kindness I know you got in you.”

I shook my head and said, “All I feel inside me is mad, Hosea. You be good for the both of us.”

When he was doing the dishes that night, gazing at the soap suds and contemplating the mysteries of the universe, Mrs. Richards screamed, “Stop daydreaming, you dumb lazy lump, and finish your chores!”

I looked up from my sweeping and said, “Leave him alone. He didn’t do nothing.”

“Oh, the ghost girl speaks up.” she said. “You care that much, you can wash the dishes for the next two weeks, morning and night, *and* do all your other chores.”

The next day at school, Hosea told me, “You gotta stop getting in trouble for me.” We had started high school at City Central. At lunch we sat at the edge of the loudest area of cafeteria, a zone occupied by black varsity athletes.

“I don’t give a shit,” I said. “I hate Mrs. Bitchards more than I hate going into the gross bathrooms here. All the toilets are broke and, even if they weren’t, homegirls in there make you pay or they slap you.”

Hosea’s Bible was on the table beside his food tray. He smoothed his hand over the worn leather cover. “The Lord said, ‘But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.’”

“Why?” I asked. “Why should I forgive people who are selfish and nasty?”

“God wants us to be good to one another, Jane.”

“Maybe you should tell that to Mrs. Bitchards.”

“Don’t you worry about her soul. Worry about your own, and stop using curse words because people will think you’re ignorant.”

A gangly basketball player walked by and said, “Head’s up, Rev!” and tossed a juice carton to Hosea. The jocks had an affection for Hosea, whom they called Rev for Reverend.

“Thanks, brother.” Hosea looked at me and said, “Do you want it?”

“That’s okay. If you get a cookie, though...” I said. I could pay for a bathroom visit with a cookie.

“It’s all yours,” he said. “We got a place to sleep and food at Mrs. Richard’s. She’s doing the best with what she got, bless her.”

“Eating and sleeping and not getting beat down – is that all our lives are gonna be?”

“We’ll get through this, Jane, and we’ll move on. It’ll get better, I promise you.”

A week later, Hosea got sick, and Mrs. Richards looked in the room at him and said, “Get up, you faker.”

I slipped by her into his room and put my hand on his forehead. “He’s burning up.”

She frowned and came to check for herself. “Okay, you can skip school today, Hosea, and don’t get used to it.”

The next day, though, he didn’t get out of bed. When I tried to give him water, he could only take a small sip before dropping his head back to the damp pillow. “My neck hurts,” he said.

Mrs. Richards came and stood in the doorway of the room and said, “Jane, don’t be late to school. Let Hosea be. The flu needs to run its course.”

I worried all day long, and I ran back to the house after school and found that my friend was much worse. I dropped my backpack by his bedroom door and touched his sweaty, hot forehead.

I tried to get Mrs. Richard’s attention while she gossiped on the phone. She waved me away and continued blabbing. From nowhere came an indistinct image of someone with dark hair and caring eyes, my mother, applying a cold towel to my forehead.

I wrapped ice cubes in a washcloth and tried to cool down Hosea’s fever. I could see his eyes moving rapidly behind closed lids. Sweat drenched his t-shirt and I tried to comfort him, saying, “I’m here, Hosea. I’ll stay until you get better. You’re going to get better.” Not having been comforted myself, I lacked the expressions to soothe him, and I kept repeating myself, hoping he could hear me.

An hour later, Hosea opened his coffee-dark eyes, looked at me, and said, “I’m going now, little sis. You be a good girl.” He gave me one of his beautiful smiles and fell unconscious.

I ran to Mrs. Richards, shouting, “Hosea passed out! We need a doctor right *now*.”

She put the phone against her shoulder and tried to push me out of her bedroom. “I’m talking to someone, Jane!”

I grabbed the phone from her hand and jumped out of her reach. “If you don’t take Hosea to the hospital this second, I’m calling the Baby Snatchers!” I shouted. We always called Child Protective Services, CPS, the Baby Snatchers because they took children from their parents.

“Don’t you threaten me, Jane Williams. I can have you sent to juvey with a phone call.”

I didn’t have time to argue with her. Still holding the phone, I ran out of the room and into the girls’ bedroom. I couldn’t lock the door, because none of the doors had locks, and Mrs. Richards cornered me as I was dialing 911.

“Give it back!” she said. “I’ll take him to the hospital.”

The other foster kids helped me get Hosea to the car. His eyelids were half-open and he didn’t seem able to focus on anything. “Lean on me, Hosea,” I said, struggling to hold up the heavy boy. “You’re going to be all right.”

Mrs. Richards didn’t say anything when I got in the backseat with my friend.

As soon as we got to the Emergency Room, Hosea collapsed. The nurses in blue scrubs came right away and hefted him onto a gurney. They asked Mrs. Richards, “Are you the parent or legal guardian?” as they rolled the gurney through a wide set of double doors.

When I followed, a security guard stepped into my path. “Parents only,” he said.

“His parents aren’t here. I need to be with him.”

“Sorry. Let the doctors do their job. You wait like every one else.”

I sat in a hard gray plastic chair and listened to the cries of the sick and

injured during the night. The sounds and chemical smells awakened a memory: I am in a white room, in a white bed, surrounded by machines, and a woman in pink scrubs is holding my hand and talking to me.

The image flickers and vanishes, and I didn't try to recall it. That part of my life was over, and I never wanted to remember it.

At midnight, the security guard left his station. I waited until a woman in a white lab coat opened the locked doors. I slipped in after her and found myself in a hive of exam areas.

Peering between partitions, I saw patients hooked up to IVs and equipment. I didn't see Hosea at first because of the crowd surrounding him. Then someone moved and I spotted Mrs. Richards's bleached blonde head in the corner of the room.

A doctor said, "Call it."

A nurse said, "Time of death, one oh two a.m." and the group moved away from my friend. I ran to the bed and took Hosea's hand, wanting to will him back to life.

"Hosea, Hosea," I said, but I knew by looking at his face that he wasn't Hosea anymore. "Please, please!"

Please. It's such a simple word. We say it without thinking. Please pass the salt. Please close the door. We forget it's also an appeal, an entreaty for mercy.

I cried, "Please, please! Please, bring him back. You brought me back – bring him back, please!"

A man in scrubs pried me away from Hosea's body and said, "We did everything we could. He's gone."

"Why can't she..." I began.

"She? Who?" he asked.

I shook my head, so exhausted and hurt and angry that I couldn't organize my thoughts. "I don't know."

"It was bacterial meningitis," the man in scrubs said. "It went through him faster than we could control it. We understand how you feel."

I took one look at his composed face and know he doesn't understand, because if he did understand, he would be weeping, too, for this boy who loved a world that never loved him.

A security guard comes and pushed me to the lobby. I fell back into one of the hard plastic chairs and my mind shut down so that I wouldn't have to think about what has just happened.

A man stumbled in through the automatic glass doors of the entrance, clutching his left wrist with his right hand. He moved his hand, and blood sprayed out and across my shirt. Hospital staff hurried him through the double doors.

I fell asleep to the cries of patients, the snores of family, and the sweet rotten stench of the blood on my shirt.

A doctor escorted Mrs. Richards out of the ER at daybreak. She looked pale under the fake tan, and she was shredding a tissue.

I stood up, my body aching from sleeping in the chair.

"I thought it was the flu," Mrs. Richards croaked to the doctor.

"People make that mistake," the doctor said.

When Mrs. Richards finally seemed to see me, she said, "You've got blood on your shirt. You should have scrubbed that off with cold water and soap. If blood sets, you can never get the stain out."

I didn't have the words for the fury I felt. I threw myself at Mrs. Richards, reaching up to hit her face and then the arms she flung up to protect herself until a security guard lifted me off my feet and away from her.

Hosea's body was shipped to a grandmother in Louisiana. I spent the days after his death sitting numbly through my classes and expecting to get sent to another home. Though Mrs. Richards never mentioned the incident, she looked at me differently after that.

When my head cleared, I tried calling the Baby Snatchers during my lunch breaks. I stood by the only working pay phone at school with a handful of coins. I was transferred from person to person. I told them all how Mrs. Richards had ignored Hosea's fever. My life as a foster and at time at City Central has given

me an understanding of the legal system. “It’s criminal negligence,” I said. “You’re supposed to investigate.”

The last administrator said with exasperation, “You again? Look, your friend caught a virus. Sometimes it’s deadly. Your guardian wasn’t responsible for that.”

“It was an infection, not a virus.”

“Either way, he’s dead and there’s no one to blame. Let it go. Move on.”

Hosea’s bedroom was cleaned out and everything was disinfected.

I compulsively filled a notebook writing my friend’s name over and over again on the front and back of every page.

A new roommate, a skinny, sharp-featured sixteen-year-old who called herself Wilde, asked, “What are you doing?” She twisted a lock of her long black hair.

“People die or leave and you forget them, the sound of their voice, they way they look. I don’t even have a picture of him, and I don’t want to ever forget him.”

“What about a tattoo?”

“With what money, Wilde?”

“I’ll do it. I’ve done a bunch of them. I’m an artist.” Her own sallow skin was adorned with professional tattoos, and she’d told us she’d traded sex for them.

“Is it safe?”

“Don’t worry.” She brought a sketchbook out of her canvas messenger bag. Her nails with their chipped blue-black polish were bitten raggedly to the quick, and her hand moved skillfully as she sketched out both simple and ornate versions of my friend’s name.

She showed me one, a lacy H over an elongated leaf. “I can use your scar for the leaf, you know, and make it ornamental, like I did with mine.” Wilde extended her arm to show me the flowers inked around the round scars she’d gotten when her meth-head mother had burned her with cigarettes. “Then it’s something that you made for yourself, not something that someone did to you.”

“No thanks,” I said. “This one,” I said and pointed to a bold upper-case H. I showed her where I wanted it, below my left breast.

We waited until Mrs. Richards left the house on an errand. Wilde slipped out back, where she hid her stash of illicit possessions. She returned carrying a red and black Chinese silk pouch. She assembled her tools on the old bureau we shared: a pencil, sewing thread, India ink, and paper towels, a pint of vodka.

Our other housemates were grieving, too, and they didn’t say anything when she dropped a needle in a pan of boiling water and scrubbed her hands in a sink of water with bleach.

We went back to the bedroom, and then Wilde used thread to bind the needle tightly to a pencil. “The thread holds the ink,” she explained. “I got some vodka. It’ll help.”

Remembering the smell of alcohol on my step-father, I said, “I don’t need it.”

“You’ll wish you did,” she warned.

I lay on the bed and hitched up my ratty shirt. Wilde had already drawn the letter on with a felt pen. Now she squatted over me and said, “This hurts, so you got to man up.” She pulled her hair back into a knot and began to work.

She was right. It hurt like hell. She jabbed the needle repeatedly in my tender flesh, and I fought the instinct to jerk away. My eyes welled with tears, and I gritted my teeth and didn’t cry out.

“One day, you’re gonna tell me how you got that scar,” she said.

“I don’t remember, and I don’t want to.”

“Lucky bitch. I remember every goddamn one of mine.” A long time later, Wilde dabbed at the tattoo with a paper towel and said, “Done! Check it out.”

I got up, feeling woozy, and looked in the small mirror over the dresser. My skin was blotchy red and the lines of the black H were thin and clear. Now Hosea would be near my heart as long as I lived. “Thanks,” I told the girl. “I owe you one.”

“No worries. You always cover for me when I’m out,” she said and smiled. “You’ve hardcore, girl. Go wash it with hot water and soap. It’ll scab up at first,

then after it'll be cool."

Wilde and Mrs. Richards got in a screaming match at the end of the week. I was at the small desk in our room when Wilde stormed in, screaming curses back at Mrs. Richards.

She grabbed her messenger bag and began shoving her things inside. "I'm outa here," she said.

"Where are you going?"

"I've got friends. You wanna come?"

I was still thinking about it when she shook her head. "You're small and the cops will notice you. If not them, then the pervs. This is a shithole, but at least you're safe here."

"Wait a sec," I said. I went to my own hiding place, a gap between the heavy dresser and the wall which was too narrow for anyone else to reach into. I reached around until I felt the thin edge of an envelope. I brought it out and took out the few dollars I'd saved up.

I handed Wilde the money and said, "Take this."

"You don't have to, Jane."

"You need it more than me," I said, but she wouldn't take it. "It's payment for the tattoo."

She pulled off the fake silver earrings dangling from her lobes and said, "For you. Next time we meet I'll pierce your ears for you."

"Thanks. Be careful."

She grinned. "I know the streets. I'm cool. Okay, well, bye." When she hugged me, I smelled her clove cigarettes and patchouli oil, and I held on tight until we heard our foster mother screeching in the other room.

"Bye, Wilde." I followed her to the living room, where Mrs. Richards was blocking the front door.

"You're not going anyplace," Mrs. Richard said. "I've called CPS and they said you stay right here. You're a minor and you can't leave--"

Wilde said, "Fuck you," and pushed right by Mrs. Richards.

I followed Wilde outside and watched her stride down the gray, dirty

sidewalk, past the house with the men who drank beer out every day on the porch, past the kids doing watch-out shifts for the dealers, past the yard where pitbulls lunged at the chain link fence, and past the old homeless woman with her shopping cart full of cardboard and rags.

When Wilde got to the corner, she turned. I waved at her and she waved back and then she was gone.

Even though Wilde seemed tough, I knew there were smiling predators out there hunting for girls like her, girls as colorful and loud as jungle birds, girls as fragile as those tropical creatures. I hoped she would make it, but I feared that she wouldn't.

I'd hated Mrs. Richards before, and after Hosea died and Wilde left, I hated her even more. I didn't want to be here, but all I knew was the ugly dangerous landscape around me. I was too small and too poor to protect myself on my own.

Two days later, I was sitting in my usual place in the cafeteria when a brawny black football player came and stood beside me. Since I couldn't slide under the table to get away, I sat still and stared at my food until he said, "Yo."

"Hey," I answered. When I raised my eyes I saw him gazing impassively down at me. The people sitting nearby got quiet, waiting to see what was happening, and I tried not to let my fear show on my face.

The jock reached up to twist one of the huge fake diamonds glittering on his earlobes. "Can't let you stay here now that the Rev's gone. Grab your gear, peewee, 'cause you gotta go."

I glanced at the crowded cafeteria. "Where?"

He tilted his head in thought, sending his dreads swinging to one side. "I'll get you someplace."

I slung my frayed backpack over my shoulder and picked up my tray, the Meatloaf Monday special, hoping that he wouldn't make me sit outside in the freezing drizzle.

As I followed him toward the back of the cafeteria, I looked around for help. The security guard was busting up a fight by the soda machine. "It wasn't the same without Hosea anyway," I said to break the fear that gripped me.

The jock spoke so low that I almost missed his words. “He was something special.”

“You saw it too?”

“My momma’d say he had the gift of grace.” The jock looked me in the eye and for a second, we had a connection, both hurting at the loss. Then the connection was gone and his face became as impassive as a mask. He pointed to an empty chair at the egghead table.

The kids sitting there looked at the jock the way rabbits look at wolves, frozen by the desire to run and the knowledge that wolves love a chase. The jock said, “She’s sitting here from now on.”

A girl spoke up, “You can’t tell us what to do.”

He laughed and said, “Oh, yeah, I can.”

“You’re a jerk,” she said even though she drew back as if expecting him to strike.

“Shut up. She’s sitting here.” He gave her an intimidating glare before strolling back to his area.

The smart kids called themselves the Alphas and they completely ignored me for days, not realizing that I was most comfortable when I was ignored.

While I’d never been a bad student, neither had I been a good one, and I barely listened to the buzz of their conversations as I stared at the wall, or did homework during lunch. When the Alphas talked about moving away from here and going to college, though, I paid attention.

Lily, the girl who’d talked back to the jock, said, “I want to get as far away from my parents as possible. We’re like potassium and water.”

The other kids laughed and I said, “Huh?”

“If potassium comes into contact with water, it instantly combusts,” Lily said slowly so if she was talking to a child.

A boy said, “Jane, if you gave a damn and pulled your grades up, you could get a full ride anywhere. College admissions officers love foster kids.”

This time I knew better than to say *huh* again. “Can you explain what you mean?”

“I was beginning to wonder if you even spoke English,” Lily said. “He means that if you want to be more than knocked up dropouts, like most of these girls,” she said and jerked her chin at a gaggle of girls shrieking with laughter as they freaked and sang in the aisles. “You can study hard and get good grades. A lot of private colleges would pay your entire tuition and fees.”

The boy said, “A full ride is a scholarship that pays for everything. Money to go to school, a dorm, books. You’d be eligible since you’ve got nothing.”

“You could get away from here if you actually want to,” Lily said with a challenging look.

It was as if I’d been staring at a locked steel door and someone pointed out an open window high on the wall. I looked around the table and said, “I want to. Will you help me?”

Lily smiled and looked at her friends. “See, I told you that there was something going on behind those brown eyes.”

The Alphas took me on and called me their “social experiment.” They helped me change my class schedule, coached me during lunch, and corrected my papers and my grammar. Since Mrs. Richards didn’t allow me to go out anyway, I turned all my energy toward studying, toward escape, and my grades rapidly improved.

I’d never thought of myself as stupid, but I’d never really tried before, and now I felt a satisfaction every time a paper was returned with “100%” circled in red at the top of the page. By the beginning of sophomore year, I was established as an Alpha, too. My friends asked for my opinions on teachers and partnered with me on projects.

I listened closely to my new friends and announcers on television. My speech evolved into the educated dispassionate language that I heard on documentaries. Now it’s hard for me to remember how I used to talk: *wich* instead of with, *ax* instead of ask, *liberry* instead of library...

I learned the names of things, ideas, and feelings; and my world both expanded and came into focus. I didn’t have one word, mad, to describe my emotions. I was angry, furious, depressed, melancholy, infuriated... Sometimes,

too, I was pleased, satisfied, optimistic, anticipatory...

By the end of my sophomore year, other students treated me as if I'd always been one of the nerds, the geeks, the grinders, the Alphas.

Instead of being happy with my grades, Mrs. Richards accused me of cheating.

"I'm not a cheater," I told her. "I don't need to cheat because I'm smart. I'm smart enough to know that Hosea wouldn't have died if you hadn't been so stupid and mean and lazy. When you die, I will be happy because I know you will burn in hell for killing him."

She paled under her crusty orange skin. "What a horrible thing to say after all I've done for you! Well, don't stay here if you don't want to. I'm calling CPS and giving you back. You'll appreciate me when you end up beaten and starved by crackheads, Jane Williams!"

"I'd rather live with addicts than with a murderer," I said.

We didn't speak to each other for weeks after that conversation, and when the school counselor called me in during summer session before my junior year, I thought that Mrs. Richards had followed through on her threat. I went to the counselor's office expecting to see sleazy low-lives, ready to drag me off in exchange for a monthly check from the foster care system.

But the woman sitting in the counselor's office was unlike anyone I'd ever met. She was tall and slim, beautiful, and wearing a navy blue jacket and skirt. She had perfect ivory skin, clear blue eyes, and dark brown hair twisted into a bun. Around her long neck was a strand of pearls.

Everything she wore was simple and immaculate. I couldn't see a bit of lint, a wrinkle, or a scuff mark. I slid my hand down to cover a hole in the humiliating old t-shirt (peach with a big purple teddy-bear and *I Wub Hugs*) that Mrs. Richards found in a box on the sidewalk.

The counselor said, "Jane, this is Mrs. Monroe, the headmistress of the Birch Grove Academy for Girls. She'd like to talk to you for a few minutes. Would that be all right?"

I nodded and wondered what was going on.

“Jane, how nice to meet you. Why don’t you have a seat?” Mrs. Monroe’s voice was soft and clear. She wore a light perfume that smelled like the herb garden that we’d planted for a biology project.

I sat in the chair opposite her, tucking my feet under my chair to hide my thin socks.

Mrs. Monroe asked, “Have you ever heard of Birch Grove Academy?”

The Alphas had spoken of the private school for smart, rich girls in the same tone that little kids talk about Disneyland. “Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled. “We at Birch Grove look for exceptional students, and we always have a place for a young lady who shows promise. We give our students an excellent, well-rounded education in a supportive environment. Our graduates go to the finest universities and many earn graduate degrees.”

She paused, as if expecting a response, and I nodded to show that I had heard her, but I wondered why she was at City Central doing a sales pitch.

“Jane, I contacted your school asking if there was a student who fit our qualifications, and they told me about you,” she said. “Do you have any family, Jane?”

I answered because I was curious. “My mother is dead, ma’am.”

“I know she passed away,” Mrs. Monroe said and I wondered exactly how much she’d been told about my mother’s death. “What about your father, grandparents? Is there anyone else?”

“I don’t know who my father is and as far as I know, he doesn’t know I exist. Child Protective Services couldn’t find any other family.” I didn’t know how hard they tried. Williams was one of the most common last names in the country.

“You’re all alone then,” Mrs. Monroe said as if the answer satisfied her.

“Yes.”

“We have a scholarship available for a worthy student.” Mrs. Monroe reached out to touch my knee. “Would you like to attend Birch Grove, Jane?”

“Of course, I would,” I said. “I haven’t stayed where I am by choice. I’ve tried to transfer to other group homes in better school systems, but my requests

have been rejected every time. My caseworker says there aren't enough spaces and stability is good for me."

"You could petition to be an emancipated minor and then you'd be free to live where you wanted. We would provide you with the old groundkeeper's cottage," she said. "Although it's small, it will be all yours, Jane. You'll be independent, and you'll have our support. We will help take care of you and teach you how to take care of yourself."

I was so stunned by her offer that all I could do was stare at her for a minute. "What would I have to do?"

"The only thing you have to do is have a physical and a blood test. You don't mind having your blood drawn? I ask because some people hate needles."

I'd be willing to have my blood drawn every day if it meant getting away from Mrs. Richards. "Needles don't bother me."

"That's wonderful, Jane. Then I can tell the board that you're interested?"

It was amazing and wonderful and I almost laughed with joy as I thought about having freedom. "Yes, I'm interested."

It sounded much too good to be true.

It was.

Chapter 2

“Birch Grove Academy for Girls endeavors to educate the complete person, promoting the intellectual, spiritual, physical, and social advancement of each young lady.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

MY KNOWLEDGE of the wealthy was limited to the relatives of drug dealers, flashing their diamonds and gold, who came to school in new Escalades. But that kind of wealth ran from the law, and Mrs. Monroe’s type of wealth controlled the law.

Two days after meeting Mrs. Monroe, I had physical at an elegant private clinic downtown. After my exam, the nurse came in and said, “We need a blood sample. Are you left-handed or right-handed?”

“Right-handed.” I watched as she tied a rubber tube around my left arm. She swabbed the inside of my elbow with alcohol and said, “You can look away if it bothers you.”

“I don’t mind, ma’am.”

She tapped the inside of my elbow. “There we go. That’s a nice vein for such a petite girl.”

I felt a small prick as she slid the needle into my skin and I was fascinated to see that the blood that filled the hypodermic was so dark red it was almost black.

“That’s it!” The nurse pressed a cotton ball against the puncture as she pulled out the needle. She put the blood sample in a rack and then used medical tape to hold the cotton ball in place over the injection.

“I’ll tell Mrs. Monroe that you’re a good patient,” she said.

“It’s only a little blood.” Somewhere in the back of my mind I heard a voice saying, *so much blood*, but I couldn’t remember who had said it or when.

As I was waiting to take the bus back to the house, I kept my head down to

an SAT vocabulary study guide. I'd learned that people would leave me alone if I was reading, but I was always aware of what was happening around me and a woman's shouts sounded familiar, so I lifted my gaze in order to see what was going on.

A whore was stumbling down the street next to an older guy who had an addict's skull face. The whore teetered because she was drunk or high and one of her heels was broken. Tattoos covered her bare arms and her short skirt showed bone-thin, bruised legs.

She looked 30, but I knew she was only seventeen.

"Wilde," I said.

Her dark-lined eyes moved in my direction and finally focused on me.

"It's me, Jane."

Wilde looked puzzled and then she said, "Jane!"

"Hi."

The man – her pimp, her boyfriend? -- shuffled to me and said, "You got any money?"

"No, sorry."

"Gimme your bus pass." When he leaned over me, his fetid body odor enveloped me like a greasy cloud.

"No," I said and moved away.

Wilde grabbed his arm and said, "Leave her," and then the bus roared up to the stop. I ran onto it as soon as the doors opened. When I looked out the bus window, Wilde and the man were exchanging blows. My heart ached for the girl.

A week later, I stood beside a lawyer in front of a judge. A silver-haired lawyer in a pinstripe suit made quick work of what had been impossible for me to accomplish. The judge granted me emancipation, making me free from the control of adults.

I kept reading the legal documents to make sure there wasn't a clause that could remand me back to the foster system. It all seemed clear enough. From now on, I was legally on my own, which was as frightening as it was wonderful, because now my survival depended upon Birch Grove Academy. So long as I

was a student, I would have a place to live and food.

On the Saturday before the beginning of fall term, I packed my few clothes into a cheap vinyl sports bag. I moved the dresser in my bedroom in order to reach my hiding place. Then I packed Hosea's Bible, Wilde's silver earrings, \$19.59, and the white envelope with the mangled bullet into the sports bag.

I said goodbye to my housemates, and walked past Mrs. Richards.

"Jane Williams, aren't you going to thank me for all I've done?" She waved her arm at me, sending a dozen gold-plated bracelets clanking on her wrist.

I turned to face her. "You have never done anything for me that you didn't have to do so you could keep getting checks from the state. You would have thrown me in the street the minute I aged-out."

In a low, shaky voice, she said, "Children can't be indulged, or they'll go bad. I did what was best for you."

"No, you did what was best for you and never gave one kind word or an honest smile to any of your foster kids. When I'm older, I'll make sure that your license is taken away and I'll tell everyone the truth about you."

Seeing Mrs. Richards' fearful expression, I felt a spark of something exciting and unfamiliar: it was power.

A driver in a dark suit stood by a dark blue Lexus by the curb. He introduced himself as Jimmy, took my bag and put it in the trunk. He opened the door to the back seat for me, but it felt weird sitting in the back and besides I always got a little carsick.

"Is it okay if I sit up front?" I asked.

"Sure. Whatever you want. You can listen to the radio if you want."

I got in the passenger seat and turned on the radio so that I wouldn't have to think of something to say. It was pre-set to a news station, and we listened to the entire broadcast twice as Jimmy drove on a series of freeways that led away from the group house, through the city, and beyond.

The sun, already low in the sky, disappeared behind heavy clouds when we finally arrived at the town of Greenwood. It was set in a small valley below low, green hills.

Jimmy flipped on headlights and said, “This place is in a fog belt. It’s never summer here.”

I’d never been anywhere as beautiful as this town. The clean roads were quiet, and I saw magnificent old buildings that were so big that I thought they were apartments at first. After seeing the addresses and the garages, I realized they were homes.

Jimmy took a street up a hill and then turned at a private drive marked by a gray stone pillars and a lacy black ironwork archway that reminded me of the scrolling designs Wilde used to draw.

The gravel drive wound through a lush garden. It looked like a park for rich people, with flawless green lawns, flowering borders, and wide pond with a fountain.

As the car turned around a curve, I saw it for the first time: Birch Grove Academy for Girls. The main building was a dark pink-rose color, framed by enormous dark green trees, and stretching three stories against the gray sky.

As we got closer I could see wide steps leading to arched carved wooden doors, above which were pale stone angels.

Jimmy parked the car in front of the steps. I got out as he was about to open the door for me. While he took my cheap bag from the trunk, I stared at school crest, which was carved in darker stone above the entrance.

Birch Grove Academy was carved into an arch over a shield with a lantern, a fox, and branches. Beneath the shield was the motto, *Ut incepit fidelis sic permanet*. A few of the Alphas and I had taken Latin, and now I translated the motto to mean, “As loyal as she began, so she remains.”

To the right of the main building were sprawling sports fields and tennis courts. To the left was a slightly newer building.

“There you go,” Jimmy said, handing me the bag.

“Thank you, sir,” I said, and he gave me a second look.

“Sir!” he said with a grin. “I don’t usually get that. Good luck, Miss.”

The car drove off and I stood there alone in the fog. I didn’t intend to depend upon luck, which was more often bad than good from what I could tell.

Then someone called, “Hello, Jane!”

I turned to see Mrs. Monroe walking from around the building, carrying a basket filled with branches. Despite the fog, she wore a wide straw hat with a crisp white blouse, navy sweater, and navy slacks. Later I learned that she almost always wore navy and white, the school colors.

“Hi, Mrs. Monroe.”

“You arrived early. Let me put these inside. Then I’ll give you a tour of the school and show you the cottage.”

I wanted to see the cottage right away, but I smiled and said, “That would be great,” and we went up the white marble steps and into the building.

“How was your drive here?”

“Fine, ma’am. It’s a long way.”

“Yes, I don’t suppose you’ll be able to visit your old friends.” She led me down a hallway with shiny dark blue linoleum. Awards and trophies filled glass cases, and portraits of white-haired women hung on the walls. “You’ll make new friends here soon enough though.”

Mrs. Monroe opened a door that had *Administration* in old-fashioned gold letters on the glass inset. A counter separated the front reception area from desks and file cabinets. She took me around the counter and said, “This is my office,” as she opened a door.

It looked like a room from one of the “Masterpiece Theatre” movies we’d watched in English class. It was decorated with antique dark wood furniture and Oriental rugs, lamps with glass shades, and gold-framed certificates.

As interesting as the room was, my attention kept going to the branches in Mrs. Monroe’s basket.

She saw me looking and said, “This is *betula pendula*, or the European White Birch. Our school’s founder planted a grove of birch to remind him of his family home in Romania. That’s the origin of our school’s name. Excuse me while I put these in water.” She went through a doorway, and I heard running water.

Rows of yearbooks were on a nearby shelf and one was open on a polished

table. I flipped through it and saw photos of girls with old-fashioned names, like Emily, Mary Helen, Grace, Roselyn. I was about to check the date of the yearbook when Mrs. Monroe returned with the branches in a vase.

“There,” she said. “Now let’s take a walk through the school.”

She showed me homerooms, the teachers’ lounge, and the nurse’s room. We came to a series of tall doors, and she said, “Here’s the auditorium, where we hold assemblies and student performances.”

The auditorium at City Central had looked and stunk like a prison hall. This one had pale wood-paneling on the lowest section. The upper walls had murals of white-barked trees that stretched all the way to the curved balcony. Midnight blue velvet curtains on the stage matched the blue leather seating.

“The paneling here is birch wood,” Mrs. Madison said, “and when we meet here, it’s as if we’re in a forest.”

Mrs. Monroe then took me to see the classrooms, which were old and perfectly clean, and the gym. I’d never seen anything like the locker room, which had individual shower cubicles and private dressing rooms.

Mrs. Monroe saw my confusion and smiled. “Young ladies were quite modest in the days when this school was built. We try to continue the tradition of modesty. Too often people equate exhibitionism as self-esteem.”

She also showed me a small chapel. It was a simple room with cream walls and a row of arched windows with yellow glass that let in golden light. “Services were held here decades ago when most of our faculty lived on campus. Although Birch Grove is not a religious school, we encourage spiritual development.”

Hosea would have liked the chapel. He could have sat in one of the varnished wooden benches and studied his Bible without being disturbed by the shrill voice of Mrs. Richards, or the cacophony of the school cafeteria.

I thought of Hosea telling me that my reward would come, but what had I done to deserve Birch Grove? What had *anybody* ever done to deserve this luxury when girls like Wilde lived on the street?

Mrs. Monroe led me out of the main building to the more modern building, which held classrooms and art studios. After touring the building, we went

outside and I took a deep breath. Even the air here was better -- damp and fresh and clean.

“Let’s go to your cottage,” Mrs. Monroe said, leading the way around the art building. I was so excited about living on my own that I didn’t care if the cottage was an old crate.

“Here’s the grove I told you about,” the headmistress said.

I shivered and thought it was because of the evening breeze, but now I know it was the trees. The towering birches were clustered close together. Their trunks were ghostly white with black markings and their branches gracefully swayed and rustled. I reached out to touch a low branch and then ran my fingers over the delicate layer of bark, as thin as parchment that peeled away from the trunk.

We took a shadowy dirt path through the grove. Mrs. Monroe told me that registration would take place on Monday and classes would begin Tuesday, but I was listening to the gentle shush, shush, shush of the branches.

“My house is right up the hill there,” she said, pointing to a trail that continued through the grove. “Please come by if you need anything or want company. Here we are.”

The little white house had a porch with two wooden chairs and a pot of red geraniums. Mrs. Monroe opened the door and I followed her inside to a living room with grayish blue walls and white trim.

“It’s so pretty!”

A loveseat and two chairs with floral cushions faced a fireplace and built-in bookcases. A wooden desk with a vase filled with pink daisies was placed by a window looking onto the grove. A small television was tucked into the corner of the room.

“I told you it was small, and we’ve tried to make it cozy. Here’s the bedroom.”

Through the doorway was a pale yellow room that was barely big enough to hold a twin bed with a white headboard and a white dresser. Next to it was a blue-and-white tiled bathroom with a deep white tub.

On the other side of the cottage was a tidy kitchen with a narrow stove, economy-size refrigerator, a microwave, and a square table and two chairs.

Mrs. Monroe opened the refrigerator and said, “You’re stocked up with the basics. Milk, juice, eggs. Well, you’ll see. Do you know how to cook, Jane?”

“I learned at my group home.”

“What do you think?” she asked. “Will it do?”

I smiled and said, “It’s amazing. Thank you, ma’am.”

“It’s no more than you deserve, Jane,” she said, smiling back at me.

“Please come to dinner at my house tomorrow, six o’clock. If you follow the path up the hill, you’ll see it. Will you be all right by yourself tonight?”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“My home number is programmed in the phone if you need anything. I’m really happy you’re here.”

“Me, too. Goodnight, Mrs. Monroe.”

When she left, I went from room to room, astonished that this was mine. Then I examined the cottage all over again. I discovered lavender-scented sachets in the closet, brand-name shampoo and tampons in the bathroom, and cupboards filled with good food.

The desk drawers were stocked with new packages of college-ruled binder paper, notebooks and journals, two dozen pencils, pens, and a calculator. A navy canvas book tote with the school emblem hung from the back of the chair.

There was a tiny room behind the kitchen with a stacked washer and dryer and a rack to dry small items.

I couldn’t understand why my heart was racing and my throat constricting. It was only when I began crying that I realized: I’d never been so happy.

When I unzipped my vinyl bag to unpack my clothes, I saw my stash of personal items. There was no snooping foster mother here, or klepto roomies, though, and I resisted my urge to hide my valuables. I placed Hosea’s Bible on the bookshelf and my money in a dresser drawer with Wilde’s tarnished earrings. Someday I’d get my ears pierced and wear them.

There was one thing left in my stash: the mangled bullet that had torn into

my flesh. I didn't remember the night I was shot and I didn't want this gruesome memento. I went outside and threw the bent chunk of metal as far into the grove as I could. I heard it fall somewhere in the distance.

The simple meal I ate – a grilled cheese sandwich, grapes, and chocolate chip cookies – seemed fantastic because I was the one who decided what and when to eat. I turned on the television and surfed the channels, watching all the junk celebrity shows that my classmates talked about, and staying up until two, when I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer.

After washing up, I slipped between the crisp sheets, moving my legs to feel the smoothness that was so different than the pilled, nylon-blend sheets at Mrs. Richards. I pulled the comforter up to my chin and closed my eyes and listened to the trees outside.

The branches shifting and brushing against the roof sounded as if they were whispering to me. A strange sensation ran through me, a memory of something too vague for me to recall.

I got up once to look out the window. There was nothing but darkness and the lovely shadows of branches moving. Suddenly realizing how isolated I was, I checked the locks on the windows and the door before going back to bed.

AT THE GROUP HOME, we were allowed five-minute showers every other day. If others cut in front of me in line, like the boys always did, the water was tepid and the spray too weak to wash the cheap shampoo out of my hair. Now I filled the bath tub with steaming water. The tub was so deep that I could have submerged myself completely.

I smoothed my hands over my skin feeling for any indications of damage besides the obvious. I remembered almost nothing about my past and I wondered if I'd been abused as Wilde had been. But the skin on my legs and arms was unmarked and my fingers slipped over my skin without catching the thickness of scar tissue.

I dried off with a thick, soft towel, and then examined my body in the foggy full-length mirror on the bathroom door. I rubbed hard at the scar with my thumb,

wishing that I could rub it away. It was oval-shaped with a higher ridge running lengthwise, crossed horizontally with narrow pale marks caused by hasty stitching.

Then I touched the tattoo below my left breast. Hosea would have been 18 now.

My own sixteenth birthday had not brought on any miraculous improvements. My eyes were an unremarkable brown, as was my hair which fell straight halfway down my back. My nose was a nose, and my mouth was a mouth. I thought my best feature was probably my teeth, which were even and white.

I shoved my small breasts together, but the resulting cleavage looked like a luxury accessory on an economy car. I turned around and checked out my butt. It wasn't completely flat, but it wasn't curvy either. I was as I'd always been, plain Jane.

At least here, at an all-girls school, I'd be spared the misery of lusting after guys that would never look my way. Even among the Alphas, I was seen as a sexless friend type. Even though it had been safer to be ignored, my heart still longed for love and my body still yearned for caresses.

It was another overcast day, so I dressed in jeans, a t-shirt and a sweater. As I ate a bowl of granola, I read the *Birch Grove Academy Handbook*. The schedule for classes was an elaborate grid of short and long blocks, and no two days of the week had classes in the same order. After I skimmed the handbook, I decided to explore the campus.

I didn't see another soul as I walked along the drive back to the stone pillars at the entrance. I turned back toward the school buildings and took paths that led through a rose garden and a terrace shaded by a vine-covered trellis. A stone statue of nymph stood in a fountain. I cut through a sports field and found myself at the back side of the birch grove.

The sky above cleared for a moment and sunlight flickered through the graceful branches. I thought I saw something, *someone*, but it was only the shadows of the branches dancing in the breeze.

In the center of the birch grove, I discovered an amphitheatre that was about 20 feet in diameter. Two concentric tiers of white marble benches surrounded a flat empty space. I sat there listening to birds and watching squirrels scamper through branches.

As I was enjoying the beauty, I had a moment of déjà vu. It was gone so fast that I could only hold onto an image of leaves, dampness, joy. I didn't know what it could mean.

I resumed exploring, going in the opposite direction from my cottage. I was gazing into the grove as I walked, trying to see if there were more surprises, when I heard a loud crunching.

I turned my head toward the sound and saw a bicycle hurdling straight at me.

"Watch out!" the rider shouted as he swerved to avoid hitting me. His tires skidded on the leaves, slid sideways, and he went flying off the bike, tumbling into the underbrush.

I rushed to him. "Are you all right?"

The rider was sprawled on the ground. He lifted his head and I saw a tangle of long dark curls and a scruff of beard. He wore khaki shorts and a gray t-shirt. A silver chain around his neck slipped beneath the collar of his shirt.

I studied him while he glared at his bike and cursed lowly. He was older than me by a few years. He had strong features and wide green eyes with thick black eyelashes.

"What the hell were you doing there?" he asked with a scowl as he slowly stood. He was about a head taller than me, more if I counted the wild curls.

His abrupt tone was much more comfortable to me than Mrs. Monroe's polished manners. "I was taking a walk."

"You came out of nowhere." He winced and leaned to one side. He brushed the dirt and leaves from the torn skin on his leg, exposing long, bloody scratches.

"You're hurt. Stay here and I'll get help."

"I'm okay. Get my bike for me."

Something about him made me keep my place until he said, “Please.”

As I picked up his mountain bike, he asked, “Where did you come from?”

“I live here.”

“No one lives here. It’s a day school.”

“I just moved into the cottage.”

“A pixie living in the fairytale cottage,” he said with a laugh. “What are you doing out here?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” I said. “I was thinking of walking up to Mrs. Monroe’s house. She’s the headmistress.”

“Have you met the Monroe family yet?”

“Another question.” I stared at him and he stared back. His direct gaze made me want to be direct, too. “I haven’t met them yet. I’m having dinner with them tonight. Are you trespassing?”

“Would you care if I was?” He tried to swing his leg over the bike and almost lost his balance. “Come here. Please.”

I stood by his side. He smelled like warm earth and pine. When he leaned on my left shoulder as he got on the bike, the heat from his hand went through the thin cotton of my worn shirt. My scar pulsed in response, something that had never happened before, and heat spread through my body.

“Later, pixie,” he said and rode off.

I wondered who he was. I glanced at the place he had put his hand. There was a smear of blood and dirt.

Blood stains. Instead of going to Mrs. Monroe’s house, I went back to the cottage and took off my shirt to wash it before the stain set in. I glanced in the mirror at my bare torso. Blood had soaked through the shirt to my scar; it was mottled rosy red and scarlet like an autumn leaf.

I turned on the tap to wash it off, yet when I looked up again, my scar was its normal pale color. The blood must have been a trick of the light and the nervousness that now made my body tingle in a way it never had before.

I changed into my nicest pants, brown corduroys, a blue blouse, and fake leather sandals that were a size too big. I didn’t have any makeup or any jewelry

other than Wilde's earrings.

As I walked up the hill, it seemed as if everything was brighter and more vibrant, from the individual notes of birdsong to the serrated edges of the birch leaves. I felt like I'd been drowsy all my life, and now I was wide awake.

The Monroes' house was easy to find. The two-story building stood apart from its neighbors and was the same pinkish hue as the school. The main entry to the house was a turnoff from a street that ran above it, at the top of the hill. Massive emerald-green pine trees surrounded it.

I wiped my sweaty palms on my cords before I rang the doorbell. I expected to see Mrs. Monroe, but the door was opened by a handsome, tall teenager with thick amber and gold hair. His broad shoulders filled a blue-green polo shirt, and his eyes were the same shade of blue as Mrs. Monroe's. Although it was the end of summer, his skin was pale and creamy with hint of pink on his cheeks.

He was like those boys who used to bash me aside as they walked down the halls at school because I didn't even register as being there. But he was different from those boys, just as real silk was different from the too-shiny synthetic of my blouse.

He smiled and said, "You must be Jane. I'm Lucian." He reached out and shook my small sweaty hand with his firm dry one, and the tingling in my body made the handshake more intense than those furtive gropings I'd had with some of the Alpha boys.

"Hello, Lucian," I said, my voice cracking with my nerves.

"Everyone calls me Lucky," he said. "Mom's all excited about having you here. Come on in."

He led me through the foyer, where a large vase of flowers was displayed on a circular table, and then past an elegant ivory and gray-green living room. Although evening was still bright outside, the interior of the house was dark. Still, I spotted polished wood furniture, rich fabrics, and framed paintings.

Lucky said, "Mom thought you'd be more comfortable in the family room. That's where we usually hang."

The family room was at the back of the house with windows facing toward Birch Grove Academy below. It was open to the large kitchen, where Mrs. Monroe stood over a six-burner stove, checking the contents of a pot. “Jane, good to see you again. Lucky, offer Jane a drink.”

“Water or soda?” he asked.

Was one better than the other? “Anything is fine.”

Lucky took a bottle out of the wide glass-fronted refrigerator and said, “Try this lemon soda. It’s kind of tart. Makes your mouth go *smack*.”

“Pour it into a glass for Jane, dear,” Mrs. Monroe said. She opened the oven and pulled out a tray of something that looked like breadsticks.

Lucky tipped the soda into a glass, plunked in ice cubes, and took a strawberry from a bowl on the counter and dropped it in. “There you go.” He winked at me.

It was only a friendly wink, and a strawberry was only a piece of fruit. Most girls, pretty girls, were accustomed to attention. They could differentiate between friendliness and flirtation. But I wasn’t one of those girls, and I had no idea what to make of Lucky’s gesture.

I could barely whisper, “Thank you.”

Mrs. Monroe said, “Lucky, please ask your brother to join us.”

“I’ll try to drag him out of his den,” he said to her, and to me, he said, “He’s like a caveman.”

“No name calling,” Mrs. Monroe said as her son sauntered off whistling off-key.

I took a sip of the soda. It was a little sour, yet tasty. “Do you have more children, ma’am?”

“I only have Lucien and Jacob. Of course, I have all my Birch Grove girls.” She put the breadstick things on a platter. “Would you mind taking these cheese straws to the table, dear?”

I was glad I put the platter down before Lucky returned with his brother. The bicyclist, still wearing his dirt-smeared shorts, limped in with a bandage on his leg.

He smirked and said, “This is the pixie who crashed my bike.”

Chapter 3

“The dignity of each Birch Grove student is recognized and supported by the collaboration of our rigorous academic and co-curricular programs.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

“Jacob!” Mrs. Monroe said, “That is no way to greet our guest.”

“It’s not *my* fault she knocked me over,” he said as he grabbed a handful of the cheese straws and popped one in his mouth. “Yowh, hot!”

“I did *not* knock you over,” I said. “You fell of your own accord.”

“She defends herself like a lawyer!” Jacob said. “She’ll probably want to sue me for libel with a talking squirrel as her witness and a troll king as a judge.”

Lucky slugged his brother on the shoulder and said to me, “Don’t let Jack bother you. He’s an idiot.”

“I believe I said no name calling, Lucien, but, honestly, Jacob.” Mrs. Monroe gave her grimy son a critical up-and-down look and crossed her arms.

Jack ate another cheese straw and said, “These are great, Ma.”

I tensed, waiting for her to yell at him, but she reached out to brush his curls off his face. The loving gesture shocked me more than if she’d slapped him.

“Jane, this young man is Jacob, my oldest son. It’s no secret that a headmistress’s biggest challenge is her family. Jacob, say hello to Jane.”

“Hello to Jane,” he parroted, pulling out the pockets of his shorts in a silly curtsy.

I couldn’t decide if it was the dumbest thing I’d ever seen, or the funniest, so I stared back at him.

“Jane can appear out of nowhere,” Jack said.

“Jack, please stop being inane and go make yourself presentable,” Mrs. Monroe said. “Jane, would you mind helping with the salad while Lucian sets the table?”

“Sure. What do you want me to do?”

The headmistress showed me to a cutting board and set me to cutting tomatoes and cucumbers. I was glad to have something to do while I observed the Monroes.

At the group home, we'd eaten off plastic plates with mismatched forks and the thin paper napkins that Mrs. Richards grabbed by the handfuls whenever she ate at fast food restaurants. Now I studied how Lucky placed the plates, cloth napkins, glasses, and silverware on the long rectangular table.

"What year are you?" Lucky asked.

"I'll be a junior."

"Me, too," he said. "What's your favorite subject?"

"It's a tie between math and science. They make the most sense."

"I hate science," he said. "I'm stupid that way."

Mrs. Monroe brought a basket of bread to the table. "Lucky, you are not stupid. You simply don't apply yourself. In fact, I thought that Jane might like to tutor you in chemistry to earn some pocket money. Would you consider that, Jane?"

I wondered how Lucky would get out of this awkward situation, but he said, "That would be cool," as if it was the most normal thing in the world for a new scholarship student to tutor the headmistress's son.

"I could tutor," I said quickly. I was thinking, *money and Lucky*, instead of paying attention to what I was doing. The knife slipped in my hand and cut into my finger and I cried out. Lucky and his mother turned to see the cut oozing blood over the green-edged, white slices of cucumber.

Lucky hurried to me and said, "Let me see."

I held out my hand. He stood close that I smelled the same fresh, herbal scent that his mother wore. He gazed at the cut welling with blood and his finely curved lips opened slightly. I felt the whisper of his exhalation on my cheek.

"Lucien!" Mrs. Monroe said sharply. "I'll take care of that." She put her hand on my wrist and turned me toward her. "It's not deep. Let's rinse it off. Lucky, get a Band-Aid. Your brother has a box in his bathroom."

Lucky walked away, and Mrs. Monroe turned on the faucet and flushed

the cut with hot water. Her oval fingernails with their clear polish and her pale fingers contrasted against my skin and my uneven, bitten fingernails.

“I should have been careful,” I said.

She didn’t take her eyes from my hand. “Most accidents happen in the kitchen. I should have a First Aid kit here. Let’s staunch it.”

I was pressing down on the cut with a paper towel when Lucky returned with a box of Band-Aids. When Mrs. Monroe reached for the box, Lucky held it away from her and said, “I can do it.”

“It’s nothing,” I said. “I can put it on.”

“You’re the patient,” Lucky said as he shook a Band-Aid out of the box and said, “Hold out your hand.”

I did as he said and put the paper towel on the counter.

Lucky tore the waxy wrapper from the Band-Aid, peeled off the slick white backing, and carefully wrapped the Band-Aid around my finger. His fingers were as pale as his mother’s, and his nails were clean and squared off.

He grinned and said, “There you go. You can thank Dr. Lucky.”

“Thank you, Dr. Lucky,” I said, thinking that he was making a big deal out of the cut. Not that I minded his attention, but it seemed *odd*. Maybe this was how they treated guests.

Mrs. Monroe said, “Thank you, Lucien, however, you’ll have to put a little more energy into your studies if you want to earn a medical degree.”

He shrugged and offered the plate of cheese straws to me. I took one and bit into it. It was hot and buttery. Lucky ate several, and then held out plate toward me. I picked up another and ducked my head, uneasy with his thoughtfulness.

Mrs. Monroe opened the oven and took out a roast chicken with shiny, brown skin that made my mouth water. She said, “Lucky goes to Evergreen Prep, the all-boys companion to Birch Wood.”

“Jack graduated from public school last June,” Lucky volunteered. He said *public school* the same way the Alphas said *youth correctional facility*. “Now he’s slacking.”

“You’ll give Jane the wrong impression,” his mother said. “The local public school has an outstanding music program. Jacob’s taking off a year to focus on his music and consider his options.”

“Options like sleeping in late or sleeping in *really* late,” Lucky said. When Mrs. Monroe gave him a sharp look, he laughed.

“You can see why I’m happy to work with my Birch Grove girls,” Mrs. Monroe said. “I know you prefer the sciences, but I hope you’ll enjoy your liberal arts studies here. We’ve got exceptional English and language courses. Do you enjoy literature, Jane?”

“It’s all right, but I prefer subjects that teach useful information.”

“Literature has many lessons we can apply to our daily lives, Jane.”

“Now you’ve got her started,” Lucky said, and he was right. Mrs. Monroe talked for another ten minutes about the importance of fiction and poetry as if memorizing a sonnet was going to help me get a job.

I pretended to listen while I watched Lucky slouching against the counter. His nose was long and straight and he had a small cleft in his chin. He was gazing out the window at the school and town below.

I remembered the blood-soaked paper towel I’d left on the counter and I took my glass to the sink, intending to pick it up so that Mrs. Madison didn’t have to clean up after me. It was already gone.

Then Jack, wearing a clean version of his previous outfit, returned with a tall, handsome older man at his side.

“Right on time for dinner, dear,” Mrs. Monroe said to the older man. “Jane, this is my husband, Mr. Monroe. Tobias, this is my new student, Jane Williams.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Mr. Monroe said with the briefest of smiles. His blond hair was shot through with silver and his eyes were the pale blue of the early morning sky. He was as tall as Lucky, but thin and there were grayish shadows under his eyes. On his wrist a heavy gold watch slid loosely, as if it was intended for a bigger man.

The dinner was more lavish than Easter dinner at Mrs. Richards. We had

roast chicken, green salad, red cabbage slaw, mashed potatoes, and warm crusty bread. It would have been a perfect meal except that when I cut into the chicken, I saw blood at the bone. I tried to eat around the raw part and then hid the barely eaten meat under lettuce leaves.

We even had dessert, strawberry shortcake, topped with whipped cream and oozing with sweet ruby juices.

I try to recollect that first dinner with the Monroes, but all I remember was the strangeness of sitting with what I thought was a happy family. Mr. Monroe was pleasant, but distracted, often staring out the window. Mrs. Monroe made polite conversation with her sons and me about weather, the neighborhood, school.

The oddest thing about the family was Jack, who looked quite different from his tall, pale family. Sometimes I caught him watching me, but I couldn't tell what he was thinking behind those clear green eyes.

Some of the kids at the group home had talked dreamily about family life *before*: *before* mom got on the pipe, *before* dad got sent up, *before* sickness, poverty, mental illness, and death pressed down upon their lives until they broke apart like the cheap plastic toys we got at Christmas.

"Jane, what sports do you play?" Lucky asked.

"I don't do sports." Sports cost money and time, and I had had neither.

"We'll have to find one for you," Mrs. Monroe said. "We're happiest when we exercise both our minds and our bodies." Her eyes slid toward her husband as he poured another glass of red wine for himself. "Tobias, what do you think?"

He took a long drink and looked at me, as if trying to size me. "I don't know. Golf?"

Lucky laughed and said, "The clubs are bigger than she is! I've still got my kiddie set, though."

What could be more pointless than hitting a tiny ball around a giant lawn with a stick? "I don't think I'd like golf."

"Get a bike," Jack said. "It's a sport *and* transportation and it doesn't

spew toxic fumes. You can even build your own. I did.”

“These hills are too steep for a beginner,” Mrs. Monroe said. “Jane, you can talk to the sports clubs at orientation on Monday and see if any interest you.”

I knew sports helped on college applications, but there had to be a way around them. The headmistress saw my reluctance and said, “If you don’t want to join a team now, you can do it later. We have something for everyone.”

“Anyone can ride a bike,” Jack said. “Even an elf.”

“Jacob, stop teasing Jane. Not every appreciates your sense of humor.” Mrs. Monroe said. “Boys, clear the table.”

She walked me to the front door and said, “Would you like Lucian or Jacob to walk you home?”

“I’m fine. Thanks for dinner, Mrs. Monroe. It was delicious.”

“I’m glad you could join us. Tomorrow I’d like to take you into town. We’ll pick up a few things you need, and you can open a bank account and deposit your stipend.”

The stipend was a payment the school was giving me for living expenses. I couldn’t wait to have my own money. “Okay.”

“Good. We also need to stop in at the tailor and have your uniforms fitted.” She smiled and said, “After having thousands of girls go through my school, I can guess sizes with a degree of accuracy, but there’s always a hem to take in, or a button to be moved. Shall we meet in front of the school at ten?”

“Yes, ma’am. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Jane. Sleep well.”

I was glad to walk alone in the darkening grove so I could think about the evening. Most of all, I puzzled over Lucky and the way he’d bandaged my finger. Although I knew it meant nothing to him, I could still daydream about the closeness of him, his long legs, and the way his lips had parted when he held my hand.

A wind blustered all night long and my heightened mood made me imagine that the moving branches were reaching out toward my little cottage, cocooning it against the world outside.

The next morning, the Band-Aid became loose in the shower and I pulled it off. The cut was a thin line without even a scab on the wrinkled skin beneath. I had a weird desire to keep the old Band-Aid, because it reminded me of Lucky's sweetness. I realized that was crazy and I threw it away.

Since I had nothing else to do, I went to the school building early. I sat on the marble steps, which chilled my butt, and turned my head to look up at the stone angels over the doors. Their beautiful, fierce faces made me think of one of my vocabulary words, androgynous.

A few adults, teachers I guessed, said hello as they passed me to go into the building.

When Mrs. Monroe came out of the building to meet me, she was dressed in navy slacks and a long-sleeved white blouse. A thin cotton sweater was tied over her shoulders and a white canvas hat shaded her face. "Good morning, Jane. Are you ready?"

We walked to the parking lot on the far side of the school property. I hadn't noticed it before because tall bushes blocked the view from the drive. Her car was an older model silver Mercedes with a Birch Grove Academy emblem in the rear window.

I slid into the deep leather seat and Mrs. Monroe waited until I'd clicked on my safety belt before starting the car.

As she drove down the hill, she said, "Our students keep so busy with schoolwork and activities that they don't mind that Greenwood isn't very large. There's a movie house, restaurants, a pizzeria, cafes, boutiques, and Feldon's, the ice cream parlor."

"We passed through it on my way to the school," I said. "How far is it from Birch Grove?"

"It's only a mile, although the walk uphill seems longer than the walk down," she said with a smile.

When we reached the bottom of the hill, Mrs. Monroe turned onto a tree-lined street with small pretty stores. Windows gleamed, the sidewalks were clean, and bright flowers spilled out of window boxes and planters.

Mrs. Monroe pointed to an intersection and said, “There’s a shuttle that runs every hour and goes up the hill. You can ride for free with your student I.D.”

She parked in front of a store that had had a sign saying *Eunice’s Sewing & Alterations*. “This is our first stop because I want to be sure your uniform will be ready.”

She took a garment bag from her trunk and we went into the shop, setting a bell above the door tinkling.

“Morning, Mrs. Monroe,” said the older woman behind the counter.

“Good morning, Eunice. I’ve brought the uniforms for Jane Wilson. She’s a new student.” Mrs. Monroe set the bag on the counter, unzipped it and lifted out navy blue and white garments. “I’m sure the sweaters will fit fine, but try them on anyway, Jane.”

She was right about the sweaters, but the navy blazer’s sleeves covered my knuckles. I was only 5’1” and jackets and pants were always too long on me. When I shoved the cuffs up, Eunice frowned. She tugged them back down and said, “I’ll pin these.”

My school wardrobe consisted of two cotton navy v-neck sweaters, one wool navy cardigan; the blazer; one pair of navy slacks, two skirts in a navy and tan plaid; and five white, cotton blouses. The sweaters and jacket had burgundy trim and the jacket had a school embroidered school emblem on the pocket.

Eunice had me stand on a wooden platform in front of a three-way mirror and she pinned the hems. I had dreamed about new clothes, however, these made me look as if I was about to enter a convent. I remembered Mrs. Richards screeching, “Beggars can’t be choosers!” when I’d complained about something she’d gotten at a garage sale.

The seamstress told us the alterations would be finished by the end of the next day.

When Mrs. Monroe and I walked to the bank, I noticed the street sign, Monroe Drive.

“Is that...” I began.

“Our family has been here for some time,” the headmistress said. “One of

the advantages of living in a small town is that you get to name things after yourself. Have you had a bank account before, Jane?”

“I never had anything to put in one.”

“We encourage all Birch Grove girls to learn how to handle finances. You’ll receive your stipend on a monthly basis. It’s not much, but it should be enough for you to buy groceries, necessities, and the occasional meal or movie out. Not that you seem like a spendthrift, Jane, but it’s always a wise practice to live within your means and have money for a rainy day. That means an emergency.”

“I’m going to be careful, ma’am.” Money was safety and security. It was a bus ticket, a sweater, a meal, a room for the night.

“Good! Since I have your bank account number, I can deposit your tutoring pay directly.” Mrs. Monroe told me the tutoring rate, which was more than twice what I’d hoped for.

Lucky and money. I see now how the tutoring job made me associate Lucky with all the safety of money.

Evergreen Bank was a midsize brick building, and when we entered, it was as if we had stepped back into time. Clerks greeted Mrs. Monroe by name and the manager came to meet us and took us to his office. I tried to fill out the bank forms as neatly as I could with a ball point pen that kept skipping.

When I got to the section for my address, Mrs. Monroe said, “Birch Grove Academy for Girls, 10 Birch Grove Way.” The whole process took only fifteen minutes and I was given a bank book, a debit card, and checks.

Our next stop was a shoe store. A salesman measured my feet using an odd metal slide. Then he brought out plain black leather loafers that looked stiff, but when I put them on, they felt smooth and comfortable. The leather soles slipped on the carpet and the salesman said, “Scuff the soles on the pavement before you wear them so you’ll have traction.”

Mrs. Monroe said, “We also need white tennis shoes, black or navy tennis shoes, and slippers.

Most kids get new shoes so often that they take them for granted. But in

foster care, new shoes – shoes that fit and haven't been worn out by someone else – are rare and important. I lifted the shoe box covers just to see them in their white tissue and smell that new shoe smell.

We had lunch in an old-fashioned drugstore, sitting at a counter. Mrs. Monroe suggested a roast beef sandwich and pink lemonade. The meat was so rare that the juices soaked through the wheat bread. I was hungry and she was paying, so I bit into the sandwich, which was tastier than I expected.

While we ate, I watched customers in the long mirror on the wall. Three teenage girls came into the store, arm in arm, giggling. They stopped when they spotted Mrs. Monroe and exchanged whispers.

They were pretty, with shining, long hair, smooth skin, and perfect white teeth. Two wore shorts and tank tops and the third wore a long gauzy white skirt, lilac blouse, and a straw hat.

Mrs. Monroe spotted them in the mirror and the corners of her mouth went up.

The girls approached in that friendly, yet wary way that you do with people you like who have authority over you. "Hello, Mrs. Monroe," they said in unison.

"Hello, ladies. How has your summer been?"

Even though the girls tried to be subtle about looking at me, I was acutely conscious of my hand-me-down clothes. They described their vacations in a jumble of words, tumbling over each other's sentences. One had been sailing, and one had traveled to Italy.

The prettiest, the brown-haired girl in the skirt, had spent the summer in Montreal with an aunt and uncle. She was as pale as the headmistress and I caught a whiff of the same herby scent.

Mrs. Monroe said, "This is Jane Williams. She'll be joining us this term."

We all said hello awkwardly, knowing we wouldn't say hello if not for Mrs. Monroe. Their sharp eyes took in my shabby clothes and the shoe store bag on the floor beside me.

"I won't take up any more of your last precious minutes of freedom," Mrs.

Monroe said. “See you on Monday.”

When the trio drifted off to the cosmetics section, out of hearing, she told me, “I know that it’s not easy to transfer for your junior year.”

“I’m sure it’s better than where I was,” I answered.

“I hope that you’ll find that we are more than merely the lesser of two evils,” she said. “Let’s pick up a few basics for you.”

She took me to women’s clothing store with neatly folded stacks of clothes and orderly racks of dresses and jackets. The price tags were tucked inside the clothes. I unfolded a pair of jeans and the tag fell out, stunning me.

“Do you see anything you like, Jane?” Mrs. Monroe asked.

There was no way I was going to spend all my stipend at this overpriced, old-lady store. “Not really.”

Mrs. Monroe quickly figured out way I hesitated. “One pays for quality, Jane, and quality pays for itself in the end. The clothes are part of our gift to you.”

That changed everything. I wasn’t going to turn down free clothes, even boring clothes. Mrs. Monroe offered advice while I selected solid-color shirts, an assortment of t’s, cami’s with straps wide enough to hide my scar, a black knee-length skirt, khaki cargos, and two pair of jeans.

Then Mrs. Monroe walked with me to the lingerie section and said, “You should be stocked with a good supply of the necessities.” She picked out a dozen pair of lace-trimmed cotton panties as well as navy knee-high and white crew socks.

Then she looked at the bra display and said, “What’s your size?”

My face went hot with embarrassment. “I don’t know, ma’am.” I looked down at the floor. “I don’t really need to wear a bra.” I’d begged Mrs. Richards for bras, but she’d said I didn’t have anything to put in them and laughed an ugly laugh.

Mrs. Monroe made a *tching* sound. “Young ladies should have proper undergarments, and you are a young lady, Jane.” She called over a clerk and soon I was in the dressing room and holding my arms out while the clerk used a

measuring tape to find my size. “A very ladylike bosom,” she said, approvingly.

“There’s nothing there,” I complained.

The clerk grinned. “I have been fitting bras for twenty-five years and no one ever thinks her breasts are good enough,” she said. “You’ll save yourself a lot of unhappiness if you accept and enjoy what you have. Neat little breasts are very chic.”

I thought she was completely wrong, but soon I was trying on a sweet little white bra that made me look as if I actually had a feminine shape.

Mrs. Monroe popped her head through the curtain. She said to the clerk, “That’s quite nice. We’ll take three white, two beige, and one black.” When the clerk left the dressing room, Mrs. Monroe continued to look, and I felt self-conscious.

I knew what she was looking at, the pale scar above my left breast, and then her eyes shifted downward and she said, “Jane, no more tattoos, please. They are unseemly and unhealthy. You can get a blood-born infection, and we wouldn’t want that.”

It wasn’t her business to tell me what to do with my body. “I was careful and I’m fine.”

“Still, we don’t want you catching anything. We want you as healthy as can be.”

When she’d left the dressing room, I ran my finger across the black H and wondered what Hosea would think if he could see me in this expensive little town, about to start an exclusive school. Hosea wouldn’t be impressed by the money. He wanted me to be a kinder person, not a richer person.

Our last stop was the grocery store. “You can make an easy spaghetti sauce with crushed tomatoes and herbs,” Mrs. Monroe said. “Oatmeal is economical and much healthier for you than any packaged cereal. I like mine with dried cranberries and brown sugar.”

Since groceries came out of my stipend, I followed her suggestions, choosing the cheaper store brands of items that would fill me up and last the longest.

Mrs. Monroe waited at the entrance while I took out my bank card to pay from my groceries. The clerk was a Latina, about 20, pretty and wearing a bright pink shirt under her Greenwood Grocery apron. She said, “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“It’s that obvious? I’ll be starting Birch Grove.”

She handed me a receipt. “Really? That school is way expensive.”

“I got a scholarship.”

“Good on you. See you around.”

“Okay, see you. Thanks.” I took the receipt and folded it into my new checkbook.

As Mrs. Monroe drove back to the school, I recognized houses on the hill and turns on the road, and I thought, *I can do this*.

Chapter 4

“Birch Grove alumna become productive, moral, and ethical citizens and understand their responsibilities as leaders in our community.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

After saying good-bye to Mrs. Monroe, I walked along the path to my cottage. The birch leaves fluttered in a faint breeze, revealing the light green on the reverse side.

Once inside, I took my new clothes out of their shopping bags and spread them on the sofa and chairs I put them in different combinations, so I would know what went with what. Then I eliminated the four most unnecessary items, two t-shirts and one pair of jeans, and put them back in a shopping bag so I could return them for a refund.

I put the other clothes in the closet, but kept their tags on. Mrs. Monroe had her idea of rainy day money, and I had mine.

After turning on the television for noise, I moved things around the cottage, just because I could. I discovered a flashlight in a cupboard in the laundry room and put them on the table by my bed in case of emergencies.

I studied a chapter of my SAT vocabulary book. I wrote out the words in sentences and then said them aloud until they came naturally. Now that I had privacy, I practiced the words while standing in front of the mirror, making up sentences like, “He has an avuncular mien,” and “We were habituated to the pedagogue’s acerbity.” Well, some things never sounded natural.

It felt like a long day, but when I looked at the clock, it was only six.

I wished I had a computer so I could write to some of my friends. I’d always used City Central’s computer lab for my homework, but I didn’t recall seeing any computers on my tour of the school. I should have asked Mrs. Monroe, but now was dinner time, not a good time to phone.

The knock on my door startled me.

I went to the front window and pulled aside the curtain. Jack stood on the porch, holding a pizza box. His bike was leaning against the banister.

When I opened the door, he said, “Hey, Jane, thought you might want some chow. I couldn’t find any of your natural diet, shamrocks and moonbeams, so I brought pizza.”

He was wearing those old shorts and brown scabs had formed on his muscular legs. I had a sense of him being a man, not a boy. It was more to do with his effortless way than his actual age.

Mouth-watering aromas emanated from the box and beneath that I detected Jack’s faint pine and earth scent. “Your mother took me to the grocery store today,” I said reluctantly.

He walked right by me into the cottage. “I know what my mom’s groceries are like. Full of antioxidants, and roughage, and moral character.” He gazed around the living room and then went into the kitchen and put the box on the table.

“Get plates for us, halfling,” he said. He shrugged off his backpack, unzipped it and took out two cans of root beer.

“You’re making up that word.” I thought he was weird, but the pizza smelled delicious, so I got two plates from the cupboard and napkins from a drawer.

“It’s as real as you are. It’s someone who’s half human and half magical creature. I’m guessing that you’re part pixie, hopefully not one of the evil ones,” he said. “Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Are you half evil pixie?”

“I don’t even know what a pixie is.”

“They’re creatures that are almost human size. Sometimes they’re helpful to people, and they like music and dancing and pretty ribbons.”

“I think you’ve spent too much time playing RPGs and reading Tolkien.”

“Who doesn’t enjoy a good sword fight?” When Jack smiled, his whole face lit up. “Yeah, I’ve read Tolkien, and my mother told us fairy tales every

night. I'm an expert on magical creatures, and I can recognize one when I see one. There's a glint of starlight in your brown eyes that gives away your true identity."

Jack flipped open the lid of the box. The pizza had slid to one side and much of the topping was stuck to the cardboard. He shrugged and said, "That's why people don't deliver pizzas by bike."

We sat down and Jack said, "Mom told me she dragged you shopping today. She loves shopping with girls. It kills her that she can't dress Lucky and me in matching sailor outfits."

As we took out slices of the gooey mess, I asked, "What else does your mother like?"

"Besides her family? Her *girls*." He pitched his voice higher, mimicking her. "A Birch Grove girl is an exceptional girl."

He was watching for my reaction. I stared right back into his wide green eyes. They were the moss color of the school's pond with bronzy flecks like the reflection of sunlight.

"Well?" Jack said.

I bit into the pizza. Even though it wasn't hot, it was the best pizza I'd ever had. "It's great."

Jack said, "What are your favorite subjects?"

It was the same question his brother had asked. "Math and science."

"Why? And tell me in complete sentences, like you'd answer in a college interview."

"Is this the price of pizza?" I said, and he nodded. "Okay, I like them because science and math are always reasonable, logical, and fair. The rules apply no matter who you are, or who you know. There is beauty and balance. They make sense."

"And people don't," he said. "We're irrational, biased, and unreliable."

"Some more than others," I said, and he smiled. "But the rules of science apply when we die. When our bodies decompose, it doesn't matter if we were rich, poor, smart, stupid... None of that matters, because our chemical

components are equal even though life is not.”

“I don’t know when I’ve had a more cheerful dinner companion,” Jack said.

I shrugged and said, “You asked.”

We ate silently for a few minutes before he said, “Tell me about yourself.”

“I came from a group home and now I’m here.”

“Thanks for the fascinating details,” he said. “Why were you in a foster home?”

I wasn’t going to reveal anything he didn’t already know. “Didn’t your mother tell you?”

“The only thing she told us was that you’re here on scholarship.”

“My mother died when I was seven, and I got dumped into the system.”

“What about your father?”

“He bailed before I was born.” I shifted my leg and it momentarily brushed against Jack’s under the table. I felt a jolt from the contact, and I quickly tucked my legs under my chair.

“So your dad’s not going to come and get you anytime soon?”

I shook my head. “As far as I’m concerned, he doesn’t exist.”

“You’re all alone then,” Jack said.

It was exactly what his mother had said, what everyone said. “You probably don’t realize it, living in a place like this, but lots of kids don’t live with their birth parents. Lots of families are broken up.”

“I know that, Jane,” he said in such a sorrowful way that I got the strangest feeling that he actually did understand. “Do you like living by yourself here?”

“Do you always ask so many questions?”

“No, because most people are happy to talk about themselves. I have to pry stuff out of you.”

“Why do you care?”

He grinned. “Now who’s asking the questions? I’m curious.”

I sighed. “I love having my own space, but it’s so different. I’m used to more noise, city noise, cars and people. And at night, when the wind blows, the trees make sounds. I’ll become habituated to it.”

“*Habituated?* Really?” A smile played on his lips. “Well, look who’s been studying for the SATs.”

“If I didn’t study, I wouldn’t be here,” I snapped. “Yes, it feels a little eerie sometimes.”

“There are lots of folktales about birches. Do you know what they say about them? They say they lift their roots from the earth and walk at night.”

I had that unidentifiable sensation again. Then I saw the twinkle in Jack’s eyes and got annoyed.

“Jacob, at my old school, students got shot and stabbed. There were ODs and arrests. There were kids who didn’t get to the emergency room in time and died. So don’t think you’re going to scare me with your preposterous stories,” I said. “Everyone knows trees aren’t animate. They can’t walk or talk or come alive at night!”

The strange sensation came again, the thing I couldn’t remember, and I pushed it away.

“No, I don’t suppose it’s easy to scare you,” Jack said more seriously. “There’s something in your eyes, Halfling, like you’ve see things not meant for mere mortals.”

“You’re so full of it, Jack,” I said and he just laughed and grabbed a third slice of pizza.

Although I was already full, I desperately hoped he wasn’t going to throw the rest away, because some people are like that, tossing away things that others could use. After all, it was his pizza.

When Jack finished eating, he stood. “Keep the rest. See you around, halfling.”

He let himself out and I heard the crunch of his tires on the leaves outside as he rode off.

I had no idea what to make of him, or why he’d really come by. He must be bored.

After I went to bed, I listened to the sounds outside. I imagined the trees pulling away from the earth and wandering in the night, massive, yet graceful in

the moonlight. I thought of their limbs moving like dancers, of their delicate whispery song, and I fell asleep.

Mid-morning the next day, Saturday, Mrs. Monroe stopped by to drop off my uniforms and a round box. “These are your school hats. There’s a straw one for sunny days, a wool one for the winter, and a cap for sports. Our founder’s wife believed that a lady should always protect her complexion and science has shown that to be an excellent policy.”

I suddenly imagined Mrs. Monroe trying to get Jack to wear a sailor suit and I smiled. “Thank you, ma’am. For everything.”

“You’re welcome, Jane. I’ll see you at registration on Monday at 8:30. Students wear their blazers and skirts on the first day of term.”

“I know I should have asked before – I don’t have a computer and I didn’t notice where the computer lab was in the school. Or are they somewhere in the library?”

“Most applicants already know and I should have mentioned that we don’t use computers for schoolwork here,” she said. “It sounds shockingly backwards in this day and age, but studies have shown that using books for research and the actual process of writing by hand reinforces learning and encourages analysis.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that,” I said. “But colleges want students who are computer literate.”

She smiled and said, “They prefer students who can think and do research from original source material. You may use the computers in the library in town, so long as you don’t use them for school work.”

“Okay, I’ll do that. I wanted to say hi to my old friends.”

“It’s good of you to keep in touch, but be careful not to hold on too tight to old acquaintances instead of making new friends here at Birch Grove,” she said. “Well, I’ll be off. See you tomorrow, Jane.”

After I had lunch, I got the shopping bag with new clothes and walked to the edge of campus and down the drive to town. The fog grew lighter as I went downhill. When I turned to look back up at Birch Grove, it blanketed in soft grayness.

The library was off the main street, and only a few older people sat in the cushioned armchairs of the reading area. I filled out an application for a library card and was issued one with tag that said *Birch Grove Academy*. Then I went to the computer stalls and logged into my old City Central account.

I thought I'd have messages from my housemates at Mrs. Richards', but no one had written to me. I sent a message to one of my roommates telling her that I was fine and happy in my new place.

Lily and the other Alphas had written to wish me luck. I wrote back and told them about the crazy no-computers rule, the uniforms, and the handbook filled with regulations.

I wanted to tell them about the beautiful school, gorgeous Lucky, my amazing cottage, and weird Jack, but I didn't want to sound all fangirly about Birch Grove when they were still stuck at City Central. As I signed off, I felt a pang; I knew they would soon forget me.

I scoured the library's non-fiction stacks and an hour later I had a pile of books for school, including a guide to tutoring chemistry. I imagined sitting side by side with Lucky, the book open in front of us, and how he'd learn to see me as more than just a mousy girl. Yeah, right. At least I could look at him.

I also did an internet search on Mrs. Monroe's theory about handwriting and found that she was right: research had shown a correlation between learning and the process of writing. Some City Central teachers made us write by hand, but only when students had gotten so blasé about their plagiarism that their cutting and pasting was obvious.

My next stop was the women's clothing shop. I tried to look confident and casual as I walked up to the register with my bag. "Hi, I'd like to return these things," I said to a clerk in a pale blue sweater and skirt.

I took the clothes out of the bag and she said, "Certainly. Do you have the receipt?"

"No, the clothes were a gift. I'd like a refund."

"We can give you store credit," she said. "But we can't give refunds without a receipt."

“I just got them two days ago,” I said. I wished I was one of those girls who could talk their way into anything, and I tried smiling.

“Hello, there, young lady,” someone said.

The clerk and I both turned to look at the older clerk who worked in the lingerie section.

“Hi,” I said.

She looked me up and down and said, “Yes, good undergarments make a very nice difference. How are you?”

“I’m trying to return some things I don’t need.”

The woman at the counter said to her, “Oh, you two know each other?”

“Yes, Mrs. Monroe brought her shopping the other day. She’s a new Birch Grove student.”

“Then I think we can make an exception to the refund policy,” said the clerk in blue.

Now that I had cash in my pocket, I stopped into the chic beauty shop next door to the boutique. Mirrors reflecting gleaming glass display cases, and a subtle floral scent hung in the air. I went to the counter with rows of eye products, eye shadows in a kaleidoscope of colors, trays of crayons from thin to thick...

I picked up a tube of mascara and turned it to see the price, which was on a tiny tab. It cost as much as a bag of groceries.

A pretty clerk came over and said, “May I help you find something?”

“No thanks. Just looking,” I said. I picked up an eye crayon and it cost even more. “Thanks.”

I walked toward the bus stop, feeling the comfort of the folded bills and coins in my pocket, when I saw the shuttle pulling away from the stop. I ran, my heavy book bag clunking against me, but the shuttle chugged off.

I read the chemistry tutoring guide while waiting for the next shuttle. I was thinking about Lucky and money, money and Lucky, when I realized that a car had stopped in front of me and then someone called out, “Hey! Hey!”

It was the girl from the grocery store. She was leaning across the front seat of the older black Nissan so she could yell out the open passenger window.

“Hi,” I said.

“Where ya going?”

“Up to Birch Grove. I just missed the shuttle.”

“It’ll be another hour ‘cause it’s still on the summer schedule. I’ll give you a lift. Hop in.”

“Thanks.” I got in the car, which had fuzzy pink seat covers and smelled like strawberry jam. “I’m Jane.”

“Hey, Jane. My friends call me Ornery, but my real name is Orneta.”

“Which do you want to be called?” I asked. There was something very easy-going about her and I felt more relaxed than I had in weeks.

“Call me Orneta around the store and Ornery when I’m not. I’m taking nursing classes at the CC.”

“Is that nearby?”

“It’s about twenty minutes away.” She said she lived in an apartment with two roommates and asked where I was from. When I told her and mentioned City Central she let out a hoot. “That place has a terrible rep,” she said. “I dated a guy who went there and he told crazy stories.”

“They’re true,” I said.

“Of course, my high school in Aurora, I’m from Illinois, was like that, too.”

“Do you like Greenwood?”

“*Chica*, this town gives me the creeps, but I get paid real good and just got a bonus. But the people are all so aren’t-we-special.”

She shuddered dramatically, and I laughed and said, “It’s pretty though. I didn’t know there really were places like this.”

“Compared to the hood, for sure. But everyone here is all up in everyone else’s business and everything is so damn old. Greenwood’s like being in a time warp.”

“Are there any stores that have things that are more affordable?” I asked.

“Nah, the whole town is expensive. Rich people don’t care about prices,” she said. “Doesn’t the school freak you out a little?”

“You mean how hard it’s going to be? Yes, I’m a little freaked out about

that.”

“Nah, if they brung you here it’s because you’re a brainiac. I meant the old buildings and the trees. You know what they call Birch Grove? Bitch Grave.”

“Any reason for that?”

“People say the place is haunted. Which is totally stupid, I know. It’s hard not to hate on the rich.”

“Crappy schools have nicknames, too. My last one, City Central, was called Penitentiary Prep, no explanation needed.”

“That’s a good one! At Bitch Grave there was that lady that died a couple of years ago. Is it okay if I leave you at the gate?”

“Sure. Who died?”

“A teacher or maybe a counselor?” Ornetta said. “She jumped from the main building. See you around.”

“See you. Thanks for the lift.”

Although I knew that rich people committed suicide, too, I simply couldn’t comprehend why they couldn’t use their money to get away from their misery, or eliminate the cause of it.

As soon as I got in my cottage, I locked the door and looked around for a place to hide the cash I’d gotten for the clothes. I felt stupid hiding money in my own place, but I would have felt stupider just leaving it anywhere. I put the money in an envelope and slid it in a narrow space behind the washer/dryer, then covered it with lint from the dryer.

That afternoon, I read the student handbook front to back including all the weird provisions about computers and cell phones, which couldn’t be used during the school day. There was a whole list of rules about social networks and online photos.

When evening came I found myself hoping that Jack would visit again and maybe bring his brother. He didn’t, of course. I heated up the leftover pizza and ate in front of the television.

That night I dreamed that I running away from something near the amphitheatre. I tried to scream, but no sound came out of my mouth. Suddenly

the branches of a birch reached down and wound tightly around me and pulled me off the ground and away from the danger. The wind blew and the trees spoke in a rustling, soft voice: *Jane, Jane, you belong to us!*

I awoke tangled in the sheets, my skin damp with sweat, and I wasn't able to sleep well for the rest of the night.

Exhaustion added to my anxiety about starting school, and Sunday lasted forever. Occasionally I went outside and looked up the hill toward the Monroes' house. I tried to fill my day with books and television, but I wasn't used to be alone.

On Monday morning, I was so nervous that I couldn't eat breakfast. My uniform felt uncomfortably snug. "Discreet use of make-up" was allowed at Birch Grove and but I was going to see what other girls wore before wasting money on makeup.

At 8:15, I walked slowly through the grove. The soft rustling of the grove soothed my nerves. I walked along the drive to the school. A stream of expensive cars dropped off girls, and the previous hush of the school was replaced with their excited chatter.

I didn't see any extreme piercings, wild hairstyles, doorknocker earrings, or protruding bellies. "Discreet make-up" seemed to be mascara and lip gloss, although some girls wore more and some wore none at all. Most had their hair down, but there were ponytails, short cuts, and braids.

The students' talked excitedly, but they didn't shriek and scream. The uniforms made everyone blend in, a herd of blue-blazered girls moving in concert to the school entrance.

I followed them into the building and to the gymnasium, which was set up with tables around the perimeter. I stood in line at the W-X-Y-Z table. I got to the front and was about to give my name when the woman there said with a smile, "You're Jane Williams, right? Good morning, Jane!"

I was instantly wary. "How did you know my name?"

"We study all the new girls' files and photos so we can make them feel welcome."

I didn't feel welcome. I felt exposed.

The woman's nametag said *Mrs. Danielson, Parent Volunteer*. She shuffled through a file box and pulled out a glossy navy folder with the school crest on the cover and a sticker with my name.

"Williams, Jane. These are your classes for the first term and here's today's schedule and a map. After you sign up for your extracurriculars, you can have your photo taken for your student I.D.," she said. "We have a Refreshment Break in the cafeteria, and the headmistress will give her welcome speech in the auditorium. Well, it's all here if you forget."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Certainly, dear. Next!"

I found a clear space against one wall and leaned there to read the contents of the folder. My schedule listed Honors Chemistry, Trigonometry, Western Classical Literature, Latin IV, and Western Culture and Civilization. There was also something called Z Block which I could fill from a variety of courses.

I scanned the optional courses and eliminated all the ones that wouldn't work for me. I didn't have a camera for photography, couldn't act for drama, didn't play an instrument for band, and had never learned to draw well for art.

I decided to take Expository Writing so I could polish up my essay writing skills for college. I wove through the crowd to the sign-up table. A poster board displayed the school newspaper, *The Birch Grove Weekly*, and cheesy photos of students busy in a classroom.

"Hello, Joan, right?" said the teacher at the table. She was almost as small as me, dressed in black slacks and a pale blue cotton button-down shirt, and a bright turquoise scarf. She wore a daring slash of ruby red lipstick.

"Jane Williams, ma'am."

She laughed a little and said, "I have the *worst* time trying to remember the names of all the new students. I'm Ms. Chu, the journalism teacher." "Are you interested in our newspaper?"

"I thought this was expository writing."

"Yes, that's what journalism is: expository writing. We'd be happy to

have you on staff. Have you ever worked on a newspaper before?”

I’d barely even read one. “No, ma’am.”

“Then you’re in for a treat,” she said, flashing a smile that didn’t convince me. “Our girls become a real team here.” Ms. Chu handed me a pen and the clipboard.

I took them without signing. “Maybe there’s another class that will help me with essays.”

“There are creative writing classes, but you sound like you’re interested in something more practical,” she said. “What are your career plans?”

“I’d like to go into forensic science,” I said.

“Really?” Ms. Chu smiled and looked interested. “Which field of forensic science? Are you interested in being a medical examiner? That can be gruesome, not to discourage you, but I can’t deal with anything gory.”

“No, I’m thinking about being a crime lab analyst. It would all be lab work, but I’d have to write reports, too.”

“Journalism and forensic science have things in common. You’ve got to be objective and accurate and present facts,” she said. “Reporting has tighter deadlines, but it’s exciting to put the paper to bed! That’s what we call it when we meet our deadline and go to press.”

I didn’t see how there could be anything to write about at Birch Grove. Ms. Chu seemed nice enough, though, and none of the other options interested me, so I signed the sheet.

“See you soon, Jane!”

“Bye, Ms. Chu.”

Next I needed to get my photo for an I.D. I blinked when the camera flashed, and the photographer said, “Let’s take another.” In fact, everyone here seemed unnaturally *nice*. I couldn’t tell if it was good manners or if people were just happier when they didn’t have a lot to stress about.

I had almost half-an-hour before the welcome speech. I went to the restroom to delay having to face other students. After washing my hands for too long and smoothing down my hair, I forced myself to the cafeteria for

Refreshments Break.

Chapter 5

“Students are expected to behave in a manner that honors Birch Grove’s standards: to treat their peers with kindness and understanding and to offer support.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

The cafeteria was entirely different from the rundown, sprawling chaos at City Central. It was much smaller and tables were arranged in clusters. At one end was lounge with rugs, potted plants and sofas. Between old black-and-white photos of the school were student-made posters extolling excellence, honor and duty.

Girls mingled in groups and I felt their eyes on me. I almost wished a big jerk would assign a seat to me.

Tables with food and drinks were set along a wall. Another table had real glasses, real plates, and pitchers of juice. I got a plate of fruit salad and a glass of juice.

“Hi, Jane.”

I turned to see a brunette girl smiling at me.

She was the one who’d been at the drugstore wearing the long skirt. Her shining brown hair was pulled back into a sleek ponytail, and small pearls shone in her earlobes. Her pretty hazel eyes were framed with long, dark lashes.

“Hello,” I said.

“We met when you were in town with Mrs. Monroe. I’m Hattie, Harriet Tyler” she said with a smile. She was much taller than me, about 5’8, and slender, but with curves. “I’m third year, too, and Mrs. Monroe asked me to show you around. Come meet the crew.”

I followed her reluctantly to the lounge area, where older girls were hanging out. Hattie introduced me to a circle of girls, who were vaguely polite.

The only one who seemed curious was a beautiful, plump girl named Mary

Violet, who asked, “Are you living in the gardener’s cottage?” Her hair was a cloud of silver-blond curls that looked striking against her golden tan skin.

“I moved in last week.”

“It must be fabulous to live in your own place,” she said. She turned her blue eyes toward the ceiling and said, “If I lived alone, I would have many passionate affairs with mature *men*!”

The other girls laughed and someone said, “You’d have a short commute.”

“Yes! I would rise from my lush silk sheets late after a night of untamed sexual coitus, bid my lover adieu, and then I would rush breathlessly to class as the last bell rang. My hair would be tousled beautifully.” Mary Violet waved her arm, sloshing juice over the rim of her glass.

“You mean you’d be a disaster and wouldn’t have the common courtesy to shower,” said a lean girl with coffee-dark skin and huge glasses that magnified her almond-shaped eyes. Her voice had a pretty lilt, and I wondered where she was from.

“My hair would look sexy and why would I need a shower?” Mary Violet asked innocently. “Bebe said she got up only ten minutes before class. She was hardly ever a mess. Well, there was that time—”

The group was suddenly quiet and Hattie shot a look around at her friends. “We don’t need to gossip about her.”

Mary Violet pouted. “Why can’t I mention Bebe? She’s the one who ditched us after promising we’d all graduate and go to the Ivys together.”

“We don’t want Jane to feel like a replacement,” Hattie said with a calm smile and then she turned to me. “Bebe was also a scholarship student here. She moved overseas at the end of last year.”

So I was brought in as a replacement for another junior.

“And she’s never written to one of us, not even me!” Mary Violet said. “That is utterly rude. All our slumber parties and cram sessions meant nothing, nothing, nothing to her. She was all, talk to you never!”

“Stop being so self-centered,” Hattie said. “Bebe’s too busy. Mrs. Monroe said she’s heard from her twice this summer and she really does miss us.”

Mary Violet scowled. “Where did her mysterious uncle come from anyway? She said she didn’t have any relatives.”

I wanted to get away from the uncomfortable discussion about family, but a cluster of girls laughing in the aisle blocked my way.

The lean girl, whose name was Constance, said, “Everyone has relatives, Mary Violet. We don’t appear from out of thin air. You might know that if you paid attention during biology.”

This was enough to divert the girls onto Mary Violet’s study habits.

Hattie remembered that I was there and said, “How’s your class schedule?”

“It’s fine, except that I was supposed to be in AP Chem, but it says Honors Chem on my schedule.”

“It counts as the same, but Birch Grove doesn’t offer courses that ‘teach to the test,’” Hattie answered. “Honors chem is more in-depth and ex---”

“Exceptional classes for exceptional girls!” the others said together and laughed.

Mary Violet looked at me and said, “The joke is that we laugh like we don’t believe it, but we totally believe it.”

“Well, *you* are exceptional,” Constance said. “Exceptionally absurd.”

“You’re exceptionally no-fun,” Mary Violet retorted and stuck out her tongue.

I tried to step away as the girls teased one another, but Hattie kept me in the conversation by addressing comments to me. I stayed with her group as they left the cafeteria and went to the auditorium for the welcome speech.

“Juniors get balcony privileges,” Hattie told me and we went upstairs and into the first rows of the balcony.

“You can see everything from up here,” Mary Violet said. “I’m so glad I’m not a lowly underclassman. It’s tragic we can’t haze them and make them grovel like the worms they are.”

“Mary Violet, you’re the most appalling girl I’ve ever known,” Constance said. She pushed her glasses up her narrow nose and the corner of her mouth went up as if she was trying not to smile.

“Can’t I ever say anything?” Mary Violet answered huffily. “What about freedom of speech?”

Hattie shook her head. “Mrs. Monroe always says, ‘Freedom of speech is not freedom *from* thought.’”

Mary Violet looked as if she was still deciding on a response when a bell chimed and the auditorium grew silent. Mrs. Monroe walked in front of the blue velvet curtains to the podium at the right of the stage. “Good morning, young ladies.”

As one, the students answered, “Good morning, Mrs. Monroe.”

“Let us rise for the Pledge of Allegiance.”

After we recited the pledge, Mrs. Monroe said, “Miss Cavanaugh will lead us in the school song.”

The headmistress stepped aside and an elderly woman in a boxy gray suit came from the wings and stood center stage. She blew a little round whistle and then began leading the students in song:

*“The trees of Birch Grove
Will always protect us
In sadness and trial
They support and shield us
In victory and hope
Their branches dance joyous*

*Let us be like a birch wood
In wind bend, but not break
Our hearts true as our girlhood
To all you have taught us
To live for the truth
To act for the good
Hail, Birch Grove hail!”*

As the voices rose in unison, I felt a chill run down my spine. This was how I wanted to be: in a wind bend, but not break, to live for the truth, to act for the good.

“Thank you, Miss Cavanaugh,” Mrs. Monroe said as she returned to the podium. “When I look out at all of you, I feel honored to be the headmistress of this exceptional school and all of you exceptional girls.”

She paused to let everyone steep in her praise. “I know you have come back to Birch Grove rested, refreshed and ready to meet the academic and social challenges of this year...if anyone is ever ready to leave summer behind.” There was a wave of laughter. “But if education is not a vacation, neither should it be a chore. This year will be invigorating and enlightening.

“It will also be intellectually demanding and sometimes emotionally trying. However, your teachers, counselors and I always have our doors open to you. We’re interested in what you have to say, and we’re here to help whenever you need it.

“I hope you will arrive every day eager to learn and share, to grow, to become the very best you can be. We are dedicated to nurturing your moral and spiritual growth, too, so that you go into the world as a responsible, well-rounded human being.”

She waited for a several seconds and then she began speaking in a low voice that grew stronger with each phrase: “Because I *believe* in your intelligence, talent, and goodness. I *believe* you are exceptional. I *believe* in you. In return I ask you to trust in *yourselves*. Trust in *goodness*. Trust in *Birch Grove*.”

She nodded her head and the students began clapping and I was clapping, too, and when they stood and clapped louder, I clapped harder, too. It was as if someone had uncovered my long-buried embers of hope, and instead of being gray and cold, they glowed alive once more.

When we were dismissed, everyone seemed energized.

“She’s amazing,” I said to Hattie.

“I know. She always makes me feel as if I could do anything.”

“She has that *je ne sais quoi*,” Mary Violet observed and turned to me and added, “That’s French for ‘I’m totally clueless.’ French is the language of *amore*, which is Italian, another language of love. What language are you taking?”

“Third-year Latin. It helps with scientific terms.”

“Do you want to be a doctor?” Hattie asked.

“I’m interested in forensic science.”

Mary Violet nodded. “Good. I can come to you when I need details for my murder mysteries.”

Constance said, “Mary Violet’s claims she’s going to be a writer.”

“Why do you find that so difficult to believe?” Mary Violet demanded.

“Because you are the sissiest female in existence and I can’t see how you plan to write gory stories,” Constance said.

“That’s why it’s called *creative* writing, because you make it all up. Let’s do lunch.”

They began walking toward the parking lot and I turned to go back to my cottage. Hattie came back, hooked her arm through mine and said, “You have to come with us. Our treat, as a welcome to Birch Grove.”

“You don’t have to babysit me.”

“It’s not babysitting. It’s just...” she shrugged. “It’s hard changing schools and figuring things out. I’d want someone to give me the four-one-one.”

“Okay,” I said, thinking that I’d like to know more about the students.

As I walked with them to Hattie’s gleaming red BMW, a stunning tall girl with long, honey blond waves crossed the parking lot in front of us. She saw our group and said, “Hi, sad little juniors.”

“Hi, Catalina,” Hattie’s group responded.

Catalina’s amber eyes settle on me. “You’re new. Who are you?”

“I’m Jane Williams. I transferred in.”

“She’s living in the gardener’s cottage,” Mary Violet said.

Catalina frowned. “What happened to Mrs. Monroe’s special project?”

“If you mean Bebe, she went to Europe,” Hattie said and opened the car door. “See you later, Cat.”

“TTYN.” The tall girl said and walked off with a swing of her hips.

When we got in the car, I asked, “Who was that?”

Mary Violet answered, “Catalina Sachs-Montes, the Argentine princess. Not that she’s really a princess. She just acts like one. She speaks five languages, including Russian. Her little sister, Adriana, is starting this year. She’s much nicer. She had class after me at Miss Harlot’s School of Croquet.”

“Mary Violet means Miss Charlotte’s School of Ballet,” Constance said. “That’s where we met when I was six and moved to Greenwood from Barbados. MV was a roly-poly thing stuffed in a pink tutu and everyone else was wearing leotards.”

“I’ve always had a fabulous sense of style,” Mary Violet said.

Hattie started the car and maneuvered it through the students, to the street. “Why are we always talking about you, Mary Violet?” she said. “Jane, Catalina’s a senior and she’s very...very Catalina. Don’t let her get to you.”

“She’s one of those foreigners who thinks Americans are gauche, which is French for oh-my-gawd-how-tacky,” Mary Violet said. “Unlike Constance, who thinks Americans are silly.”

“Not all Americans, only you,” Constance said.

Catalina’s hostility seemed a lot more normal than my companions’ friendliness, none of whom were looking out for cops as Hattie drove us off campus.

I said, “I thought you had to be 18 to drive other teens.”

“Oh, no one pays attention to that here,” Hattie said. “It’s such a small town and everyone knows everybody.”

Mary Violet said, “My grandparents let my mother drive when she was fourteen. She was an excellent driver and hardly ever got in accidents. She did run over a possum once and we can make her cry about it if we pour her a second tippie of Dubonnet and ask her about its sweet furry paws and darling whiskered snout.”

I tried to remember *dubonnay* so I could look it up later.

“You don’t,” Constance said.

“We absolutely do! My father is the worst. He always talks about the heartbroken possum looking for his dead possum wife. Sometimes I recite my poem, *Requiem for a Marsupial*.”

Mary Violet threw out her arms as far as she could in the confines of the car and intoned:

*“Oh, once you gamboled happily in a wood
Living, loving, gathering food...”*

Constance said, “*Food* doesn’t rhyme with *wood*,” but we were all laughing.

Mary Violet continued:

*“You cross the road exploring afar,
When you are crushed by a careless car!
Alas, poor possum, you draw a last breath,
A Birch Grove girl has crushed you to death!”*

She bowed her head.

“Brilliant as always, MV,” Hattie said. To me she said, “As long as you’re wearing your uniform or let people know that you go to Birch Grove, they’re okay. If bigger problems come up, Mrs. Monroe can take care of them. It’s easiest for everyone that way.”

Hattie took us to a small café called The Tea Stop, but the girls called it The Free Pop and explained that Birch Grove girls always got a free soda with meals.

When I picked up one of the laminated menus, Hattie said, “They don’t actually serve anything that’s on the menu. You have to order from the chalk board. The favorite is crab sandwiches on toasted white bread and green salad.”

“I always get the cup of soup,” Mary Violet said. “Salad gets stuck in your teeth.”

Constance said, “Soup gets dropped on your boobs.”

“At least I have boobs,” Mary Violet snipped back.

“Or you are one.”

I would have preferred to listen to their conversation, but the girls asked me questions about my old school and my background.

Mary Violet’s eyes went wide when I told them that my mother had died and my father’s whereabouts were unknown. “How tragic! You could hire a detective to find him. Think of how excited he’d be to find out that you’re attending a top school. You’re the *crème de la crème*. That’s French for cream of the cream.”

“I don’t know anything about him,” I said uneasily.

Hattie said, “Jane is doing okay on her own and we’ll be her family. She

won't be able to get rid of us!"

"Hattie," I said. "It's okay. You don't have to include me on things."

"Yes, we do," Mary Violet popped up. "Mrs. Monroe asked us to and I want her to give me a letter of recommendation for college. She only gives out a few every year."

"Mary Violet," Hattie said with a hard look.

"What?" the blonde girl answered with an obstinate glance at Hattie. Then she looked at me. "What you don't know is that we're all so bored with each other in Greenwood that we're thrilled to meet anyone from the outside world."

"I might not be as exciting as you think."

"I'm not doing it for the letter of recommendation," Constance said.

"Well, you like everyone," Mary Violet said critically. "Let's have a sleepover at the gardener's cottage! We can watch movies and tell ghost stories!"

Hattie shook her head at Hattie and looked at me. "I'm not doing it for the letter either—"

"Because you already know you're getting one, Headmistress's pet," Mary Violet cut in.

"What about it?" Hattie said. "So, Jane, we're happy to show you around and if we all get along, great. If not, that's okay, too. Deal?"

I shrugged. "Deal."

Hattie smiled and said, "Have you met Mrs. Monroe's family yet?"

"I had dinner at their house. They were really nice."

"Especially one of them," Mary Violet said and pinched Hattie's arm. "Your loverrrrrr!"

Hattie rolled her eyes and said, "We've only gone out a few times."

I had no reason to feel disappointed. Of course, Lucky would already have a girlfriend and the girlfriend would be someone like Hattie. "Lucky seems like a cool guy."

"Not Lucky," Hattie answered. "His brother, Jacob."

"Jack? Really?"

"He's really smart and talented," Hattie said. "And mature."

“Why do you think he didn’t go off to college?” Mary Violet asked. “He’s psychotically in lust with Hattie. There’s something terribly intriguing about him, like he’s sexually depraved or something.”

Constance sighed and said, “Mary Violet, if we cut open your skull, I have a feeling all we’d find would be hair products and chick flicks.”

“And silk lingerie and chocolate truffles!” Mary Violet said and laughed.

Constance asked me, “What do you think about our no-tech policy?”

“It’s interesting,” I said.

She grinned and said, “Interesting like completely crazy and antiquated, right?” She reached into her bag and pulled out a silvery blue phone. “Let’s all sync up. What’s your number?”

“I only have the phone in the cottage.”

“Oh, we’ve already got that,” Mary Violet said. “It’s Bebe’s old number. She didn’t have a real phone either. Mrs. Monroe is viciously anti-TSGs and we have to sit through an assembly every year about how they’re destroying civilization and how it’s more important to live life than text it, blah, blah, blah.”

“Do you mean STDs?” I asked.

“TSGs is trendy status gadgets,” Hattie said. “TSAs is trendy status accessories.”

“I like labels, because they tell you whether something is good or not,” Mary Violet said. “What I want is a TSB.”

Constance and Hattie looked puzzled for a few seconds and then said together, “Trendy Status Boyfriend?”

“Yes! I’m drawing up a list of candidates and starting with A’s for Ashton.”

“I’d love to hear them, but I’ve got to get home,” Hattie said.

When I looked up at the tea-kettle shaped clock on the wall I was surprised to see that two hours had passed.

Hattie drove us back to Birch Grove parking lot, and the girls shouted goodbyes. As I walked back to the cottage, I thought of how the wealthy expected and received special treatment with the same blasé attitude that City

Central kids expected and received violence and misery.

Chapter 6

“Our curriculum is evaluated each year in consideration of the school’s philosophy, student needs, current state education requirements, and college and university requirements.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

ON THE first day of classes at Birch Grove, I joined the other students filling up the hallways and found my locker. Since I was an upper classman, I got the top row. I twirled the combination, opened the clean green metal locker, and put my books inside. I tacked a photo of the Alphas and my class schedule on the corkboard inside the door.

The first bell rang, lockers clanged shut, and I headed to the day’s first period, which was homeroom.

I was glad to see Hattie sitting in the classroom. She waved me over and I sat in the chair beside her.

A man with short graying hair and glasses stood at the front, looking over papers on the broad oak desk. On the blackboard, he’d written “Mr. Albert Mason.” He was also my chemistry teacher.

When the bell rang at 8:30, he said, “Good morning, students. I’m Mr. Mason, your homeroom teacher.” He had a pleasant voice and a wide smile. He wore a navy blue jacket, a white shirt, a navy and maroon tie, and khaki trousers. He was thin all over except for a small belly. While he wasn’t handsome at all, there was something very likeable about his intelligent expression.

“Let’s go around and make sure everyone is here.” He read a roster aloud, and when he came to “Jane Williams,” he looked up at me and smiled.

“Here,” I said.

“You’re our new transfer student. Good to have you at Birch Grove, Jane, and I’m happy to have you in honors chem.”

“Thank you, sir.”

As he finished the rest of roll call, I looked out the window at the greenery beyond. None of this felt real.

Mr. Mason picked up a sheet of paper and said, “Let’s get to the announcements.” He went through the list of notices and deadlines for various forms. I took the handouts for upcoming events. I was used to keeping track of school information and deadlines since Mrs. Richards didn’t care.

As we left the classroom, Hattie said, “What do you have next?”

“Western Classical Literature.”

“Me, too. I wonder what else we have together.” We compared schedules and found out that we were also in the same history course. “I love learning about the past,” she said. “Whereof what’s past is prologue.”

“Is that a quote from something?”

“It’s Shakespeare,” she said. “It means that what’s happened in the past determines what will happen in the future. That’s why we’ve got to know history in order to understand the present and predict what will happen in the future.”

“But whoever writes history puts his spin on it, so it’s always distorted.”

“You’re very cynical,” Hattie said.

“I’m realistic.”

We’d arrived in the classroom. There were only ten students in the class and the teacher had us put our desks in a circle. When she handed out the syllabus, it was worse than I’d thought: Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, readings from the Bible, Chaucer, Milton and Shakespeare.

The teacher, Mrs. Baybee, spoke in a flat drone that made me zone out. Today’s class was 90 minutes, and after 15 minutes, I gave up trying to understand what she was talking about. I took down notes that made no sense to me. I never felt so stupid in my life.

I dragged my feet to my next class, Honors Chem, thinking that I’d return the rest of my clothes and cram in tutoring so I’d have more cash in case I flunked out.

Mary Violet was sitting at one of the tall black lab tables in the third-floor classroom, sighing and staring out the window to trees beyond.

I sat at her table and said, “You didn’t tell me you were in honors chem.”

Her bright smile made me feel better. “Yes, I’m a Chem Ho, too. My parents are totally draconian and make me take all this math and science because they’ve got some delusion that I should be a doctor. I wish I had nothing but English classes.”

“I’ve got the opposite problem. I just had Western Classical Lit with Mrs. Baybee. I couldn’t make any sense of what she said, even if I cared about the subject, which I don’t at all.”

“I would be mortified if you were a cultural barbarian, Jane,” she said. “That’s exactly what my mother tells my father when he complains about the symphony, though she doesn’t call him Jane. Mrs. Baybee is renowned for being boring. Her voice always makes me think of a fly buzzing somewhere in the room.”

“I thought it was me.”

“Oh, no, she’s always voted Teacher Most Likely to Inspire a Coma in our secret annual poll. Why don’t you transfer to something more interesting?”

“What else is there?”

“I’m in *Civility and Propriety of the Victorian Woman* because I want to write fat, juicy historicals with lots of mayhem and I need to learn all about fainting and corsets. But that’s at the end of the day and you’d have to shuffle your whole schedule. Constance is in *Night Terrors* and that’s the same block as Western Classical Lit.”

“What’s *Night Terrors* about?”

“It’s totally fabu. Fabulous to the nth degree,” she said. “See, I also *parlez* geek! It’s the only class Mrs. Monroe teaches. I’m taking it next semester.”

Mr. Mason came to the front of the room, the bell rang, and class began.

I felt more confident now that I had a heavy text in front of me. I looked around the room at the shelves of specimens in display jars, and racks of test tubes. An old cloth banner of the periodic table was stretched on a standing wooden frame.

I’d memorized it once, and now I looked at the groups: alkali metals,

alkaline earth metals, lanthanides, actinides, transition metals, poor metals, metalloids, nonmetals, halogens, and noble gasses.

These are the things that made up the world, and even humble elements, like soft and gray potassium, could have fierce power.

I glanced out the third-floor window through the trees and toward town. I wondered about Orneta's story of a woman dying at this school. Who had she been and where had she fallen?

Mr. Mason began talking about our curriculum and I opened a wire bound notebook. I'd already drawn a vertical line through each page. On the left side, I took notes. Later, when I reviewed my notes, I would add details on the right side of the page.

Despite Mary Violet's complaints about chemistry, she was writing diligently with a fountain pen that had violet ink. She wrote in a beautiful script with big loops and swirls. While Mr. Mason was handing out the week's assignments, she drew a small flower on the page border.

"It's a violet," she whispered to me. "My trademark."

I didn't know why I found myself liking Mary Violet so much. Although she was silly, I couldn't help returning her bright smiles. I liked her pink and golden prettiness and the way she blurted out anything that came to mind.

Mr. Mason explained everything clearly and paused for questions, which he answered easily. When class was over and we were leaving, he said, "May I have a word, Jane?"

"Yes, Mr. Mason?" I moved to the side of his desk.

"I know we go at a fast pace in this class and I want you to know that I'm here to help if you find yourself getting swamped."

"Thanks. I think I can keep up in chem, but I'd like to transfer out of my Western Civilization Lit course."

"Is there a problem with it?"

"I can't really connect to the subject. Mary Violet suggested Mrs. Monroe's nightmare course."

"*Night Terrors*," he said with a smile. "I'm surprised the headmistress

didn't sign you up for that. It's an excellent course. I'll talk to the Registrar at my break, and you can check in at her office after school today."

"I really appreciate it. Thank you, sir."

Mary Violet was waiting in the hall for me. "He's valiant and tragic," she said. "What did he want?"

Since she used *tragic* the way some people use *like*, I didn't take her seriously. "Just checking with me. He's going to talk to the Registrar so I can transfer to *Night Terrors*."

We both had lunch break, and we walked down the stairs together. The girls heading up walked on the right of the staircase, and the girls heading down walked on the left and no one blocked traffic to hassle others or conduct drug deals.

Mary Violet told me that they usually went off-campus for lunch. "We go to the Free Pop or get something from the deli in the market. Everything else in town is too slooow. The town is too slooow and on days with long-blocks, we eat in the café-teria and do the salad bar."

"There aren't any fast-food places around?"

"Oh, no, my mother would shriek at the horror. The Birch Grove Alumnae Club makes the mayor's life miserable every time there's a rumor that one might come in."

"I'd rather use my cafeteria pass anyway. What's good?"

"The salad stuff is always fresh, and the pasta's good. Everything's homemade and organic since the alumnae are terrified that we'll have mutant babies if we eat anything with pesticides."

"You sound as if you want a mutant baby," I said as Mary Violet and I served ourselves small plates of salad.

"I'd prefer an alien baby with soft fur, like a kitten." Her big blue eyes opened wide and she said, "Quick! Tell me what you're thinking."

I smiled and said, "In my old school they would say, *You hella crazy, bitch!*" which made her laugh.

We went to the hot entrees counter and I got something called pasta

primavera, which was noodles and vegetables, warm bread, and an oatmeal cranberry cookie.

I hesitated and Mary Violet turned toward me and said, “Come on, slow poke,” and led me to a table near the lounge area. “This is reserved for juniors, although a few underclassmen might be allowed if we decide they’re worthy. Naturally, I got to sit here last year even though Catalina had a fit.”

Hattie had a later lunch period, but Constance was already sitting there. I took the seat at the end of the table. It was enough for me to have a hot meal and listen to the others talk.

I must have looked puzzled at some of their slang, because Constance said, “Everything here has a nickname. The main building, Birch Grove Hall, is B-Gro, and the other building, Founder’s Arts Building, is Flounder.”

The other students offered other definitions. The gymnasium was the Gin Nauseum, and the Founders Memorial sports fields were called Fo-Mem.

Constance looked over my schedule and told Mary Violet, “She’s got Ms. McSqueak for Trig.”

“Oh, you’ll love her,” Mary Violet told me. “Especially when she says hypotenuse. You have to count how many times she says it over the semester.”

“We have a pool and it only costs a dollar to enter,” Constance said. “Whoever’s assigned the front right desk has to keep it, and then there’s a prize to whoever guesses the closest.”

Mary Violet said, “My mother won when she had Ms. McSqueak. She guessed 217 and she was right. We’re all so proud of her.”

I found out what they meant when I went to trigonometry. My teacher, Ms. McPeak, was an ancient, eccentric woman, who gesticulated wildly and was covered with chalk dust. Her reedy voice broke upward on the last syllable of every word, especially hypotenuse. I counted four times and wrote it on the corner of my notebook cover.

Then I had history. As I’d told Hattie, it wasn’t my favorite subject, but at least the tests didn’t ask for personal interpretation.

When the bell rang at the end of the day, I felt glad to have made it through.

I can do this, I thought. I put my book in my Birch Grove tote and went to the Registrar's office.

The Registrar took care of the three girls ahead of me. When it was my turn, I asked to change classes.

"Hmm," she said sternly. "Mr. Mason talked to me about that. Students reserve their space in that seminar one or two years ahead of time."

"But I just transferred in, ma'am," I said. "If there's a space..."

"There's no space," she said, closing the subject.

A voice behind me asked, "Jane, how was your day?"

I turned to see Mrs. Monroe. "Hello, ma'am. It was good, thank you."

"Can I help you with anything?"

The Registrar, who'd been so unhelpful, suddenly said, "Miss Williams wanted to transfer into your class, and I explained that it was full."

"You're quite right -- the class is full, but I think we can make room for one more. Would you please handle the paperwork, Mrs. Dodson? Thank you so much."

"Of course, Headmistress."

As the Registrar completed the transfer and printed out a new schedule for me, Mrs. Monroe said, "I'll have Lucian call you to arrange weekly tutoring sessions. Sometimes we can schedule them in early evening, and I'd like it if you could stay for dinner with us."

"That would be nice," I said, but I was thinking, *money and Lucky and good food*.

If this was a fairy tale, then Mrs. Monroe was my fairy godmother, all light and kindness, watching me and able to wave her wand and make any problem vanish.

My homework assignments kept me busy through the evening. I spread all my books and papers on the floor and worked there. I made a scrambled egg sandwich for dinner and reviewed the first chapter in my Latin text.

When darkness had fallen, I went outside and looked toward the Monroes' house, thinking that I might spot their lights through the grove. The black

splotches on the white-barked trees looked like pale, amorphous faces. The more I stared at them, the more they seemed to be gazing back at me.

I found myself wondering what they would tell me if they could, and then I realized how crazy that was. They were only trees.

Chapter 7

“Each student is assigned a locker at the beginning of the academic year. Neither this locker or the combination to the lock should be shared with anyone, nor may a student change her locker without permission from the office of student affairs.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

I FELT optimistic about Latin until I walked into the classroom and saw Catalina arranging her books on a desk and then taking a silver pen out of a small leather case. Her long tawny hair hung in lustrous waves down her back and small gold earrings glinted on her earlobes.

“Please sit at your *assigned* seat,” said the teacher, who was standing at the front of the room and looking right at me. She was a sturdy woman with a cropped brush of hair the color of a dead lawn and brownish-yellow eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses.

I looked at the desks and to my dismay I saw *Jane Williams* on a piece of paper atop the desk beside Catalina’s. The beautiful girl glanced at me without smiling. I said a low “Hello” to Catalina and took my seat.

The moment the bell sounded, the teacher, Ms. Ingerson, said, “*Salvete, discipuli. Latine colloquamur.*” Hello, students. Let’s speak in Latin. She put us through a series of rapid drills.

I could barely keep up, and I kept flipping through my dictionary, trying to translate Ms. Ingerson’s instructions. When the bell rang an hour later, I felt as if my brain had tried to run a marathon and collapsed half-way through.

Catalina gathered her things and stood gracefully, watching me as I quickly scribbled down what I could understand of our homework assignment.

When I finished writing, Catalina said, “Maybe this isn’t the right place for you.”

There were times when you couldn’t avoid a confrontation. Picking up my books, I said, “If you’ve got a problem with me, guess what? I don’t care. You

don't even know me."

"I know you are the headmistress's new scholarship student, some poor little homeless thing." Her accent was barely discernable, only evident in the rich rounded vowels. "Harriet has adopted you, no?"

I stared up at the taller girl. "She's friendly, but no one's 'adopted' me. I'm an emancipated minor."

"Hattie was friendly to the other scholarship girl, too," she said critically. "Another *pobrecita* like you."

Catalina didn't need to know that Mrs. Monroe had asked Hattie and her friends to be nice. "The world is as full of poor girls as it is of nasty snobs."

I was walking away when I heard Catalina say, "Perhaps the world is, but not Birch Grove. Just as one poor girl disappears another fills her place."

Catalina's level of bitchiness was nothing compared to the homegirls at City Central, who would stab someone with a long hat pin while her friends used a camera-phone to record the good times. Five minutes later, I forgot her comments.

When Constance invited me to go off-campus with them, I said I was staying on-campus. I went to the cafeteria, picked up my lunch, and approached the table that I'd sat at before. I watched their reaction to see if I should move on somewhere else.

The girls who were already there looked up at me and smiled, carrying on their conversations in a perfectly normal way. A girl from Chem Ho said, "Have a seat," so I did. We talked about the work load and tests. Her older sister had taken the course and she offered to share notes.

The last class of the day was Expository Writing. The classroom was in the Founder's Arts Building, aka Flounder. I went through the main door, but I couldn't find the classroom. I dashed upstairs and down again before I asked another student.

"Go outside and around to the back," she said. "The only way to get to that classroom is by a door leading downstairs."

"Thanks. I never would have found it."

“That’s why this hall is called Flounder,” she said.

I got to the class room out of breath and a few minutes late. Ms. Chu gave me a nod toward an empty chair and continued to take roll. The first thing I noticed was a row of computers on tables against the wall. So there were exceptions to the no-computers for class work rule.

Wooden file cabinets lined another wall and framed copies of the *Birch Grove Weekly* hung from the walls, along with a poster displaying editing symbols.

Ms. Chu reviewed editing symbols and the newspaper production schedule. The wooden file cabinets held the archives, the files of every article for the *Birch Grove Weekly*.

“Always make a hard copy,” she said. “Your assignments aren’t counted as complete until they are filed in the archives.”

Ms. Chu talked about reporting as “the four w’s: when, where, what, why,” which seemed pretty straight-forward.

“Our first issue comes out in two weeks,” Mrs. Chu announced. “The seniors will be writing the op-eds.”

Ms. Chu saw me beginning to raise my hand. “Op-ed is short for an opinion dash editorial column. You’ll catch on to the jargon soon enough. Your first story is due Monday,” she said. “Five hundred to seven-hundred-and-fifty words, third-person. Pick a topic about the upcoming academic year. Quote at least two people, and if *any* of your facts are incorrect, you *will* fail the assignment. I don’t have to tell you to proofread, now do I?”

Why couldn’t teachers just tell you what they wanted so you wouldn’t screw up the assignment? I wrote down Ms. Chu’s office hours so I could check on a topic with her.

When I returned to the cottage, the phone was ringing. Having my own phone was as exciting as having my own bathroom. I grabbed it and said, “Hello!”

“Hey, Jane? It’s Lucky.”

I took a deep breath and tried to sound calm even though my nerves pitched

my voice unnaturally high. “Oh, hi, Lucky.”

“How’s it going?” His voice was lighter than Jack’s and didn’t have that sardonic edge. “School okay?”

“It’s good. I’m taking *Night Terrors* with your mom.”

“Everyone loves that class. Okay, you know that tutoring thing? Chemistry? My mom says I should start it right away and not fall behind,” he said. “I can come over there on Saturday around noon if that’s okay.”

“That would be great,” I said too fast. “I mean, I’m available then.”

“Okay, see you then.”

“See you.”

I hung up and stood there thinking, *Lucky and me*.

There were things that I knew. When a car turns a corner, burning rubber, duck down behind something solid. When the cops ask if anyone saw anything, say nothing. When you get on a downtown bus, take a seat by a badass, because no one will bother him. If you have to walk home late, stay away from dark doorways.

But there were so many things I didn’t know, like how regular people behaved, what families were like, how to live without caution dictating my actions. And I didn’t know how to be cheerful and outgoing, or how to act when I was alone with a gorgeous guy.

My imagination raced at the thought of Lucky’s smile, his face, his body, the wink he’d given me, the smell of him, the feel of his breath against my cheek.

I knew absolutely and without any doubt that girls like me never got guys like Lucky -- but I could still dream. That night in my own bed, I thought about Lucky and let my hands explore my lonely, unloved body.

THE NEXT DAY Constance and I had Mrs. Monroe’s *Night Terrors*. The headmistress stood in front of us, in a simple long-sleeved white blouse and straight navy skirt. She held a thick book with a dark maroon leather cover and said, “Let’s begin with a poem written in 1748 by Heinrich August Ossenfelder. It’s called *Der Vampire*.”

She waited until the room was completely silent and then she recited the poem:

*“And as softly thou art sleeping
To thee shall I come creeping
And thy life's blood drain away.
And so shalt thou be trembling
For thus shall I be kissing
And death's threshold thou' it be crossing
With fear, in my cold arms.
And last shall I thee question
Compared to such instruction
What are a mother's charms?”*

Inexplicably, though I did not understand the poem, a chill ran through me. I looked around at the other students and saw their spellbound expressions.

Mrs. Monroe opened her hands, letting go of the book, and it fell with a loud slap against the floor. Many of the girls jumped in their seats and several laughed nervously.

Mrs. Monroe smiled and said, “Does everything that goes bump in the night have a nasty bite?” and we laughed more comfortably.

“Why does every society, every culture have stories about monsters, such as those that drink blood? The universality of these tales says something about our own humanity, but what? Are we afraid of what is outside lurking in the dark, or do we fear the darkness of our own souls?”

Her comments made me think of the noises I heard at night. It was as if *something* was out there. Why wasn't I afraid then?

We went through the poem line by line, and I discovered it was about a man threatening to give a vampire's kiss to a pure maiden. At the end, he cruelly taunts her with her lost innocence.

I brooded on the poem through the discussion that followed about the symbolism of blood in literature. When someone mentioned menstrual blood, I expected giggling and rude comments, but the students were serious as they made associations between fertility and blood, the penetration of a bite and coitus. They even used that word, coitus, which I'd never heard anyone my age use.

“Thus, life, death, blood, sex, innocence and knowledge all come together

in these two brief stanzas,” said Mrs. Monroe. “Please read Johann Ludwig Tieck’s *Wake Not the Dead* for our next class.”

The bell sounded and we began leaving the classroom. Mrs. Monroe smiled at me as I passed her desk. “Did you like the class?” she asked.

“It’s definitely more interesting than Western Classical Lit.” I paused and said, “The poem’s disturbing.”

“It is, isn’t it, even after more than two centuries,” she said cheerfully. “I’ve always been fascinated in our perception of those things outside the norm.”

“Jack told me you read fairy tales to them every night.”

“Lucien wasn’t interested, but Jacob always loved hearing folktales from the Old World about goblins, elves, will-o’-the-wisps, magical kingdoms...” Mrs. Monroe handed me a few pages. “Here’s the syllabus, and you can pick up your books for this course in the administrative office.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Monroe.”

During lunch break, I found Ms. Chu in her small office on the third floor of Flounder.

“Hello, Jane. Did I convert you to journalism?”

“I like that it’s fact-based,” I said.

“Nice evasion, Jane,” she said with a wry smile and I smiled back. “Can I help you with anything.”

“I was wondering what exactly you’d like us to write about for our assignment.”

“Most students are happy to run off on whatever interests them,” she said.

I shrugged and said, “The academic year is so open-ended and I’m still unfamiliar with so much here.”

“Well, our coaches are always happy to talk about their teams. Everyone’s excited about varsity lacrosse this year since we’ve got a great goalie.”

“I’m not really into sports, ma’am.”

She tapped her short, rounded nails with their sheen of pale pink gloss while she thought. “How would you feel about a piece on Birch Grove’s scholarship program?”

I must have frowned because she added, “It doesn’t have to be personal. In fact, it’s better if it isn’t. Do you know that twenty-eight percent of our students receive some form of financial aid?”

“So many?” I said.

“Last year one of our students started writing an article about it, and then she got the flu and we never ran it,” Ms. Chu said. “Your piece could mention the tradition of our alumnae to donate to the scholarship fund. You can interview Mr. Shaunessy, who manages the Birch Grove Fund. His office is in administration. He can give you the names and contacts for an alumna who donates.”

At least it was better than asking a lacrosse coach stupid questions about a sport I’d never even watched. “That sounds fine, Ms. Chu. Thanks for the help.”

After school, I found Mr. Shaunessy’s office and knocked on the door, which was ajar.

“Enter!”

“Hi,” I said. “I’m Jane Williams and I’m writing a story for the Birch Grove Weekly about the scholarship program. Ms. Chu said I should talk to you.”

The tall, balding man looked annoyed and said, “Ten minutes is all I can spare. Sit and listen.”

I took one of the chairs by his desk and he began rattling facts and numbers before I had my notebook out.

Although I was writing as fast as I could, my notes were a jumble of unfamiliar words and phrases: fiduciary, funding, matching grants, unrestricted bequest...

Mr. Shaunessy gave me names of three of the most generous graduates or, as he put it, “our kind benefactresses.”

As he walked me to the door, he said, “A pity that Bebe isn’t here for your story. She was on full-scholarship like you. Coming to Birch Grove was a transformative experience for her.”

“I heard that she moved to Europe.”

“Quite unexpectedly.” He sniffed and raised his thin eyebrows. “I doubt any European trip is worth abandoning a Birch Grove education.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Now run along, child,” he said as if bored with me.

“I’m not a child. I’m an emancipated minor and legally responsible for myself,” I said.

Mr. Shaunessy met my eyes. His narrow lips pressed together, as if he was trying not to smile. “My mistake. Forgive me. Then run along, Miss Williams.”

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Shaunessy.”

After I picked up my textbooks for *Night Terrors*, I walked into the hallway, where Mary Violet was using her reflection in a framed portrait to fluff up her silver-gold curls.

“Why are you looking vexed?” she said. “That’s what my mother always says. She says, ‘Why is my family determined to vex me?’” Mary Violet accompanied this statement by placing the back of her hand on her forehead.

I didn’t care what Catalina believed, Mary Violet wasn’t a snob. She was fun and funny. I said, “I have to write an article for the paper on the student aid program, and after I interviewed Mr. Shaunessy, he called me a child.”

“He’s a darling. My mother loooves him. She has him for tea, and they lament and wail about how no one cares about culture anymore and Art with a capital A, and then she gives him massive checks.”

“Your mom donates money to the school?”

“Oh, oodles, as fast as Daddy makes it, she gives it away.”

“Do you think I could talk to her for my assignment?”

“Sure. You can come to my house if you promise not to laugh at Mom’s paintings. They’re *scandalous!*”

“Sure. I promise.”

Chapter 8

“The role of parents is to promote Birch Grove’s philosophy, support our policies, and ensure that students have moral and ethical guidance.”

Birch Grove Academy Handbook

MARY VIOLET lived nearby and we walked to her house on narrow streets that didn’t have sidewalks. Often a car would slow down and the driver would call out a hello to her or a kid on a bike would wave and shout to her.

“It’s a bitsy, pocket-pal little town,” Mary Violet said. “Everyone knows everyone, which is tragic because there’s no mystery. That’s why I was ecstatic that you came to Birch Grove. Of course, it would have been more fun if you were secretly a hot guy dressed in girls’ clothes and hiding out from the Mafia.”

“I hope you’re not too disappointed.”

“Oh, I’m already over it! Not everyone be a hot guy on the run from the mob.” She sighed. “There isn’t any interesting new talent in Greenwood.”

“Talent?”

“You know, guys. You go to pre-school and primary school with these boys and you can’t even think of them *that* way. It’s like incest without the thrilling wrongness. It’s boring wrongness. Brongness.”

“I used to feel that way about the boys in our group home. Really, you can’t even think of a guy that way if you have to share a bathroom with him. It’s way too much information.”

“Was it a horrible orphanage? Did you eat thin gruel?”

“We ate stuff that came in giant cans from the dented warehouse store and could be microwaved. It was a group home, not an orphanage.” I told her a little about the ramshackle house and the rules.

“That sounds hideous! I could never ever get up that early every day. I’m sure it’s child abuse. How did you get to be so smart?”

“A bunch of smart students got stuck with me and took me over as an experiment, which is why I freaked out when we had to read *Flowers for*

Algernon in class. I was afraid that I might revert back to the feral kid I was.”

“That book is freaky anyway. I swear, the people who pick assigned reading must be high. *The Stranger*, ugh.”

“We always got stuck reading books about teenagers who got pregnant or jailed and that was supposed to make us feel better because we could ‘relate.’”

Mary Violet grinned. “I’m glad you didn’t revert. You must be special or else Mrs. Monroe wouldn’t have brought you here to replace Bebe. Not that you’re anything like her. She was big and strong, like a female wrestler. She pretended to be innocent around Mrs. Monroe, but she was a bit wicked,” Mary Violet said as she turned toward a gate in a hedge. “Home sweet home.”

The rectangular two-story house was painted taupe and the multi-paned windows had snowy white trim. Ivy grew up to the second floor balconies, which had black wrought iron railings. A brick path led through a green lawn to the glossy grayish-blue front door.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“It is, isn’t it? You wouldn’t guess that inside is my mother’s exhibition of vulgarity.” Mary Violet walked to the side of the house saying, “My mom says children should use the back door because we are too messy even though I’ve explained to her that I am a mature young lady now.”

Mary Violet opened a side door that led to a big laundry room. She dropped her bag and book satchel on the floor beside the coat rack. Through an open door, I saw a garage. On the other side of the laundry room was a small bathroom. Though the doorway ahead, I glimpsed stainless steel, an expanse of pale stone countertop, and a huge butcher block island.

“I’m home, Teresa!”

A short, dark woman came to the kitchen doorway. She wore high-waisted mom jeans, a pink sweatshirt, and white tennis shoes. She glanced at the floor and said, “Hang up your bag, baby.” She spoke with a Spanish accent.

“Yes, boss.” Mary Violet sighed loudly and turned back to pick up her things. “Teresa, this is Jane. Jane’s new at school.”

“’ello, Yane.”

“Hello, señora,” I said as I followed Mary Violet. I suddenly remember something. My mother had cleaned houses. The image of yellow gloves and a bucket of soapy water came and went as quickly as a billboard sighted out of moving bus.

As I looked around sun-filled room, I hoped my mother had found a place as nice as this.

“Teresa thinks she is the boss of me,” Mary Violet said.

The woman made a face and then tapped her own cheek. “*Besito*,” she said, and my friend gave her a hug and kissed her cheek.

“Who’s home?” Mary Violet asked.

“Mama is in her studio and Bobby is upstairs. The baby is at practice.”

Had my mother been on such affectionate terms with any of her employers? I felt an ache inside. I knew nothing about her and I’d never know anything about her.

Mary Violet said to Teresa, “Okay. We’re going up to my room for a while.”

On the other side of the kitchen was a narrow staircase that we took to the second floor. “Teresa’s from El Salvador,” she said. “Her kids are still there because she wants them to be with their family.”

I was sure the reasons were far more complicated and painful.

Mary Violet led me down a hallway decorated with framed family photos and children’s drawings. She saw me looking at the pictures and said, “Behold, the family gallery. Thank God my mom hasn’t put her paintings here. Yet. We live in terror.”

An Oriental rug in shades of blue and green cushioned our steps. We walked by a bedroom with an open door and my friend called out, “Hey, Bobby,” and then said to me, “That’s my little brother, and he’s a pestilence upon this earth. If you ever want a brother, you can take mine.”

“That’s for the offer. I don’t have room for one at my cottage,” I said as we walked by the stair landing, and I caught a glimpse of an expansive living room in blues and white.

“My sister, Agnes, is okay. She’s always off doing one of her sports things.”

“Is she at Birch Grove?”

“She’ll be coming next year. She’s in eighth grade now at the Town School, which is where everyone goes before the boys and girls are separated because our parents believe raging hormones interfere with education.”

At the end of the hall was her room. There was a pink satin quilted cover on her white four-poster bed, framed prints of dancers, and gilt trimmed mirrors. Built-in bookcases were filled with paperbacks.

Lotions, perfumes, makeup and accessories completely covered the top of a white vanity. A pile of clothes spilled out of the closet, and sheer white curtains moved in the breeze from the open windows.

Her room made me think of those dreams I’d had of finding a big closet full of new clothes, or discovering money scattered all over the ground. It had that unreal quality, and I had an urge to grab an armful of clothes and run out of the room before I awoke.

“What do you think?” Mary Violet asked.

“It looks like you,” I said.

“A mess!” she said with a laugh.

“No, pretty and comfortable. Feminine.”

“Yes, a mess.” She went to the pile of clothes on the floor and shoved them inside the closet. “My mother says that one day I’ll be buried under an avalanche of clothes and no one will ever find my body.”

Her comment made me remember what Orneta had said. “May I ask you a question?”

“Yes, you may,” she said as she forced shut the double closet doors.

“I heard that someone committed suicide at Birch Grove last year.”

Her eyes went wide and she nodded. “Mr. Mason’s wife jumped from the roof. Mr. Mason is shattered. Mrs. Monroe was devastated, too, since she and Mrs. Mason were best friends from when they were both students.”

“Mrs. Mason was her friend?”

“Oh, yes. She was really close to the Monroes,” Mary Violet said. “Mrs. Mason was interesting -- nervous and pretty. Well, prettyish. When she talked to you, it was always as if thinking of something else.”

“Is that why the school’s called Bitch Grave?”

“Oh, no, it’s been called that *forever*. Although more polite people call it Rich Loathe. Constance says that *I’m* not good at rhyming, but rich doesn’t rhyme at all with Birch.”

I noticed the slim lavender aluminum case of a laptop on a mirrored antique vanity table. “I can’t believe we don’t have access to computers at school. Would you mind if I just checked in with some friends?”

“Go ahead, but don’t download anything because my mother checks all my files constantly ever since, well, never mind...”

“Thanks.” I sat down and tried to log on to my City Central account, but I got a message saying *ID Closed*. “Damn, the school must have cancelled my account.”

“Don’t you use other sites?”

“No, I just had this one with my school friends. All my addresses were in there.”

“It’s just as well. The Birch Grove PTA hires a tech consultant, whatever that is, to spy on us online, and if anyone posts scandalous pics or disses Birch Grove, she’d get suspended,” she said. “Come on and I’ll introduce you to my mom. Try not to stare.”

“I don’t stare.”

“Uhm, maybe not stare, but you have a uniquely piercing look as if you’ve got a very cynical interior monologue going. Quick, tell me what you’re thinking!”

“I think you’re letting your imagination run amok,” I said as I followed her out of the room and down the main staircase.

“That’s the fun of having an imagination, don’t you think?”

“No, I think reality is difficult enough to deal with.”

“Jane, it will be my life’s mission to funnify you.”

“Now *I’m* the one living in terror,” I said.

The living room was decorated in white with sofas covered in aqua and gray-blue armchairs. A gleaming black grand piano was placed by the window.

Above a beautiful white stone fireplace was an enormous painting in beiges and rosy colors. After a moment, I realized that the blobs and streaks of color were a nude woman showing all she had in far too much detail. It made the graffiti at City Central look demure.

Mary Violet laughed and said, “You *are* staring! Wait until you see the studio. It’s a nightmare. My mother uses words like vulva and labia like it’s perfectly normal, so whatever you do, do *not* ask her about her *Art*.”

She took me down another hallway to the other side of the house. We walked in a glassed-in sunroom flooded with late afternoon light. I let the delicious heat of the room seep into me. All around us were easels with paintings similar to the one in the living room. Nudes, nudes, and nudes of various women and their private parts in hues of pinks, browns, purples, and reds. There was even one in green.

I was so embarrassed by the display that I didn’t where to look or not to look.

“Hello, sweetie.” A woman came from behind one of the tall easels. She was wearing denim overalls covered in paint smudges. Her curly brown hair was cut close to her head, making her look young and boyish. She was holding a paint brush, and she dropped it into a glass jar of murky liquid.

She resembled her daughter’s, but where Mary Violet was pleasingly rounded, her mother was all sharp angles.

“Hi, mommy. This is Jane Williams. Remember I told you she transferred in? She’d like to interview you for a story she’s writing for the *Weekly*.”

“Nice to meet you, Jane. Are you here to talk to me about My Art?” She said it that way, the way Mary Violet had mimicked.

“Hello, Mrs. Heyer. Actually, I’m writing a story about the scholarship program. Mary Violet said that you wouldn’t mind.”

Mrs. Heyer looked a little disappointed. “Hmm, I suppose the subject

matter of My Art is not quite appropriate for Birch Grove. I'm happy to talk to you about the school fund, though. Come sit with me. Mary Violet, would you get us some tea, please?"

"Everyone thinks she's the boss of me," my friend grumbled cheerfully as she left us.

I wove through a maze of paintings to get to Mrs. Heyer, who was by green wicker chairs and a paint-splattered wooden table in the corner of the room.

Mrs. Heyer sat with her legs crossed like a kid and said, "Now what can I tell you?"

Sitting by her, I could see the small wrinkles radiating from the outer corners of her gray eyes, as if she smiled a lot. After I took a notebook and pen out from my school tote, I asked, "Why is important for you to donate money for scholarships?"

She said the things I expected, that Birch Grove had given her a fine education and she wanted to give back, and then she talked a little about her own time as a student. I kept hoping that she'd mention running over a possum when she was a frosh, but she didn't mention it.

Then Mrs. Heyer caught my attention by saying, "Between us, no matter how much I give, I'll never be in the inner circle since I'm only a second-generation Grove girl. Hyacinth Monroe and her family go all the way back to the founding of the school. They even follow the founder's pasty white, no-sun rules. They always do and say everything right."

"Does it still matter to you?" I said, surprised. "Being in the 'inner circle' of a high school, I mean."

"Birch Grove isn't just a high school in Greenwood. It's the center of most of our lives in one way or another. Sometimes I feel, I don't know, *left* out. I wonder if I make these donations to be accepted." Mrs. Heyer sighed and said, "Even as ancient as you must think me, I still don't know all the reasons I do the things I do."

"Why is it important to know *why* we do things as long as we do the *right* things?" I asked. "The result is the same – the school's scholarship students

benefit.”

She looked startled and said, “Alexander Pope said that the proper study of mankind is man. In my case, it’s woman. If we don’t look inward, how can we truly understand others? The internal and the external are all of a piece.”

“I’m more interested in what people do, not why they do it,” I said.

“You sound like a very practical young woman. But where’s the joy in practicality?”

I hesitated then said, “Mary Violet has a plan to ‘funnify’ me.”

Mrs. Heyer laughed and said, “Come, let me show you My Art while we wait for our tea.”

She tried to explain her paintings to me and talked about the “ripeness and fecundity of the female body,” while I was cringing inwardly at the sight of springy pubic hair and slick pink and purple folds and openings.

As she talked, I glanced away and saw a painting on the floor in the corner, leaning against other canvases. It was black and white, with rich splashes of deep green, yellow-green, and streaks of gray. “What’s that?”

“Ah, my *Lady of the Wood* series.” Mrs. Heyer moved to the painting and pulled out the framed canvases behind it, displaying them all in a row. “I’ve always loved the grove and the mythology about birches.”

The vertical shapes resembled the trees at night, with branches and roots that suggested arms and feet. “They’re so beautiful.”

Mrs. Heyer looked happy. “It’s nice to hear that someone else appreciates them.”

“Someone mentioned the folk stories, that the trees walk.”

“There are stories from all over the world about the birch. They’re a symbol of fertility, spring and healing, and also seen to have a connection with the world of the dead,” she said. These paintings honor the Lady of the Wood, the myth of the benevolent female spirit who inhabits the trees.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but whatever I was going to say was gone. My friend’s mother looked at me and I shrugged and said, “I forgot what I was going to say. It was something about the trees. I get this sensation when I’m in

the grove, like words on the tip of my tongue, and try as I might, I can't remember what it is."

"Stop trying." Mrs. Heyer, said, "It will come to you when you're not expecting it."

Mary Violet returned with a tray of tea things and almond cookies and we sat at the wicker table. She asked innocently, "Did you enjoy the vulva paintings?"

"They're very interesting," I said as I kicked her foot under the table.

"Jane liked my *Lady of the Woods* paintings," Mrs. Heyer said with a smile.

Mary Violet stood, knocking the table and making the tea cups rattle on the saucers, and said:

*"Whether my heart with hope or sorrow tremble,
Thou sympathizest still; wild and unquiet,
I fling me down; thy ripple, like a river,
Flows valleyward, where calmness is, and by it
My heart is floated down into the land of quiet."*

We were all silent for a moment.

Then Mary Violet sat, bumping the table again. "That's from James Russell Lowell's 'The Birch Tree.' I did a term paper last year on poems dedicated to the birch and I should have gotten an A+, but I got an A-."

"You knew you weren't supposed to use purple ink," her mother said. "I'm sure your prose was purple, too."

"It was violet, not purple, and that is my trademark."

Her mother rolled her eyes in exactly the way that Mary Violet did.

Mary Violet chattered about her classes and teachers and I offered a few comments about my own. It was only when Mrs. Heyer got up to switch on the lights that I noticed how late it was.

"Thank you for talking to me," I said to her. "I have lots of work to do. I better get back."

"You're living in the groundskeeper's cottage, aren't you, dear?" Mrs. Heyer asked. "That's where Bebe lived. Too bad she left. Would you like a ride?"

“It’s only a few blocks. I’ll walk.”

Mary Violet went outside with me and said, “My mother’s an intellectual. That means that she thinks it’s all right to discuss the filthiest things if she uses their medical terms.”

I laughed. “She’s really nice. See you tomorrow.”

“*Au revoir.*”

I’d walked a little ways when Mary Violet came skipping after me.

“Jane!”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad Mrs. Monroe extorted us to hang out with you.”

“Me, too,” I said, feeling oddly shy. “See you tomorrow.”

The street lights had come on and glowed in that perfect moment when the sky is the deep thick blue. Sometimes I heard faint conversation or the slamming of a car door or a dog barking.

Mrs. Heyer wasn’t like anyone I’d ever met, and I wished she’d spoken more about the internal and the external and used something besides her *Art* as an explanation.

I turned into the drive that led to Birch Grove. Ahead, the school was a dark, solid mass looming against the night sky. The lights at the school’s entrance cast eerie, exaggerated shadows of the stone angels.

As I got closer, I saw the lights on in a third floor classroom and a man’s silhouette in the window. It was Mr. Mason, working late, and I felt a twinge of sadness for him with his solitude and his heartache.

The breeze grew stronger, as it had every evening, and now the night was no longer silent, but filled with the sound of the trees -- rustling and sighing, shifting and creaking, so *alive* and so lovely. Now I understood why some people talked about how they loved the sound of the ocean, and others spoke of the rush of a river. The sound of the trees awakened something in me, a sense of peace.

I was cold, so I raced down the drive, feeling exhilarated as I entered the dimness of the grove. My steps crushed leaves below, releasing clean scents.

My cottage was dark, because I hadn’t left any lights on. I unlocked my

door and went inside. I panicked that I was not alone, that someone was in the room with me. My hand frantically went to the wall until I found the light switch.

Light filled the room and it was exactly as I had left it. No one was there.

My heart was still racing, though, and I crept toward the bedroom. I flicked on the light there, and then I checked the bathroom, kitchen, and even the laundry room. I looked in the closets and, my nerves still jangling, I dropped to the floor and peered under the bed.

Finally, I checked all the windows and doors. There was no one else here.

Why did I have the creepy sensation that someone was watching and waiting for me?

I was letting my imagination run amok.

I thought and started in on my homework. After almost two hours of trig and Latin, I made a peanut-butter and jam sandwich and ate while reading my assignment for Mrs. Monroe's class, "Wake Not the Dead."

I had to constantly refer to the footnotes to understand the first few pages. Soon, though, I became so engrossed in the story that I hurried through the paragraphs.

A powerful, wealthy lord is passionately in love with his young beautiful bride, who dies. He marries a kind woman and they have children, yet he remains obsessed with dead bride. He forces a wizard to bring her back to him even though the wizard warns, "Wake not the dead."

The bride returns from the grave and the lord is enchanted by her, but death and destruction come to his castle. He realizes much too late that she's a blood-thirsty vampire.

I thought the lord was a fool who deserved his fate for letting passion overcome reason. He deserved his gruesome death.

Still, the story rekindled the eerie sensations I had earlier. I was scolding myself for being so foolish and superstitious as I got ready for school the next morning.

I walked out my front door into the dappled light on the porch and saw two

words scraped into the dirt on the path by my cottage. Although parts of the letters had been blown away, the message was clear: *Go away*.

Chapter 9

“Birch Grove allows no harassment of or by students. The administration will act promptly to investigate any claim of harassment. All claims will be treated with sensitivity and confidentiality.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

GO AWAY.

I kicked furiously at the message until there was no trace of the letters. Then I looked around to see if anyone was here, watching. Branches swayed in the morning breeze and birds and squirrels rustled.

No one was here now, but someone *had* been here while I was inside. A shiver ran down my spine and then I thought, what were a few words scrawled in dirt compared to what I lived through every day at City Central? Nothing. What kind of person left an anonymous message? A coward.

I dusted off my shoes and went to class feeling angry instead of scared. Catalina was the only person who’d been openly hostile to me. There wasn’t anything cowardly or anonymous about her. So who was it?

During chemistry, I noticed that Mr. Mason was watching me. He was smiling in such a friendly, encouraging way that I thought my anger must be showing. I relaxed the muscles in my face so that I revealed nothing and I focused on the lesson.

I arrived at Latin class before Catalina. She came in with waves to her friends. Her amber eyes skimmed indifferently over me, almost as if she’d gotten used to me being there.

I spent the rest of the day looking around me, trying to discern any laughter or stares directed my way. I was already tense when someone touched the back of my arm in the cafeteria. I jerked away and turned to see Constance.

“Oh, you startled me!”

“Wake not the dead!” she said in a spooky voice and then laughed. “What a warped story.”

Hattie and Mary Violet joined us. “We’ve decided to have a sleepover at your cottage tomorrow night,” Hattie said. “If that’s okay with you.”

I’d never had a sleepover in my life and suddenly the stupid message seemed meaningless. “That would be great.”

Mary Violet said, “I can fix your eyebrows and trim your hair.”

Constance shook her head and said, “Under no circumstances should you let MV near you with scissors. I made that mistake once and had to wear my stupid uniform hat for four months. It made my mother cry.”

“You looked like a model with your hair so short,” Mary Violet said. “One of those models who wears geeky glasses so people will realize she’s also a genius.”

“I can’t wear my hair short,” Constance said. “My ears stick out like handles on a jug.” She lifted her hair back to demonstrate.

“Embrace your flaws. I would if I had any,” Mary Violet said.

“Right, Miss Thing,” Constance said and pinched her friend’s plump pink cheek.

“So, Jane, we can bring stuff,” Hattie said. “I can bring spaghetti.”

“I’ll make brownies,” Mary Violet said. “I make killer brownies.”

“I’ll bring a Caesar salad,” Constance said. “And garlic bread.”

“That should be everything,” Hattie said.

“What should I do?” I asked.

“You can take care of drinks,” Hattie said.

“Champagne,” Mary Violet said. “A bathtub full.”

Hattie shook her head and said, “Soda’s fine.”

“No problem,” I said. “What time?”

“Five,” Constance said. “I’ll get movies.”

Hattie gave me a ride to the Greenwood grocery store after school. Under the fluorescent lights her pale skin had the slight blue tinge of nonfat milk. She steered me to the drinks aisle.

I scanned the prices and saw an inexpensive store brand. I wanted to save money, but this was my first time having my friends over, so I picked up two six

packs of the Italian lemon soda that I'd had at the Monroes.

"We all like that," Hattie said. "Mrs. Monroe always has it at her house."

"That's where I had it," I said. Trying to sound casual, I said, "Lucky's coming over tomorrow at noon for chemistry tutoring."

"Really?" she said and tilted her head.

"Yes, and it's cool because I can add it to my resume and earn money, too," I said as if I wasn't excited about being with Lucky. "I don't know if I should give him lunch."

"Guys like food. Jack lives on pizza and burritos, and Lucky likes burgers and roast beef sandwiches."

"Maybe I can sandwiches," I said. We went to the deli counter and Hattie said, "He likes his it extra rare because good beef shouldn't be overcooked."

"Thanks. I never learned to do much besides open cans and microwave things at the group home, but I can make sandwiches and macaroni and cheese."

When I went to the check-out stand, I spotted Orneta was working at the far register. The line there was too long, and I steered my cart to the ten-items-or-less register and waved at her. She smiled and waved back.

"Who's that?" Hattie asked.

"Her name's Orneta. I met her when I came here with Mrs. Monroe."

"That's what's nice about Greenwood. Everyone gets to know each other so quickly."

When Hattie was driving me back to school, I said, "Everyone does seem pretty friendly, but do they really like outsiders?"

She glanced at me and said, "No one likes, you know, a bad element. Why?"

"I was just wondering." I wasn't going to be a little bitch crying about a stupid message.

"Some people take longer to warm up. Just give people time to get to know you."

I laughed and said, "Hattie, I'm not ever going to win a popularity contest and that's okay with me. I've just never lived in someplace where everyone

knows each other and it's a little weird.”

She smiled and said, “Okay,” as she stopped on the drive close to the grove. “See you tomorrow night!”

By the time I got inside the house and unpacked my groceries, blood from the roast beef had soaked through the white butcher paper package. I placed the meat in a plastic bag and put it in the fridge.

Then I cleaned the house so it would look nice for Lucky and my friends. I vacuumed, dusted, scrubbed out the bathroom, and emptied the trash.

I threw out the dead pink daisies, and took a pair of scissors and went outside. I brushed the back of my hand across the lowest tree branches. I raised the scissors, but I didn't want to cut something that was living.

After gathering broken branches, twigs, and fern, I did my best to arrange them in the vase, which wasn't very good.

I prepped for my lesson with Lucky by reviewing the chemistry tutoring book. All the while, I listened to the sounds outside the cottage. Had anyone harassed Bebe when she lived here? Mary Violet said she'd been tough – maybe everyone was too intimidated to harass her.

I wished I could talk to Bebe and ask her how she'd felt about coming to Birch Grove. I wondered what she was like. When foster kids moved, they usually left something behind – a stray earring, initials scrawled on a table, discarded clothes. But I hadn't found a trace of Bebe here.

As evening grew dark, I closed the curtains, so that no one could spy on me from outside. I dragged and pushed the small sofa so that it blocked the front door.

After checking all the locks, I turned out the lights in the living room, and left on a bedroom lamp and the porch light.

Now no one outside could see me in the living room, but I would see anyone prowling close to the porch. After placing the phone and the flashlight beside the sofa, I gathered the comforter and pillow from the bed and set myself on the sofa to sleep.

NO ONE came during the night and there were no messages outside my cottage in the morning. Then I remembered: Lucky was coming over.

I quickly moved my furniture back into place. My mind was all over the place. I was thinking of Lucky, listening to hear anyone near the cottage, and thinking about the chemistry lesson, and my slumber party.

I checked the locks on the door before I took a quick shower. Then I put on my new jeans, a clean white t-shirt, and my new black tennis shoes. I wore my hair parted on the side and down, like Hattie and her friends.

I made two roast beef sandwiches, sliced them diagonally, and placed them on plates with potato chips. I set the table with glasses and napkins. I looked at the clock. It was only ten a.m.

I tried to write my article on the financial aid program, but after every few sentences, I'd find myself looking at the clock again, which was so pitiful because it was only a tutoring session.

Then noon came. I paced up and down the small living room, biting my nails, and finally there was a knock at the door. I counted to three before opening it with a smile.

Lucky stood there in a snug long-sleeved Evergreen Prep t-shirt holding a chem book and a paper bag.

"Hey, Jane," he said with a flash of smile that went right through me. "Bet you hate spending Saturday teaching a knucklehead."

"I'm happy to help you." The words sounded stiff and stupid to my ears, like a customer service rep.

"Yeah, right. You don't have to be nice about it, because I'd hate having to tutor a dunce." He held out the paper bag and said, "My mom sent cookies because she thinks we're ten years old."

Lucky Monroe walked into my cottage, and I struggled to look calmer than I felt. While he looked around, I tried not to stare at him. He looked as if he'd just gotten up; his golden hair was tousled, and he had stubble on his jaw. He wore a silver bracelet, one slim lustrous band on his pale strong wrist.

"You moved things around," he said.

“You were here before?” I asked. “When Bebe was here?”

“Yeah and when it was empty,” he said. “I helped fix it up. I painted the bedroom.”

“You did a great job. It looks as if no one ever lived here before.”

He walked to the fireplace and touched the mantle. “Mom wanted it to look like new for you.”

He didn’t say anything else and I realized that I was supposed to be in charge of our time together. “I made sandwiches. We can eat and study.”

He shrugged and said, “I ate a lot of cookies on the way here. I’ll take something to drink.”

I nodded, disappointed, and went to the kitchen. I put the sandwiches in the fridge and took two cans of soda out to the living room. Then it seemed too late to go back and pour the drinks into glasses, the way he was used to drinking at home.

We sat on the sofa and I said, “Okay, we’ll go over the basics, so I can figure out where you’re at.”

“My head hurts already.” He reached for the bag of cookies and took one out. “Oatmeal with dried cranberries. Even mom’s desserts are good for you.” He handed it to me and took another for himself.

I flipped open his text book to the first chapter and said, “Did you bring your calculator?”

“I guess I should have, huh?”

“It’s okay. You can use mine.”

As we leaned over the coffee table to read the book, our shoulders occasionally touched. Although I was excruciatingly aware of each contact, I tried to act like it was no big deal.

“Jane, Jane,” Lucky said. “How can you like this stuff? My mind goes into overload.” He leaned back and threw his arm over the back of the sofa, behind me.

I was careful to stay as I was, on the edge of the sofa. “You’re doing fine. You understand it. You should spend some time reviewing exponential numbers

and you could start memorizing chemical symbols.”

“No wonder my mom likes you, because you’re all business. How’s school going? Have you made any friends?”

I hesitated and said, “Your mother seems to have picked a few out for me, but I like them -- Hattie Tyler, Mary Violet Heyer and Constance Applewhaite.”

“That’s what I meant about the way she treats us,” he said. “But Hattie doesn’t do a damn thing she doesn’t want to. Constance is friendly to everyone, and Mary Violet – she’s a wild card. She either loves you or hates you, and you know right away.”

“They’re coming for a sleepover tonight,” I said.

“Sounds like fun. Should I crash?”

I didn’t know if he was kidding, so I kept my eyes down on the text book.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “If Mary Violet’s coming, it’s going to be too girly for me. Girly movies and girly gossip. Mary Violet will want to dress me up and make me play house. Don’t tell the others how stupid I am about chem.”

“I would never say that!”

He laughed. “I was joking, Jane. You can say whatever you want. They’re cool girls, especially Hattie. She goes out with Jack sometimes.”

“She told me. I was a little...surprised.”

“Because he’s so grungy and she’s so perfect? Yeah, but she’s not interested in pretty boys. She goes for the talented, sensitive musician. All the girls fall for Jack.”

I kept myself from saying, you’ve got to be kidding. “Not me.”

“You haven’t seen Jack play, yet. I can’t even carry a tune. Hey, I’m taking up all your time.” He picked up his textbook and stood. “How about next Sunday around four-thirty? Mom says you should come to the house and stay for dinner.”

I nodded and said, “We can go over any assignments you have then,” as I went with him to the door.

“I hate chem, but I was okay in biology.” Lucky suddenly reached for my hand. Turning it over, he ran his finger on the inside of my wrist, tracing the blue veins.

I stood frozen.

“Jane, did you know that human body contains about five liters of blood?” he said. “You’re small, so you have less blood. It travels 12,000 miles through your circulatory system every day.” His finger pressed on my wrist. “I can feel your pulse. It’s strong.”

I gazed up into his blue eyes, able to see each dark eyelash and the gradations of light and dark blue.

He wasn’t smiling anymore and I thought he might lean over and... Then he dropped my hand. “See you next week.”

Lucky walked out the door and sauntered toward the path, whistling tunelessly.

There was an undercurrent of something else beneath his smiling exterior. Why had he touched my arm in that confusing way that was much more than friendly, yet not exactly sexual.

HATTIE AND HER FRIENDS arrived in the early evening with food, sleeping bags, movies, music, and makeup.

“This place is sooo cute,” Mary Violet said, throwing a sleeping bag on the sofa. She set a platter of brownies on the coffee table. “It’s like something in a fairy tale.”

Constance said, “I’m sure you’d be happier if it was made out of gingerbread and candy.”

“As fabu as that would be, getting cooked in a pot by a witch isn’t my idea of fun. Honestly, the old fairy tales were horrible.”

“Were halflings awful?” I asked.

“No, they were usually very charming. I meant the stories that Jakob Ludwig and Wilhelm Karl Grimm wrote from local folktales.”

“Don’t ask how she knows these things,” Constance said. “She never remembers my birthday.”

“I know because, unlike *some* people, I care about literature, and your birthday is in March or May, one of those *M* months,” Mary Violet said snootily.

Turning back to me, she said, “Someday I’m going to write stories that will really curl your toes with terrifying monsters and werewolves.”

“I thought you were writing mysteries and historicals,” Hattie said.
“Besides, no one needs to hear scary stories about supernatural monsters.”

Her blond friend considered for a moment and then said, “I think we do because fear makes you feel alive. Besides, the supernatural is really about the id.”

“I don’t know what the id is, but *id* guess it’s something ridiculous,” Constance said.

“*Id* is not,” Mary Violet said and grinned. “The id is your unconscious desires and fears. It’s your instinct for pleasure and survival. That’s what my mother says and she did her minor in psych.”

When Constance shook her head, her glasses slid down her elegant narrow nose. “It sounds like something Mrs. Monroe would talk about in *Night Terrors*. I think there must have been some huge psych fad when they were in college.”

“And once again, MV’s dragged us completely off-topic,” Hattie said.
“There’s no comparison between a witch house in a fairy tale and this sweet little house. I bet Jane loves it here.”

“I love having my own space, but what I like best is the sound of the trees. It’s like they’re keeping me company.”

“Oh, you’re getting all poetic,” Mary Violet said. “That’s how my mother got started, with poetry and then she spiraled downward fast. Promise me you won’t take up painting!”

Constance said, “Half the girls here are such idiots they’d be too spooked to live in the grove.”

“I’ve heard some of the silly stories,” I said. “But I’m not superstitious.”

“Did you hear from that friend in town?” Hattie asked. “What was her name? Alana?”

“Orneta,” I said and felt an instinct to protect Orneta. “Jack Monroe was the one who told me people said that the birches walked at night.”

Hattie smiled uneasily. “You can’t take anything he says seriously.”

“I don’t,” I said.

Later, after we’d eaten our spaghetti dinner and I’d let Mary Violet trim an inch off the bottom of my hair (which turned out to be three inches because she kept trying to make it even), we were talking about our classes and teachers.

“Mr. Mason seems so lonely,” Mary Violet said. “I wish he’d have a torrid affair with Ms. Chu and then they’d get married and I would be a bridesmaid.”

Constance looked at me and said, “Ms. Chu lives with her boyfriend, which is supposed to be a big secret because of Birch Grove morals, blah, blah. Did MV already tell you about Mr. Mason’s wife?”

When I nodded, she said to her friend, “It’s not like he’d be ready for another relationship so soon.”

I listened to them debate about other possible girlfriends for Mr. Mason and then Mary Violet asked, “Jane, have you had any boyfriends?”

“No. I was always in the friend zone. Some of my roommates would make grabs, mostly because we were all stuck together, but that’s all. I was never really interested in them.” I thought about telling them about Lucky’s strangely intimate gesture today, but I was afraid of making too much over something that meant nothing to him.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘grabs’?” Mary Violet asked.

“Mary Violet!” Hattie said. “Let a person have some privacy.”

“Just because you won’t talk about your lover, doesn’t mean Jane doesn’t want to talk about her thrilling sexual experiences,” Mary Violet said. “I would tell you about mine, in explicit detail, if I had anything worth telling.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to tell,” Hattie said.

“That’s not the point. I confided in you how Teagan Bartholomew stuck his tongue down my throat and then dropped trou with no warning whatsoever. After my mother’s paintings, I’d assumed everyone had a vulva and I was so shocked that I screamed.”

“You’re totally making that up,” Constance said, as we laughed.

“I’ve been deeply traumatized ever since,” Mary Violet continued. “And nobody tells me anything. I’ll have no idea what to do if I ever meet someone

who gives me the shivers in a good way. I'm going to die a virgin."

A phone rang and Hattie reached into her bag and pulled hers out. She looked at the screen and answered "Hello," and then tersely, "How did you know I'd be here?" She then went out to the porch to talk, closing the door behind her.

"You're the one who won't let boys touch your va-jay-jay because you think it's too precious," Constance said to Mary Violet. "I always talked about Gerard when I went out with him. I told you every sordid detail." She sighed. "I can't believe I was so stupid about him."

"Okay, you did tell us," Mary Violet said. "It's not your fault that he turned out to be so slimy. It's so hard to tell from the way they look and act. They should be forced to wear labels."

Constance shrugged and told me, "Gerald already had a girlfriend in college. I was the summer fling."

A few minutes later, Hattie returned as Mary Violet was telling me, "Jane, you can share if you to. You don't have to."

"It was just going through the motions stuff, totally perfunctory. There was never anyone special," I said, thinking about how apathetic I'd been at the physical contact. "Besides, I'm always the friend type."

"Don't get me started on friends," Mary Violet said. "These days, all a guy wants is a hook-up, no commitment, nothing, and that's why I'm holding out for romance."

"Or a really hot guy," Constance said.

"If he's really hot, then it's automatically romantic," Mary Violet said.

Hattie said, "Are we going to watch a movie or not?"

We crashed about 2 a.m. Mary Violet slept on the sofa, and Constance had gone to the bedroom to escape her friend's gentle snoring.

I awoke under my comforter on the floor. It was about three and the television was soundlessly playing the movie we'd left on. Hattie's sleeping bag beside me was empty. I listened for her steps in the kitchen or bathroom and then checked the cottage. She was gone, so I put on my shoes and a sweatshirt.

The front door was unlocked, and Hattie wasn't out on the porch. I got my

flashlight and walked outside. “Hattie, Hattie,” I called in a loud whisper. I took a few steps out and peered around.

The birch branches stirred in the breeze, and I began walking along the trail toward the Monroes’ house. Every few seconds, I’d call out for my friend again.

“Over here!” Hattie’s voice came from the direction of the amphitheatre.

The darkness wasn’t as dense in the clearing. My eyes adjusted to the pale moonlight illuminating the marble benches. Sitting there, wrapped in a blanket, was Hattie, as still and pale as a statue. The lace hem of her long white cotton nightgown brushed against her bare, narrow feet.

She turned at the sound of my step and smiled. “What are you doing out here?”

“Looking for you. Are you okay?” I sat beside her, the cool of the marble chilling me through my thin cotton pants.

“I woke up and felt like taking a walk. Isn’t this place magical? In the moonlight, it looks like a black and white photograph.”

“How did you find your way here in the dark?”

“I know the paths and besides my night vision is great.”

We sat quietly, listening to the rustling of the trees and feeling the crisp night air on our skin. Then Hattie said, “Whenever you want, you can talk to me, you know.”

“Thanks.”

She laughed. “Like MV’s offer to share sexual details, you don’t *have* to, but you can if you *want* to. I wouldn’t tell anyone else unless you said it was okay. I know things are different for you here...” Her voice trailed off.

“It’s been so long since I’ve had someone I could really talk to that I forget that it’s normal for most people,” I said. “I had a friend, Hosea, when I was fourteen and I could talk to him.”

“Did he get adopted?”

“No, he got mono and died. He was the best person I ever knew. Everyone says ‘patience is a virtue,’ but it doesn’t mean anything until you know someone who has such calmness. The gift of grace.” I still missed him so much that now I

had to stop talking.

When I had my emotions under control, I said, “Yesterday, when I came out of the house, someone had written ‘go away’ in the dirt.”

“No!” Hattie said, turning to me with wide eyes.

“Could it have been hazing?”

“No, seniors sometimes haze frosh by stealing clothes from the gym lockers and throwing them from the third-floor into the trees. We’d be suspended for anything else.”

“Catalina is the only girl who’s been nasty to me, but she’s direct about it.”

“Catalina would have signed her name if she’d done it. Not that she’d touch dirt,” Hattie said.

“You haven’t heard about anyone mad that I’m here?”

“No one’s said anything to me. We should report it to Mrs. Monroe.”

“No way,” I said. “I’m not going crying to her every time I get my feelings hurt. Please don’t say anything to her.”

“It’s your decision.” Hattie watched the shifting shadows of the birch branches. “On to other subjects. You didn’t tell us about your tutoring Lucky today.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” I said carefully. “Lucky solved the problems fairly easily, but he claims that he can’t understand.”

“Lucky pretends to be incompetent and then people do things for him because he’s gorgeous,” she said a little bitterly. She saw my expression and added, “I’ve known him forever. We used to tell people we were getting married when we were in kindergarten.”

“I guessed that there’s more to him than what’s on the surface.”

“Yes, but it’s too easy for him to let people adore him and how’s he ever going to ever grow up that way? He’s so spoiled.”

“Attractive people always get special treatment. So do rich people. Everyone at Birch Grove gets special treatment.”

Hattie smiled and said, “We must *all* seem pretty spoiled to you?”

“You seem...fortunate.”

“We are. I’ll try to remember that more often,” she said. “I guess I just hope that Lucky will find friends who’ll bring out the best in him, instead of encouraging his egotism. Because he *is* good and smart and... Why are we talking about Lucky anyway? I’d rather talk about Jack. He watches out for me and he can make me laugh when I get riled.”

He sounded more like a big brother than a boyfriend. “I can’t imagine you mad about anything. What sets you off?”

“The usual stuff. Being treated like my opinions don’t matter. Being treated like I’m just a girl. *Just a girl*. Whenever anyone says that it makes me want to slap them.”

She sounded as if she had someone specific in mind. “I hate that, too. It’s as if our opinions mean nothing because we’re young, and I always think that if I’d said the same thing but I was big and male, people would listen.” A breeze gusted and I shivered.

“You’re cold,” Hattie said. “Let’s go back.”

I used the flashlight to find my way, but Hattie didn’t need the light. She walked as gracefully as a cat on the pitch-black path.

She stopped once to say, “You’ll tell me if anything else happens, like that message, won’t you?”

“I’ll tell you if something worse happens.”

Before we went back into the cottage, Hattie put her cool hand on my wrist. “I get this feeling that I could tell you anything and that you’d understand.”

“I’d try.”

Chapter 10

“Third and fourth-year Peer Advisors are trained to assist fellow students on personal, academic, social, and health issues. All conversations are confidential, with the exception of those situations when a student is endangered or a crime has been committed.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

AFTER I TOLD HATTIE about the message, after the sleepover, after Lucky’s visit, I began to feel as if I was settling in at Birch Grove. I didn’t push the sofa against the wall the next night and I was familiar with my class schedule.

My life at the group home seemed unreal now, and I realized how bizarre it was to worry about every move and every word.

But I was still amazed at the things other students took for granted, though. They expected competent teachers, pleasant classrooms, and clean bathrooms. They’d leave their bags around as if they were at a friend’s house, not at a school. They thought it was normal to drive a new luxury car to Birch Grove.

It took me a while to identify the cliques. The fashionistas displayed their handbags and took out TSAs when teachers weren’t around. The jocks hauled their gear into classrooms. The partyers snuck off campus more. Emo girls wore thin lines of black eyeliner and subtly dyed their hair.

Hattie and her friends were part of the popular crowd. Hattie was the leader, but low-key, cynical Constance had the most friends because she hung out with everyone. Mary Violet was split between the fashionistas and the arty girls who wrote the literary magazine. I was on the periphery of the group, and their friends were nice enough, if a little impersonal.

Catalina either ignored me in Latin class, and I stopped paying any attention to her, too, because keeping up with Latin took all my concentration. Western Civ was a chore, and Expository Writing became easy because I liked the straight-ahead recitation of facts.

My most difficult class was Mrs. Monroe’s seminar. We had to write an

essay on “Wake Not the Dead” and I struggled with it. The day after I handed it in, Mrs. Monroe stopped me as I was leaving class.

“Jane, I read your essay last night.” She came from behind her desk and smoothed her long, straight navy skirt with her pale, elegant hands. “Was the archaic language of the story a challenge for you?”

“I was able to understand it with the footnotes and glossary.”

“I asked because your essay seemed constrained. I know that literature isn’t your favorite subject, but I wish you’d give it a chance.”

I sighed and said, “I’ll try, but I don’t see the point.”

She smiled in an encouraging way. “The point is that fiction connects with our emotional lives. I’d like you to bring your personal perspective into your essay. Don’t just tell me what happened in the story, but how you felt about what happened and the characters.”

She handed me my ungraded essay and said. “Please try again.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, annoyed that I’d have to do the work again.

“Your paper wasn’t bad, Jane, but I have expectations of you --- of all my girls — and I know you won’t disappoint me.”

That night, I started the essay three times, getting more irritated with each failed effort. Finally, in my clumsy cursive hand, I wrote, “‘Wake Not the Dead’ is not a story about love. It is about one man’s stupid and cruel selfishness, which leads to the ruin of everyone around him.” The rest of the essay came rushing out.

When I handed it in, Mrs. Monroe smiled and said, “We can talk about it when you come to dinner on Sunday.”

I left the classroom already regretting what I’d written. At least I’d see Lucky in a few days. I thought about the different shades of gold in his hair, the jut of his shoulders in his shirt, and his long legs. I played over and over again the way he had held my arm and touched my wrist. Would he do anything more, or act as if it had never happened?

Friday night, Mary Violet invited Hattie, Constance, and me to her house with a few other girls from school. I got to meet Agnes, MV’s little sister. She

was a tomboy about my size, with Mary Violet's big blue eyes, but with brown hair.

"Are you trying out for any of the teams?" Agnes asked.

"I don't play sports."

"Even MV can hit a softball," she said, "although she always giggles afterward."

"That's because I pretend I'm hitting you," Mary Violet said.

The other girls went home late, but Mrs. Heyer had asked me to stay the night. It was a mild night, and we slept on cots on the second-floor balcony. I thought it must be like camping as I looked up into dark sky, the stars hidden by a layer of clouds.

Mary Violet said, "Are you seeing Lucky soon?"

"I'm tutoring him Sunday." I was glad that she had brought him up.

"If I never meet anyone outside this stupid town, I've got dibs on marrying Lucky. Try to find out if he likes me. We would have blonde children. Or see if he talks about someone else. Hattie says he's not seeing anyone, but maybe he's seeing someone at Birch Grove and she doesn't know."

"Why would it be a secret from her?"

"Not from her, from Jack. Lucky's always competing with him. Sibling rivalry, although I don't think I'm going to have to worry about Agnes stealing my boyfriends."

"Mary Violet, it's always an effort keeping up with your train of thought. Why are you only interested in finding out about Birch Grove girls? What if Lucky's seeing someone from another school?"

"It wouldn't be serious. Monroe men only marry Birch Grove girls, and Monroe girls only marry Evergreen boys."

"That must be very convenient for them."

"So far it is. At some point the inbreeding is going to show up in rare blood disorders or prehensile toes."

I said, "I'll tell you if I see any genetic mutations. Goodnight, MV."

"Goodnight, JW."

THE NEXT DAY I had breakfast with the Heyer family while Mary Violet squabbled with her siblings over who ate more bacon.

Mr. Heyer, whose hair was even paler than his daughter's, asked me questions adults always ask: Where did you go to school? What are your favorite subjects? Where do you want to go to college? What are your career plans?

At one point, Mr. Heyer glared at his kids and shouted, "Will you *stop* fighting over the damn bacon? No wonder I'm losing my hair."

Whenever I heard shouting, I tensed, waiting for a blow to follow. But his kids started making funny faces at each other, and Agnes sat on her father's lap and stole his slices of bacon. The rest of the family started laughing and even Mr. Heyer laughed.

Mrs. Heyer told me that she thought I had an artistic soul, which set Mary Violet to giggling. "She wants to suck you into her loony painter world," she whispered to me. "Run while you can!"

Mrs. Heyer took me into her studio and handed me a large package wrapped in brown paper. "It's one of my *Lady of the Woods* paintings, Jane."

I looked at her, astonished. "You're really giving this to me?"

"Art isn't not alive unless it's seen and loved. Enjoy it."

She ruffled her short locks and looked at me for a moment. "Life is not merely survival, Jane. Make sure to take the time to look inward and understand who you are."

"The proper study of mankind is man," I quoted back to her. "I don't know if I agree."

"You don't have to agree with a concept immediately. Place it on a shelf in your mind, where you can think of it now and then. When you need it, it will be there waiting for you."

She looked at me with her grave gray eyes and I thought that maybe she did know things I couldn't understand. "I'll try. Thank you for the painting."

I stayed at the Heyers' house until Saturday afternoon. After we had finished our chem homework, she said, "Jane, why don't you ever wear any

lipgloss, or mascara to bring out your eyes?”

I told her part of the truth. “It costs money and I didn’t have any.”

“I get oodles of gifts-with-purchase, and I never use the ones that don’t go with my coloring. Do you want some?”

When I hesitated, unsure of how to accept this gift, she said, “Of course, I wouldn’t give it to you free. You’d have to let me make you up to get it.”

“All right.”

Forty minutes later she had slathered purple eye shadow on my lids, caked my lashes with mascara, and painted on cherry-red lips, while Agnes howled with laughter.

I looked in the mirror and said, “This is much too special for daytime use. I’ll wash it off.”

“Very tactful, Jane,” Mary Violet said and handed me a small shiny black paper bag filled with lipsticks, glosses, mascara, blush, and perfume samples.

After I scrubbed my face and got my things together, including the painting, Mary Violet asked, “What are you doing tonight?”

“Nothing. Studying.”

“I have to go to my grand-aunt’s house. It’s a family party. My grand-aunt is a cheek-pincher and she always calls me Marie-Violette because she pretends we’re French. If you get bored, call me and I’ll say I’m sick and leave early and then we can hang out. Maybe I can convince you to let me put an arch in those eyebrows.”

“If I said yes, I know I’d end up with no eyebrows at all.”

“No one trusts me,” Mary Violet said. She looked at the package I was holding and said, “My mom must really think you’re on her spiritual wavelength to give a painting away. I don’t know if that’s a good thing or if you should be worried about your mental health.”

I laughed and said, “Thanks for everything, MJ. I’ll see you Monday.” Although the painting was big, it was light, and I carried it back to my cottage before walking down the hill into town.

I stopped in at the market to buy groceries, but I didn’t see Ornetá. When I

paid, I asked the man working the register, “Can you tell me when Orneta’s shift is?”

“She’s no longer working for us. She quit. Thanks for shopping with us!”

As I walked to the bank with my groceries, I thought it was odd that Orneta had quit when she’d said it was a good job. I went to the ATM and checked my balance, and then withdrew some of my tutoring money.

After taking the shuttle back to campus, I put away my groceries and stashed my cash in my hiding place. The envelope of crisp bills made me feel safer; I would keep saving until I had enough to take care of me in an emergency.

Then I unwrapped Mrs. Heyer’s painting. I ran my fingers over the rough and smooth surfaces of the paint, which felt like white and black bark of a birch. It was as if I had a piece of the grove inside now.

I had never owned something so wonderful and I leaned it atop the fireplace mantle, so I could see it all the time.

I tried on my new makeup with a much lighter hand than Mary Violet had used, and was happy to see that I looked more my age and less like a kid. It didn’t transform me into a beauty, but it kept me from fading completely into the background, where I’d always hidden before.

I spread out my books and began to do my homework. In the late afternoon, I went outside to stretch. The trees’ long shadows made it seem later than it was. Then I heard someone calling my name.

“Jane! You home?” Lucky was coming down the path.

“Hi!” My heart leapt, and I yanked the rubber band from my hair and shook it out. “Did you want to change our lesson? Or cancel? You could have called.” Feelings of hope and disappointment tangled inside me.

Lucky stepped onto the porch and his height made me feel much smaller. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“No, I thought...”

“I had to get out of the house. Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

He sat on the sofa and tilted of his head, indicating that I should sit beside

him. When I did, he turned toward me and asked, “Do you want to know something about me, Jane? I don’t have any friends.” He said it dramatically, as if expecting me to console him and stared into my eyes.

“Lucky, you talked about all the friends you supposedly don’t have when I went to your house for dinner.”

He laughed and said, “Okay, I have lots of friends, but not anyone close to me, someone I can really talk to.”

“You have your brother”

“Brothers don’t count. They *have* to talk to you.”

I began to understand what Hattie meant when she said Lucky was spoiled. “Do I need to point out how self-indulgent that it?”

“I mean, I’d like to talk to someone who likes me for *me*, not because I’m on the baseball team or a Monroe or that my mother’s the headmistress. Money doesn’t solve loneliness, Jane. It makes it harder for me to figure out who my real friends are. Everyone here assumes they know exactly who I am, already. I want a friend who doesn’t come with any ideas of how I’m supposed to act, or be.”

So he was here looking for a friend. Jane, the friend. I sighed. “I like you for you, Lucky.”

“Maybe once you really know me, you won’t like me. Would you like me no matter what?”

In the soft light of the lamps, I could see the honey shades of his hair and the curve of his cheekbones. “Of course not. I wouldn’t like you if you were stupid or rude, and I know you aren’t stupid and you’ve been nice to me.”

He edged closer to me, until our knees touched. “Jack says I’m selfish. Yeah, maybe he’s right. Maybe I do use people sometimes. Maybe they don’t mind. Would you mind?”

Pretty girls got used for sex and rich girls got used for money, and I was neither pretty nor rich. “You’re not using me Lucky. I’m getting really well paid for tutoring you.”

“What I mean is,” he began and then we both heard the noise outside.

I’d left the front door open and now Jack strolled in, wearing his ragged

shorts and an old t-shirt. “Hi, Jane. Lucky, I was looking all over for you.”

“You found me,” Lucky said and eased away from me on the sofa.

Jack said to him, “You’ve gotta go. Dad wants to talk to you.”

“He’ll see me later,” Lucky said.

“He said *now*.”

Lucky stood up, looking annoyed and went to the door and said, “Aren’t you coming?” to his brother.

“Dad wants *you*, not me.”

“Whatever,” Lucky snapped. “See you tomorrow, Jane.”

I went outside with Lucky and watched until he walked around a turn in the path that took him out of my view.

When I went back in the cottage, Jack was sitting in the armchair with his feet on the coffee table.

“Get your feet off the furniture,” I said.

“Ooh, snappish,” he said and swung his tan legs down.

“I didn’t ask you to stay.”

“Do you have other plans?”

“No,” I said before I thought to lie.

“How’ve you been?”

I sat on the sofa. I was sure that Lucky was about to share something important with me when Jack crashed in. “If you thought Lucky might be here, you could have called.”

“This is more neighborly,” he said. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“All you ever have is questions. I’ve been fine.”

Loking at the mantle, he said, “Is that one of Mrs. Heyer’s paintings?”

“She gave it to me. It’s the birches.”

“It’s beautiful, but I love the trees,” he said. “She’s kind of famous and that’s probably valuable so take care of it.”

“I’ll take care of it because I love it.”

“That’s an even better reason.” He picked up my Latin book from the table and flipped it open. “*Nihil bonī mihi hīc invenīrī potest*,” he said slowly. “How

was that?”

“Terrible. You’re supposed to pronounce the v’s like w’s.”

“Vhy?” he asked with a smirk.

“Because that’s how it is.”

“Vhat does it mean?” He repeated the sentence again.

I translated the words in my head. “Nothing good can be found here in my opinion.”

He gave a sharp laugh and said, “That sounds about right. That should be the Birch Grove motto.” He repeated the sentence as if memorizing it. He slapped the book down on the table. “Why Latin instead of a living language?”

“It will help with science studies, and I like it,” I said. “It’s specific – the declensions break things down into gender, number, tense, mood. English is too ambiguous and you’re always guessing what people really mean.”

“Do you think everyone should say exactly what they mean?”

I stared at him and said, “I wish *you* would. You might consider taking up Latin.”

Jack grinned. “Maybe I will. Everyone at school treating you all right?”

“Yes.”

“Because these schools can be a bit, you know, elitist and controlling. That’s why I decided to go somewhere else.”

“Your mother said you went to public school for the music program.”

“That, too, and girls, of course.”

As he sat there, I studied him and his out of control curls.

“Do you approve of what you see?” he said.

“Your hair looks like you stuck it in a blender.”

He shrugged. “That’s another reason I couldn’t go to Evergreen Prep – my hair is too messy. Do you think I’m better looking than my brother?”

“If you’re fishing for flattery, you’ve come to the wrong person. No, Lucky’s better looking.”

“You could at least pretend. You could have said that I was good looking in my own special way, like a snowflake.”

“You’re not a snowflake, and it’s obvious that Lucky is really good-looking.”

“Yeah, that’s what the mirror tells me, too. Even my girlfriend tells me that, quite frequently, in fact. Appearances are so important. And Lucky’s nicer than me, right, halfling?”

“He has better manners. He doesn’t call me ridiculous names.” When Jack talked to me I felt wide awake, as if I had to be completely alert to follow the twists in his conversation, and the truth was that I didn’t mind feeling this way. “You brought the pizza.”

“It was the neighborly thing to do, like this. A visit to chat. You could chat more.”

“I think we’re allotted a limited quota of words in our lifetime and you’re using all of mine up.”

“I’m just borrowing them since you’re letting them pile up,” he said with wide grin. “You’re look like a fairy creature, yet you’re as silent and mysterious as a sphinx. A sphinxling. Tell me something in your native woodland language. Or, since ve’re svitching v’s and w’s, voodland.”

“Jack, are you trying to be funny, or annoying? Because I can’t tell.”

He sighed and said, “One day I’ll learn the magic words to win your trust. They may even be in Latin, although I think your tongue predates human history.” Then he stood up. “Guess I’ll go and get ready for my date. I’m taking Hattie out tonight. She’s gorgeous, don’t you think? She’s as gorgeous as Lucky is handsome.”

“What’s important to me is that she’s friendly and not stuck-up.”

“Her family goes back generations with Birch Grove. She’s really exceptional. Not many girls are gorgeous *and* smart *and* talented *and* her family has truckloads of money. Have you heard her play the piano? Like an angel, and she speaks French like Marcel Marceau. She draws extremely well.”

He seemed more intent on taunting me than praising her, so I said, “You wouldn’t want to be late then.” I stood and walked him to the door.

“Don’t I get a goodbye hug?” he asked as he stood on the porch.

He was still grinning and I suddenly saw why Hattie would think he was attractive with his leaf-green eyes and wide mouth that was always curling up in a smile, tan muscled arms, and his scent of fresh green things and the grove.

He said, “A hug is the neighborly thing to do.”

“I come from a different neighborhood,” I said and I shut the door on him.

Then I leaned against the door and wondered what had happened. Why did everything the Monroe brothers say seem to have another meaning? Why couldn't they speak directly?

I sat down and opened a composition book. I ran a line vertically down the page. On one side I wrote down everything I'd remembered Lucky telling me. On the other side, I wrote possible interpretations. Why had Lucky asked if I mind if he used me? People who used people didn't ask permission.

I didn't have enough data, so I added all the things Jack had said, too. His nonsense only made me more bewildered.

I wasn't comfortable leaving such private information where one of my friends could find it. I hid the notebook behind the washer/dryer with my cash.

On Sunday afternoon, I filed my short nails until the edges were even. I carefully stroked on the clear pink nail polish. Some smeared on my cuticles, and I had to start over again. When the nail polish dried, I got dressed in my best jeans and a white cami under a purple sweater.

I dabbed concealer on a red spot on my chin that had erupted overnight. I stroked on a light coat of mascara, brushed on a little blush, and slicked on lip gloss. My hair looked a little fuller and healthier since Mary Violet had trimmed the ends.

I smelled the cologne samples she'd given me and found a citrusy one I liked.

I took a last look in the mirror and tried to tell myself that I looked good, but I didn't look as if I was trying too hard.

I turned on the porch light and locked the front door as I left. The days had quickly become shorter and cooler. As I walked up the path toward the house on the hill, I passed the amphitheatre. The sunlight flashed off something by a

bench.

At first I thought it might be a bottle cap or aluminum gum wrapper. With the edge of my shoe, I pushed aside the dry brown leaves and saw a small silver penknife. As I leaned over to pick it up, I noticed the two dark brownish-maroon spots on the gray-veined marble bench. On impulse, I licked the tip of my finger and dragged it across one of the spots. My finger came away red.

It was blood.

I looked around, but didn't see any blood spots or splatters on the ground, the kind you see when someone's run off. We'd had those at my old school – splashes, splatters, puddles, sprays.

No, it was only these two spots.

The knife was about three inches long with that soft luster that comes from age. There was a pretty scrolling design etched on the handle. It looked expensive.

Hattie had been here last week and this knife was had a feminine design. The cutters I'd known had been like a cracked glass, able to break at any moment, and Hattie didn't seem like that. I put the knife in my pocket and walked up the hill to the headmistress's house.

Mrs. Monroe answered my knock. "Hello, Jane. Why don't you look nice today!"

"Hello, Mrs. Monroe." Once again I was struck by how dark the interior of the house was. I wondered why they turned on lamps instead of opening the drapes.

"Lucky is in the boys' study. Go upstairs, turn right and go all the way down the hall."

As I walked upstairs, the penknife in my pocket hit my thigh. At the top of the stairs was a mirror. I took a quick look and saw that the breeze had mussed my hair. I smoothed it down and took a deep breath before walking on.

My footsteps were muffled by a thick woven rug, in shades of dark reds and browns, the color of drying blood and dead leaves. The door at the end of the hall was open, and I walked into a large corner room.

Windows looked out on tall shadowy pines crowding the house. There were long desks beneath each window, and the wall closest to the door had floor-to-ceiling bookcases. The back of a long blue sofa faced me. Opposite the sofa was a dark blue leather chair and an ottoman.

“Lucky?” I said.

His blond head popped up from the sofa back. “Hey, Jane. Come on in.” His head dropped back out of sight.

I went round the sofa and saw Lucky lying on his back, tossing a baseball from hand to hand.

Sitting on the ottoman, I said, “You have your own study?”

“I’d rather have a home theater,” he said. “Mom thinks the bigger the screen, the smaller the brain.”

I smiled and waited, hoping he would continue our conversation of the day before.

He swung his long legs down and sat up. “I guess we better get to chem.”

I tried not to show my disappointment as I followed him to one of the long desks. We reviewed his previous week’s work with metric units of mass and volume and prepped for his next chapter on the physical properties of matter. He kept up easily with the problems.

“You don’t need my help,” I blurted.

“I do need you, Jane,” he said, putting down his pencil and turning to me.

“I mean, you don’t need me to explain. You can do all this on your own.”

His blue eyes gazed at me for tortuous seconds before saying, “You smell nice.”

I flushed and I kept my eyes on his.

He took my hand and said, “I can do the chemistry on my own, but I’ll do better if you keep me on track. I need someone beside me for support, someone I can confide in who won’t judge me. Don’t you want to be that person?”

My breathing quickened. “Is this what you meant about using me?”

“I’m saying that I want you to be there for me. To be my friend and my... and more. I want you to be loyal to me and to stay with me through anything.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Lucky,” I said with frustration. “Why can’t you just be direct and tell me if you want me for a friend, or more and what exactly?”

“More.”

My heart raced, but I was still confused and cautious. “A girlfriend?” I said, hoping desperately that he wouldn’t laugh in my face.

“Girlfriends are temporary,” he said seriously. His grip on my hand tightened. “Will you be loyal to me, Jane?”

“I still know what you want, Lucky, but I’ll be loyal to you so long as you are deserving of loyalty.”

He smiled and lifted my hand and then turned it over. He bent down and kissed my wrist, his lips soft and moist.

“I knew I could count on you,” he said. “You won’t go away and leave me, will you?”

What a strange question. “Where would I go?”

We both jumped at the sounds down the hall. I leaned away from Lucky as Jack came in. He looked from one of us to the other.

Lucky lifted his chin. “What is it *now*, Jack?”

Jack gave me a look that made me feel as if he’d caught us doing something terrible. “Dinner’s ready,” he said, then turned and left.

Lucky stood and took my hand, pulling me up. “You need more red meat in you. I want to keep you healthy.”

I couldn’t help smiling at him because he was so beautiful and now I knew that he wanted me. *How* exactly he wanted me didn’t matter as much as his need for me.

Chapter 11

“Students are expected to uphold Birch Grove’s ethical, legal and moral standards both on campus and off-campus. Disciplinary action will be taken against any student who threatens the mental or physical well-being against any other person.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

MRS. MONROE had made roast beef, so raw that I asked for the end of the roast, which was browned and savory.

It was an uncomfortably quiet meal. Jack pushed his food around on his plate. Mr. Monroe stared off again, distracted. He finished his meat and filled his glass with red wine as he had throughout the meal, and I wondered if he drank this much every night.

As I helped clear away the dishes, Mrs. Monroe said, “Jane, your essay was quite an improvement. I was glad to read your spirited analysis of the story.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“You’ll get it back with my comments tomorrow. Your structure is sound, though.”

After dinner, Lucky offered to walk me back home. Once we were in the grove, he swung an arm over my shoulders. It could have been just friendly, but I wanted the walk to last forever.

He paused at the amphitheatre. “I like this place,” he said. “Sometimes I come here at night to chill.”

“Hattie likes it here, too,” I said as I bent to touch a cool marble bench.

“All the girls do. They think it’s romantic. I bet Mary Violet would say so.”

“I never know what crazy thing she’ll say.”

“She’s an attention-whore,” he said.

I was taken aback and said, “That’s really harsh and unfair. MV likes to make others happy, which isn’t selfish. It’s generous. She’s one of the nicest

people I've ever met."

"I didn't mean it in a bad way," he said. "I meant, like, she's an extrovert."

I looked at him to see if he was just backtracking because I'd reacted, or if he was being sincere. He smiled at me and looked earnest and kicked at dry leaves as we began to walk again.

When we reached the cottage, I hoped he might come in. He faced me and I couldn't breathe anymore. Then he brushed my hair back and his mouth went to the side of my throat. He put an arm around my waist drawing me close.

I arched my neck back, astonished by his mouth on my skin, thrilled by the feel of his body against mine, and I closed my eyes.

When he nipped my throat with his teeth, my first reflex was to jump away.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked anxiously.

"You surprised me." And made me nervous and excited and confused and unsure.

He kept his arm around my waist. "Jane, don't tell anyone what I said to you before, about us."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Everyone gossips here. Some of the girls will be jealous because they've been after me and they'll be total bitches to you. Once people get to know you, we can be more open about our..."

"Our what?"

He paused and considered then added, "About us. See ya."

I stood there stunned. He'd said girlfriends were temporary, but hadn't his kiss, even though it was on my neck, meant something?

It had to me. It *must* have to him.

I played his words and the kiss – and the nip -- over and over in my head. Before I could forget, I took out the composition book and wrote down everything Lucky had said and done.

I was about to hide the book in the laundry room with my cash when I realized that I should probably write down Jack's weird behavior, too.

All through evening, I imagined things I could have said, things Lucky

could have said, the ways we could have touched each other. Then I thought of his hostility to Jack and the crude way he'd spoken about Mary Violet. He couldn't have been aware of how thoughtless he seemed.

My biggest question was, *why me?* Of all the hundreds of girls here at Birch Grove -- talented, beautiful, rich girls -- why had Lucien Monroe chosen me as a special friend? And I thought, maybe Lucky has a secret that he can't share with anyone he knows. But a foster kid would understand because we've been through it all.

When I was undressing for bed, something fell out of my jeans and thudded onto the floor. I'd forgotten all about the silver penknife.

On Monday, I asked Hattie if we could talk for a minute. We stepped into an empty hall, near the chapel. I pulled the silver penknife from my pocket of my school blazer and showed her it to her.

"Hattie, I found this at the amphitheatre."

Hattie took it from me with a smile. "I must have dropped it when was out there. It was my great-grandmother's."

"I don't have to be worried, do I, Hattie? Why were there spots of blood on the bench?"

"You think I'm a cutter, don't you?"

"If you are, I'd like to help in any way I can."

"I'm not." She rolled up her sleeves, revealing flawless skin so pale that the blue veins showed clearly on her wrists. "See." Then she hiked up her skirt, showing off her slim perfect legs. "Not a mark. I don't even have scars."

"Why were there spots of blood?"

"I took the knife out for protection. Pretty silly since this is the safest place in the world. I was playing with it and I nicked my finger." She held up her forefinger. "All better now."

I smiled. "Sorry. I had to ask, in case."

"It's okay. I asked when I thought something was bothering you. We've got to watch each other's backs," she said. "I wanted to tell you, there's a party on Friday at the country club. Jack's band is playing. Do you want to come?"

“Sure.”

“Great, Constance and MV are coming.” She began to walk back to the main hallway and added casually, “Lucky will be there, too.”

Being happy was strange and wonderful. My mind was filled with thoughts of Lucky, the way he looked and felt, the things he’d said and done, and there was little room for anything else. Despite my promise not to say anything, I was dying to tell someone, to get another opinion on what he’d meant.

I came close to telling Hattie when we went for lunch at the Free Pop. Constance and Mary Violet had gone to the drugstore to buy mints because Constance had had a garlicky salad.

Hattie said, “You’ve been smiling all day. You like it here, don’t you?”

“Getting away from the foster home was enough to make me happy, but having the cottage, such a great school, and everything else... It’s more than I could have asked for.”

“You haven’t had any more incidents, no strange messages?”

“No, everything’s been good. Better than good. Fantastic.”

After homeroom on Thursday, Mr. Mason stopped me on my way out and said, “Jane, would you come see me after school today?”

“Is it about my work, sir?” I asked.

“No, you’re doing great. I thought we should chat since I’m your homeroom teacher and you’re new.” He took off his glasses and polished them with a square of white cloth.

“We have to put the *Weekly* to bed this afternoon,” I said. “Ms. Chu said we’d be busy until after five.”

“Come as late as you like. I’ve got papers to grade and I’ll be here for hours.

“Should I come to your office?”

“I’ll be here in the lab,” he said.

When I returned to the chem lab a little after six p.m., Mr. Mason was standing at the window staring out to the thick green trees beyond. He turned at the sound of my footsteps.

Over the weeks, I'd noticed that he looked neglected. His shirt was badly ironed and his graying hair had grown shaggy. His favorite tweed jacket was missing a leather button. His classroom lights were on late every night.

He put down a batch of papers on the ledge under the window and said, "Do you have an article in this issue of the newspaper?"

"I wrote a piece on the scholarship program."

"A *piece*, hmm?" He smiled. "My wife was a scholarship girl here, too. She was an orphan and Birch Grove paid for her tuition and provided housing. You probably heard that she passed away last year."

"Yes, I'm sorry, Mr. Mason."

"She came back to teach here because she was so grateful for all that Birch Grove had done for her," he said. "Birch Grove can give you so much, Jane. Don't underestimate the power and connections of this school."

"No, sir," I said, recalling the ease with which Mrs. Monroe's attorney got my emancipation. "Did Mrs. Mason live here in the cottage, too?"

"The groundskeeper lived in it in those days. No, Mrs. Mason was taken in by Mrs. Monroe's family. My wife and Mrs. Monroe were as close as sisters. Well, that's the wonder of Birch Grove. It's like a family and it's hard to leave," he said. "But I really wanted to know how everything's going."

Is Mrs. Monroe's course working out?"

"Thanks for helping me transfer in. It's much better than the other course, and she's a really good teacher."

"But?" he said.

"But I still don't see the use of analyzing some long dead writer's fantasy. It's not chem."

"I feel the same way," he said. "Let's not tell anyone though, because people always think something's wrong with you if you'd rather be in a lab than reading a novel."

I smiled with him and said, "Deal."

"Good. If you'd like any assistance, either academically or emotionally, I could set up with tutors or counselors."

“It’s hard, but I’m keeping up.”

“Terrific. You’re my top student in Chemistry Honors, you know, so I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Me, too,” I said, feeling really proud at his compliment.

He took a red pencil from his pocket and said, “I suppose we both better get to our homework.”

“Yes, sir. Good night, Mr. Mason.”

“Good night, Jane.”

I was still savoring Mr. Mason’s praise as I went down the shadowy stairwell. The building seemed like a different world when it was empty with only a few low-wattage bulbs providing dim circles of light. My leather shoes sounded too loud on the linoleum and I found myself walking softly.

As I turned a corner toward the lockers, I saw someone down the hall and the little hairs on the back of my neck went up in warning that something was wrong.

A big hulking girl wearing jeans and a black sweatshirt with the hood up over her head was fiddling with a locker. I took two steps forward and saw that she was by *my* locker.

“Hey!” I called.

She ducked her head so I couldn’t see her face and dashed off in the other direction. I took off after her. She turned down the hall with the music practice rooms.

Without thinking, I tore off after her, yelling, “Hey, you!” I wasn’t far behind, yet when I rounded the corner, the hallway was shadowy and empty.

The hall dead-ended into an emergency exit door with a glowing red light. If the girl had opened it, an alarm would have gone off. My heart was pounded and every nerve was alert as I went up and down the hall, looking into the practice rooms. Each was empty.

She *couldn’t* have disappeared, so I checked every room again.

The dim halls and her disappearance made me think for a moment that I’d seen a ghost, but I stopped that thought as soon as I had it, because there was

always a reason for something. She must have somehow gotten to the end of the hall and out the emergency exit without setting it off. Which means that she knew the access code for the emergency exit.

I rushed back to the other hallway. My locker was closed, but not locked. When I opened it, I saw the manila envelope atop my pile of books.

Adrenaline still courses through me, making my hands tremble as I took three slips of paper, each cut from a magazine headline, out of the envelope. One said, “To Live.” The second said, “Things You *Must* Do.” The third said, “Get Out.”

I crumpled the clippings into a ball and shoved them in my book bag. I left the building and glanced back. The only lighted room was the chemistry lab. Mr. Mason was still silhouetted against the front window, which didn’t have a view to the emergency exit.

When I got to my cottage, I locked the door and called Hattie. I told her exactly what had happened and she said, “Jane, this is awful!”

“Whoever she is was able to get my combination and the code to turn off and reset the emergency alarm,” I said.

“Could it be someone who has work-study in the admin offices? They’ve got all the locker combinations and maybe they’d know how to get past the emergency exit. Are you sure you didn’t see what she looked like?”

“She kept her face down, and she was tall and stocky. It was too dark, and I don’t have your night-vision.”

“I don’t know what to say, Jane,” she said. “Have you upset anyone, or has anyone said anything to you?”

“Not that I know of. Catalina’s the only one who’s been a bitch, but I’m sure it wasn’t her. She doesn’t give a damn about me.”

“I can’t believe you chased her.”

“Neither can I.” I realized that it was completely out of character for me to go after someone. “I was just so mad because...because I love being here.”

“We *have* to tell Mrs. Monroe.”

“Whoever it was ran away, so she’s more scared of me than I am of her,” I

said. “If I complain it will make me seem like I’m the cause of the problem.”

“No it won’t, Jane. We’re supposed to report problems.”

I thought about the pros and cons of telling Mrs. Monroe. “No, whenever adults get involved, they blow everything up bigger than it is.”

“I think you have to stop something that’s wrong.”

“It only matters if I make it matter. I probably shouldn’t have even told you. Let’s drop it,” I said. “What should I wear to the party?”

“We’ll be wearing dresses. Do you have dress?”

“I have a skirt.”

“If you were close to my size, I’d lend you something. Let me talk to Mary Violet. She’s got a genius for this sort of thing.”

“Don’t tell her about what happened. Don’t tell anyone. Promise.”

She sighed heavily. “All right. I promise, but I don’t agree at all. Promise me that you’ll think about telling Mrs. Monroe.”

“Okay,” I said, but I knew I wouldn’t change my mind.

We said goodbye and Mary Violet called five minutes later. “Did you know that my mother has a room like a museum where she keeps all our dresses?”

“Your clothes wouldn’t fit me, MV.”

“State the obvious, please! You’re about the same size as Agnes and she’s got a pile of dresses that she won’t wear.”

“Really?” I said hopefully.

“Really. My mother and all the aunties keep buying them hoping she’ll be more feminine, which is like, ugh, why do they need *her* to be feminine when they’ve got me?” she said.

“Good point.”

“Come over tomorrow after school. We can get ready for the party together. Constance is coming, but Hattie’s going out to dinner with Jacob first. He’ll probably take her to that depressing old people restaurant in town.”

“If you think...”

“I don’t think. I *know*. The dresses are very pretty, which is why Agnes won’t have anything to do with them.”

“You keep giving me things, MV.”

“I know – isn’t it fabulous? At last I can exert my influence over someone. Until tomorrow, darling! ”

That was one problem solved, but I had a lot of other things to figure out. I wrote down and dated the incident in my composition book. Then I smoothed out the crumpled magazine clippings, placed them back in the white envelope and put the envelope in the notebook.

I checked my doors and windows twice before I went to bed. I slept fitfully. My thoughts jumped from the bitch who’d broken into my locker to the party and seeing Lucky there. I was quite aware that he hadn’t mentioned it to me, but I didn’t know if he assumed I was going, or didn’t care, or didn’t want me there.

The next morning, I collected pennies and nickels, screws and nails from the laundry room, paperclips and small metal objects. I put them in a glass jar and screwed the top on. The jar rattled loudly when I shook it. I put the jar in my book bag with the things I’d need for tonight.

As I joined the other girls heading into the main hall in their uniforms, I looked for tall, solid girls. I remembered Mary Violet’s description of Bebe: a big strong girl, like a female wrestler. Bebe was in Europe though.

I went to my locker and stacked my books high. When no one was looking, I slipped the glass jar out of my tote and balanced it precariously on top of the books. Holding the jar in place, I eased the locker door shut. If anyone opened it normally, the jar would crash down and shatter.

I was jumpy and anxious as I took my seat in chem lab. Mary Violet came into room grinning wildly. “JW, you will not believe the ensembles I’ve put together for you to try on. I will transform you into a mini-diva.”

“MV, repeat after me, *Jane is not a Barbie doll.*”

“Jane is not blah, blah, blah,” she said. “Tragically, Mother told me I can’t dress like a courtesan. Courtesan is French for high-class ho. They could discuss politics and art and also had secret techniques that would make men insane with desire and lust.” Mary Violet widened her big blue eyes and puffed out her pink

cheeks. “Can you imagine!”

Her words triggered an indistinct memory. My step-father looms over my mother. Her arms are covering her face and she’s sobbing.

I’ve never remembered this before and I don’t know if it’s real or something I’ve imagined.

I was about to tell MV not to wish for a man driven insane with lust when Mr. Mason started class.

My locker was undisturbed that day. I left the glass jar balanced against the locker door as I went to meet Mary Violet and Constance on the front steps of the school.

Chapter 12

“Attire should be modest and students should be well-groomed.

Undergarments should never be visible and, on free-dress days, students are prohibited from wearing ‘tube tops,’ halter tops, or exposing midriffs. All shirt straps must be at minimum two-inches in width.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

CONSTANCE, holding a suit bag, was talking to Mary Violet on the front steps of the school.

“Hey, JW,” Mary Violet said as I went to them. “Constance is brutally crushing my dreams.”

“I am not,” the other girl said. She adjusted the suit bag in her hand. “I’m telling her to be realistic.”

“Oh, don’t go to Jane to back you up,” Mary Violet said. “She’s already too, too realistic.”

We started walking together in the direction of Mary Violet’s house.

“I’m trying to be more fun,” I said. “I’m going to the party and wearing a dress.”

Constance said to MV, “You should limit your fantasies to your Hello, Kitty diary and your short stories.”

“That’s so unambitious. If you had been in charge of the space program, we never would have put a man on the sun.”

“We haven’t...” Constance began and said, “What would you do without me to make you funny?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Mary Violet said and bumped her hip against Constance’s.

We rounded the drive and my friends waved and called out to all the other girls going home.

It wasn’t until we reached the Heyers’ street that Mary Violet said, “Constance thinks that Lucky won’t ever fall in love with me. She thinks I’m too

ugly and stupid.”

“I did *not* say that,” Constance said, narrowing her almond eyes. “I said you’re too girly-sissy.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“It is *not*,” Constance answered. “Jane, tell her it’s not the same thing.”

“It’s not the same thing,” I said.

Constance said, “Even if Lucky suddenly realized that you’re...”

“Gorgeous and brilliant and sexy,” Mary Violet said.

“Sure, why not?” her friend said. “Why would you even want to date the headmistress’s son? It would complicate everything at school for you.”

“Hattie dates the headmistress’s son, and you don’t give her grief.”

“That’s different. Hattie’s a Tyler. They’re as old as the Monroes here. Mrs. Monroe couldn’t object even if she didn’t like Hattie,” Constance said.

“Why do you care about Lucien Monroe anyway? He’s kind of...”

“He’s stunning!” Mary Violet turned to me and said, “Isn’t Lucky stunning?”

“Yes,” I said, but I asked Constance, “He’s kind of what?”

“A little too perfect. It’s all polished surface like a mirror reflecting what you want to see, and I wonder if there’s anything else. He’s boring.”

“You’re crazy! His manners are divine,” Mary Violet said. “Don’t you remember in sixth grade when the boys came to Miss Harlot’s School of Croquet? Jack put on his blazer backwards because he thought it was funny—“

“It *was* funny,” Constance said to me.

“Okay, it *was* funny, but Lucky was the only one who bowed after a waltz,” Mary Violet said. “He does the two-step like an angel.”

I tucked away all this information to think about later, and I asked, “Has Lucky ever gone out anyone at Birch Grove?”

“Frosh year he was a total womanizer,” Constance said. “He was going through all the juniors, but we heard that Mrs. Monroe put a stop to that.”

Mary Violet said, “We thought there was something going on between him and Hattie. When we asked, she said there wasn’t. I don’t know if I completely

believe her.”

Constance waved her narrow fingers as if she shooing away a fly. “You imagine them together because they *look* good together. They’re more like brother and sister.”

“By that thinking, so are Jack and Hattie,” Mary Violet said.

Constance shrugged. “You said it, not me.”

“If Hattie likes Lucky, she’d date him, right?” I said. “What’s to stop her?”

“Not a blessed thing,” Constance said. “MV finds it impossible to believe that Hattie would choose an interesting personality over good looks, although I think Jack is way hotter than Lucky.”

“Lucky has gorgeous looks and fantastic manners,” Mary Violet said.

Constance smiled at me and said, “We’re such losers, aren’t we? We have so few guys here that we get worked up over the headmistress’s sons. I hope that some of the Evergreeners have gotten more interesting over the summer.”

We arrived at the Heyers’ house and went through the back entrance. Mrs. Heyer was in the kitchen swirling chocolate frosting on cupcakes. We all said hello.

“Mother, dearest,” Mary Violet said, “we’ll be in the Wardroom Museum.”

Mrs. Heyer looked at her daughter and said, “You are *not* allowed to borrow any of my gowns. Nothing with a low décolletage.”

“I know, I know, no bounteous cleavage.”

As soon as we were away from the kitchen, Candace said to me, “Mary Violet is still in trouble for sending photos that almost showed nip to a guy she met last summer.”

“It was only sideboob,” MV said primly.

I said, “So that’s why your mother checks all your online activity?”

Mary Violet nodded. “But she was totally overreacting. Nothing actually showed. She’s so much worse. Once she made pink cupcakes and put Hershey’s strawberry kisses in the center of each one. It was appalling.”

“They tasted good,” Constance said.

“I had to close my eyes to eat them. We had an intervention and begged

her never to make vulva cupcakes.”

“No, you didn’t,” Constance said.

“We did, and I read my poem, ‘Ode to an Artistic Mother.’” Mary Violet dropped her bag, held out her arms, and recited:

*“Your cupcakes are tender and quite delish,
But won’t you grant your children’s wish?
A mother’s love is what we cherish
So please no coconut as pubic hairish,
Nor gummy worms as labial lips
Or any substance for a clitoris.
We firmly support your creative expressions
But vulva cupcakes will cause insurrection.”*

Constance and I were laughing so hard that we were doubled over, and Mary Violet said, “And she has the nerve to tell me not to dress skanky.”

“Please don’t ever change, MV,” I said.

“Only my clothes.”

MV opened the door to a room near her mother’s art studio. Three sides had chrome clothes racks like a department store, and the fourth wall had shelves of purses and shoes. There were full length mirrors and a bench with pale blue velvet cushions.

Several dresses hung from one rolling rack.

“*Voila!*” she said, holding her hand toward the rolling rack. “I picked these out last night.”

The dresses were all my size and looked as if they’d never been worn. Clearly they’d been chosen for Agnes: there wasn’t a pink or frilly one in the bunch.

“Do you like them?” Mary Violet asked.

“Of course!” I caressed a chocolate brown velvet dress.

“Agnes won’t even try them on. She’s afraid it will affect her standing as a potential lesbian even though I tried to convince her that lipstick lesbians wear dresses.” She lifted the skirt of sleeveless cotton dress. “What about this one?”

Constance picked out a scoop neck with a peach and white swirly pattern. “This is pretty.” She held it up in front of me and I looked in the mirror.

My hand went to an emerald green dress and I took it off the rack and held it in front of me.

Mary Violet said, “Empire waist, which makes the most of your slip of a figure, and the color’s fabulous on you.”

They made me try on all the clothes. When I stripped down to my underwear, I made sure to let my hair fall over my left shoulder to hide the scar, but I heard Constance gasp.

“A tattoo! Jane Williams, you’re a wild thing.”

“What is the H mean?” MV asked. “Is it gang ink?”

“It’s for my friend, Hosea. He got meningitis and died.”

“Oh,” they said together.

The dark green fit the best. The narrow cut made me look taller. I was about to slide on my too-big plastic sandals when my Mary Violet said, “Wait! We have a present for you.”

Constance went to her suit bag and unzipped it. She took out a cloth bag tied at the top with a big white ribbon. “This is from us to you.”

I took the bag and felt the lumpy weight inside. Then I untied the ribbon.

Inside was a pair of pretty black open-toe heels. “How did you...” I began, touching the smooth leather. “They’re my size.”

“Well, duh,” Mary Violet said. “I looked in your closet when we spent the night and I knew you needed heels. We all pitched in.”

“Thank you,” I said and my eyes welled up.

My friends put their arms around me and said, “Group hug!”

They helped me pick out a small black velvet evening bag and a black cashmere shawl.

Agnes poked her head in the wardrobe museum, took one look at me, and said, “It fits you. Keep it. I hate dresses.”

It took me only ten minutes to dress for the evening, and a few minutes to put on my makeup and brush out my hair. Constance wore a turquoise and black geometric print dress and twisted her hair up on her head, holding it with clips decorated with silver butterflies that matched dangling silver earrings.

Constance and I sat on the bed and watched Mary Violet's elaborate preparations. She kept trying on different combinations of clothes, before choosing one of her many pink outfits.

Then MV spent ages messing with her blonde curls, before letting her hair down as it had been when we left campus. When she was finished, she took a look at me and said, "Jewelry."

She wanted me to wear big hoop earrings. "Even Constance is wearing earrings and a bracelet and she's practically a Puritan."

"I am not a Puritan," Constance said. "I don't need to decorate myself like a Christmas tree every time I go out."

"I don't have pierced ears," I said, "and those bracelets you're looking at are too, uhm, clanky for me. I don't need anything."

Mary Violet huffed out a breath. "Okay, baby steps."

As she drove us to the party in her mother's black Saab, I kept smoothing the silky material of my dress and the soft shawl. The thought of seeing Lucky made me so apprehensive I couldn't pay attention to the conversation.

We took winding, dark roads into the hills and stopped at a gate with an elderly guard at the booth. A narrow sign read *Greenwood Country Club* in small white letters.

Mary Violet opened her window and said, "Hi, Mr. Haggerty."

"Hi, sunshine," he said and pushed a button so that the big gate swung open. "Have a good time."

"See you later." Once we got through the gate, we drove along the golf course. "Mr. Haggerty has been here since the dawn of man," Mary Violet said. "He once caught my mother and her friends skinny-dipping, and she still gets as red as a tomato when she sees him. That's why you should never skinny-dip near home."

"Thanks for your wisdom, MV," Constance said.

"If you're going to be so ungrateful, I'm going to stop sharing important life lessons with you." MV parked in a lot by a low building near swimming pools that glowed aqua in the night. Another older and more impressive building

was set farther back.

Constance said, “This warehouse is the teen center.”

“They keep us away from the civilized people,” Mary Violet added.

Kids were getting out of cars and going into the building. The guys wore suits, most of them with loosened ties and tennis shoes, and the girls darted to greet one another, like dragonflies in their vivid silk dresses. I recognized lots of Birch Grove students. They looked much older dressed up like this.

“Does anyone ever crash these parties?” I asked. At my school there cops, security guards, and cyclone fencing at every event.

“They can’t,” Constance said. “We know everyone and if an outsider even drives into town, the sheriff stops them.”

We walked inside to a large dark hall. A DJ, stationed on a platform in the corner, was spinning an indie tune that sounded familiar. Strings of lights radiated out from central points on the ceiling, like starbursts.

Chairs, benches, and trees in large pots created nooks around the periphery of the room. Tables with refreshments were set up at one end of the hall. At the other was a stage with band equipment. Kids hung out in groups, laughing and talking, with the ease of knowing they belonged.

I followed my friends. Constance turned back to me and said, “We always find a good place to survey the terrain and then we go on reconnaissance missions.”

Mary Violet said, “Have you been watching the Military Channel with your dad again?”

“He wants to bond with me,” Constance said.

They claimed a bench near the DJ’s stand and we put our sweaters and shawls there. Mary Violet and Constance left their clutches on the bench, trusting that they’d be safe. I kept hold of my small bag, which held my keys.

We went to the refreshment table where people were ladling red punch from big silver bowls to glasses.

“It’s the famous Greenwood Country Club punch,” Mary Violet said. “The secret recipe is ginger ale, sugar, raspberry puree, lemon juice, orange juice, and

ice. In the old days, someone always put rum in it. Now the club's so strict that we have to drink outside like animals."

Constance said, "You can't drink anyway. You're the designated driver."

"They let you drink?" I asked.

"Only if everyone pretends it isn't happening," Constance said. "It's part of Greenwood's see-no-evil, hear-no-evil moral code."

"Hey, guys!"

We turned to see Hattie coming toward us, holding hands with Jack. Hattie's tousled dark hair hung down her back and she wore a strapless scarlet dress showed off her beautiful smooth skin. Glittering gold earrings with red gems dangled from her lobes.

I felt a complicated pang of admiration for my friend's beauty and hurt that I would never be as pretty. I remembered Jack's comment about the importance of looks and wondered if he'd meant it snidely or sincerely.

Standing beside Hattie, Jack looked less ramshackle and more arty and sophisticated. He wore a battered corduroy jacket over a t-shirt, ancient jeans and black boots. He hadn't shaved and his curly hair looked as if he'd come back from cycling in a hurricane.

Everyone said hello to each other. I hung back as MV grabbed Jack's arm and said, "I can't believe your mother let you go out like this."

"I'm a grown man," he said and gave MV a loud smacking kiss on her cheek. "You look very *blonde*, Mary Violet."

"I hear that sarcasm in your voice, Jacob Monroe."

"You always were too smart for me, Mary Violet."

"That's why men are so intimidated by me," she said. "Is your brother here yet?"

"He'll be here later." Jack saw me standing back. "Jane, did you come to hear Dog Waffle?" He saw my expression and said, "Dog Waffle. It's my band. I guess the answer is no. Doesn't Hattie look beautiful?"

"Yes," I said. "Even more so than usual."

Hattie reached out and took my hand. "You look pretty in that dress. The

color is one of my favorites.”

“I thought red was your favorite,” Jack said. “Valentines, roses, strawberries, blood—”

Hattie interrupted, saying, “Blood-red lipstick, rubies, beets.”

“No one likes beets,” Mary Violet said.

“MV, you always make these grand pronouncements,” Constance said.

“With you it’s always *everybody* or *nobody*. You have a binary approach to life.”

“My mind is like a super computer,” MV said. “Let’s do a lap of the room. Hattie, are you coming or will be acting all groupie and sexually servicing the band members?”

“That was my plan, MV,” Hattie said.

Jack feigned shock and said, “How do I get in on the groupie action?” and Hattie slapped his arm and said to us, “I’ll catch up with you.”

I followed Mary Violet and Constance as they began making their way around the room, which had quickly become crowded. Most people looked like juniors or seniors, and several looked college-age.

My friends were so busy talking to people that it was easy for me to slide away, keeping to the comfort of the periphery.

The music stopped and the stage lights came on. Jack and three other guys hopped onstage. One guy went to the drum set, another carried a bass, and Jack picked up a guitar from a stand, and a thin guy with a bleached buzz cut took the center mike.

The DJ announced, “Greenwood’s own, Dog Waffle.”

The crowd clapped and hooted as the singer shouted, “*Uno, dos*, three, four...”

I moved back around to where my friends had left their things. I sat hidden by one of the potted trees and watched the band as best I could over the people standing.

At City Central, almost everyone listened to hip-hop, and I didn’t know much about rock. The band was too loud for the room, and the sound bounced around, more noise than music. I could only make out a few lyrics. It was a song

about deceit.

The band played four more songs and the more I listened, the more I liked them. The lyrics were clever, not just the usual you/true/blue monosyllabic rhyme, and the harder edge cranked up the energy of the room.

It was obvious even to me that Jack was a much better musician than the rest of the band. He played with his head down and his hair hanging over his face. Every now and then, he'd look at the other guys and grin. The lights played on his strong nose and chin and caught the glint of his eyes. His smile was so infectious that I found myself smiling, too.

Then I caught sight of Lucky's golden head near the front of the stage. There was a tall honey-haired person beside him. She was Catalina, and Lucky was leaning close to talk to her. The beautiful girl lifted her face toward to him as she laughed. His hand went up to stroke her hair.

Hurt gripped me and twisted hard. How stupid was I to believe Lucky's *girlfriends are temporary* speech, to think that he just wanted an adoring audience in addition to real girlfriends? How stupid was I to think that I might have meant something to him? I needed to get out of here, and I hoped that I could find my way back to my cottage, because I needed to cry.

Then I would crush down the traitorous emotions which had given me false hope.

Chapter 13

“Possession of the following will result in serious and immediate action, including the possibility of expulsion: alcohol; drugs; weapons, including guns, knives...”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

“Jane! There you are. What’s the matter?” Hattie caught my arm as I reached the door.

“Nothing. I have to go. I’m...I don’t feel well.”

She put her arm around my shoulders. “We’ll go out in the fresh air.”

Outside, I inhaled the cold air, feeling as if I could breathe again. Across the lot the blue pools looked pure and bright. Voices floated from dark shadows under the trees beyond. A bottle crashed on cement somewhere and laughter followed.

Hattie wrapped her arms around her body and said, “It gets too stuffy in there. Are you coming down with something?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine, really.”

“Jane, I can tell you’re *not* fine. What’s wrong?”

I looked into her hazel eyes and wished I hadn’t promised Lucky not to say anything. “I’m not very good at social things. I’d rather be home.”

“If you stay at home, you’ll never learn to handle parties. Everyone here is okay, but you have to put some effort into getting to know them. It’s not instant.”

I nodded. Finally I admitted, “I saw Lucky in there. With Catalina.”

“She’s is *so* not interested in him. He’s too small-town for her,” Hattie said casually. “Lucky’s a tease. He flirts with Catalina because he thinks it makes other girls jealous.”

Had he been teasing me? “I thought that maybe...”

“Lucky likes to pretend that Catalina’s sexier and prettier than anyone from Greenwood could *ever* possibly be. As if we’re so threatened by someone who’ll be gone as soon as she graduates.”

“To college, you mean?”

“Yes, and her family’s only here for a few years. Her father works for a multinational and they move a lot.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling foolish for overreacting. “Hattie, what if the person who’s been leaving those messages is here?”

“Is that what’s really bothering you? No one’s going to get by me to hurt you, Jane.”

I smiled at the thought of Hattie in a cat fight. “You’d really throw down for me?”

“Absolutely! Let’s go back in. Unless you want a drink first. Some of my friends set up a bar behind the pool house.”

I realized that from her relaxed manner that she’d been drinking. “No, thanks.”

“Why do you always keep such tight control of yourself?”

“It’s the only thing in my life I ever could control.” I tried to explain. “If you’re small and in a sketchy environment, you’ve got to be alert and careful all the time.”

“I know you might not think so, but I have to watch out, too, Jane.” She said it so seriously that I assumed it was the vodka talking, because what would a girl like Hattie have to worry about?

But I went back inside with her as the band was ended their set. The crowd clapped and hooted, and Jack jumped off the stage, hi-fiving friends as he made way to Lucky. Hattie put her arm through mine and pulled me with her as she went to meet him.

Catalina was now leaning against the stage. Her lustrous caramel satin slip dress showed off her golden skin, the curves of her breasts, and her long legs. In her heels she was almost as tall as Lucky.

“Hi, Catalina, Lucky,” Hattie said breezily, as she dropped my arm and slipped hers through Jack’s.

“Hello, Harriet,” Catalina said coolly, rolling the r’s of Hattie’s name. She looked me up and down. “You’re all dressed-up like a woman.”

“Hello, to you, too, Catalina.”

Lucky looked at Hattie and me and casually said, “Hey.”

Hattie said to me, “Isn’t Jack’s band great?”

Jack brushed a curl off his sweaty forehead. “Don’t pressure her to compliment me. She doesn’t like fishing for compliments.”

“I wouldn’t compliment you unless I meant it,” I said. “You’re really good.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Good like pizza?”

“Pizza’s great, not good, so there’s a qualitative difference.”

Jack clutched his heart dramatically and Hattie laughed.

Lucky was already talking to some other guy who’d come up. Then more kids joined us and somehow I was in the center of those talking, even though no one was talking to me. They all talked to each other over my head, as if I was an inconveniently placed fire hydrant.

One guy mentioned the mid-term break and other said that everyone should go on a group vacation. Lucky wanted to visit Portland because he’d never been there, and Catalina said she would be seeing relatives in Barcelona. Hattie voted for the trip to Portland and hotels were mentioned.

Constance came up and said, “Oregon’s always rainy. We can go to the Islands and stay at my family’s beach house,” and then she pulled Hattie away and I was left with the others.

An older girl, a long-faced college student named Sage, looked right at me and said, “Who are *you*?”

“I’m Jane Williams.”

Catalina said, “She’s the new Bebe.”

“What happened to the old Bebe?” Sage asked.

“She went to live with her uncle in Europe,” I said.

“Pulleeze,” Sage drawled. “More like she got knocked up by one of her ghetto boyfriends and sent back to wherever she came from.” Smiling flirtatiously at Lucky, Sage said, “Lucien, you think your mom would get tired of rescuing these sad orphans.”

Lucky looked at his brother and said, “It’s all yours, bro,” and walked away, making me feel as if he didn’t care how people treated me. I wished a hole would open in the floor and I would fall through and away from this place and these people.

“I don’t have parents either, Sage,” Jack said suddenly. “Not birth-parents. I’m adopted. Do you feel sorry for me, too? Can I cry on your shoulder? My nose gets snotty when I cry, but snottiness turns you on, doesn’t it? Makes you feel so *special*, am I right?”

“I, uhm, I didn’t mean...” Sage said nervously and those around her grinned at her distress. “I didn’t know, uhm...”

“It’s not your fault,” Jack said. “Only our *close* friends knew. Like Jane.”

Jack put his arm over my shoulders, drawing me close, and when he touched me, I got that jolt that woke all my nerves. I felt the heat from his body and smelled his intriguing scent, like the morning dew evaporating in the grove, like the earth in the sun.

“I’m sorry, I, uh...” Sage stepped back away from the group.

“Don’t ask to cry on my shoulder, Jacob” Catalina said. “Hattie is already so jealous of me.”

“It’s because you’re a goddess, Catalina,” Jack said with a smart-ass grin that made her laugh.

I felt drained and on the edge of tears. When I tried to step backward, Jack kept his arm firmly around me. “Jane, you look like you’ve had enough of these idiots and my awful music probably gave you a headache. I can give you a lift home if you want.”

“Don’t you have to play again?”

“Not for another hour.”

Even though I didn’t want to go with Jack, I didn’t want to stay here either. “I was going to spend that night at Mary Violet’s.”

“She always stays until two or three,” Jack said. “Your choice.”

“Let me tell her I’m going to my place.”

MV was nowhere to be found, but Constance was by the refreshment table.

I told her, “I’m burnt out and Jack’s giving me a lift home. I can pick up my things at MV’s tomorrow.”

“You sure?” Constance asked as she glanced at a lanky guy by her side.

“Sure. See you in the morning.” As I went back to Jack, I looked around for Lucky. I saw him talking to Hattie by the steps leading onto the stage. She gestured with her arms, almost as if she was scolding him.

Jack was waiting for me by the door, and we went outside to the parking lot.

I said, “I thought you were against cars.”

“It’s our drummer’s van,” he said, pointing to an old VW on the edge of the lot. “I can’t even balance a pizza on a bike, how am I going to balance amps?”

He opened the passenger door for me. I tried to get in without my dress hiking up, and I had to tug at the hem, which caught on the ripped seat cover. The van smelled like potato chips and motor oil and weed. There were curtains in a daisy print on the side windows. A plastic Batman with a missing arm dangled from the rear view mirror.

Jack got in and after a few tries, he got the engine started. He struggled with the stick shift and said, “I’m driving so it’s your job to make small talk.”

“Oh.”

“Not that small.” He waved at the security guard as we left the club.

“Make medium talk.”

I looked down the steep hill at the street lights in town far below. “I didn’t know you were adopted.”

“It’s not a big secret, but it’s not the first thing I tell people. Most people take one look at my family and say, who’s the Jewish kid?”

“What happened to your parents?”

“They divorced right after I was born. My father got custody and then he died in a helicopter accident a few months later. He was an old friend of the Monroe family and they adopted me. They’re the only family I’ve ever known.”

“That’s why you asked me about my family and my father.”

“I was wondering if you’d ever met him. I got in touch with my birth

mother when I was fifteen. She's married, no kids, and seriously not interested in a grown one. She doesn't compare to my *real* mom."

"I like your mother."

"She likes you, too." He drove along the winding road with an occasional grinding of gears as he shifted. "You may not think I'm a prize, but the Hayers always act like they've won the lottery with me. I couldn't ask for a better family."

"I'm glad for you, Jack."

"So am I. Every family has problems, though, halfling." He glanced over at me and said, "My mother works really hard trying to keep everything in order. My father gets stressed and down. Lucky has his own issues. He's not just some smiling, movie-star looking dude, so don't expect him to act like a hero."

"Jack, if there's something you want to tell me, tell me. Don't speak in elliptical terms."

"Elliptical," he said with a laugh. "You're always so direct, nothing to hide, no unspoken agendas, no manipulation."

"What stops you from being straight-forward?" I asked. "You and Lucky are the same that way – your talk always seems coded and as if you're testing my reactions. I'm like Charley in *Flowers for Algernon*, struggling to solve the maze."

"I don't see you that way, Jane," he said. "I wish I could explain, but it's too complicated and too...too private."

He turned into the Birch Grove drive. Only a few lights were on at the entrance to the school.

"So what's your role in the family?"

"I'm the one telling them that it's not all about success and image."

"In other words, the slacker."

"Or the king's fool."

"What does that mean?"

"Read your Shakespeare," he said.

"Why don't you tell me?"

“No cheating on the test. Eyes on your own paper, Jane Williams.” He parked on the drive and said, “I’ll walk you the rest of the way.”

He reached across me to open the glove compartment. His arm brushed mine, sending that reaction through me, so strong that it threw me back into a cool, shadowy place that I couldn’t remember, no matter how hard I tried, and I froze.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Being a jackass isn’t contagious.” He took a flashlight out and we got out of the van.

He angled the beam of the flashlight down on the uneven soil of the path, and I followed it carefully. The wind tugged at the ends of the cashmere shawl and the branches of the birches thrashed. Other than the porch light on, the cottage was dark.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said. I opened the velvet clutch and took out my keys.

Jack followed me up the porch. “Don’t you ever get scared out here by yourself?”

“Here, in the trees?” I looked at the dark silhouettes of the graceful trees. “I love the trees. Other things scare me, though.”

“Would you ask for help if you needed it?”

The wind whipped my hair across my face, and I brushed it away. “I have to depend on myself, Jack. Even when things scare me.”

“Jane, I know you’ll beat any maze.” His clear, green eyes gazed at me without the mischief that made them crinkle at the corners.

“Thanks for the ride. Good night, Jacob.”

“Good night, halfling.”

When I opened the front door, I reached quickly for the light switch. I turned it on and stepped into the living room. Outside I’d felt safe, and this is what scared me: that someone would trap me inside and hurt me. I looked around and everything was exactly as I’d left it.

I shut the door and locked it. I checked the bathroom, the bedroom, the kitchen, the porch and the closets. Nothing was out of place.

When I peeked out through the front curtains, I saw Jack standing at the edge of the path, as if he was making sure I was all right. He must have seen me, too. He gave a wave and turned to walk back toward the drive.

I couldn't figure him out. He looked at me in such a strange way, as if he was seeing someone other than the Jane Williams that everyone else saw.

I took off the emerald green dress and hung it in the closet, and then placed my new heels neatly beside my other shoes. I put on a cotton tank and pajama pants. As I rinsed my face, I looked in the mirror. My mascara was smeared under my eyes.

When I went into the medicine cabinet to get the bottle of facial cleanser, I saw the sunscreen beside the bottle of aspirin. Thinking of Lucky's pale skin, I reached for the sunscreen and took off the cap. It smelled like him.

Lucky wanted me to be loyal to him, and then he'd walked away when Sage insulted me. Or maybe he'd walked away because Sage had inadvertently insulted Jack.

I curled up on the sofa with a comforter. I felt safer here, where I could watch the door. My thoughts raced. Most of them began with why. Why, why, why, why. I must have fallen asleep because the banging on my front door made me jump up in bewilderment and terror.

My heart thudded. Then I heard, "Jane, let me in! Jane!" It was Lucky.

I ran to the door and opened it. Lucky fell into my arms, drunk and laughing, "You're awake!"

"I am now." I helped him inside and he collapsed onto the sofa.

He smelled of beer and cigarettes. His blue eyes were glassy and he slurred when he said, "Why'd you leave?"

I sat on the chair facing him and crossed my arms over my breasts. "I was tired."

"Was it because of Sage? What a fucking wannabe. Forget her." He tried to make a scoffing sound.

I went to the kitchen, filled a glass with tap water and took it to him. He took a few gulps and said, "Come sit with me."

I sat on the far side of the sofa. Even bleary-eyed, Lucky was stunning. I thought I would never get tired of looking at him.

“Janey, are you mad at me?” He reached for my hand and I snatched it away.

“Why did you disregard me like that?” The pain caught in my voice, shifting it higher.

He shrugged. “I told you. Those bitches will get jealous if they know about us.”

“What is *us*? I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I’ll show you what I want.” He fumbled with his jacket and brought out something. It was a gold penknife, similar to Hattie’s.

I jumped off the sofa and took two steps back, out of his reach. “What do you think you’re doing?”

He looked at me with those eyes, the color of the sky. “I want to have a blood oath with you. It’ll only be a drop or two. Don’t you trust me?”

I wanted to trust somebody. “Why do you want a blood oath?”

“To seal *us*, Lucky and Jane,” he said. “You can even do it yourself, if it makes you feel safer. Come here, Jane.”

Why did I go to him? Because I wanted something, *someone* so beautiful, and I wanted to believe that he thought I was special.

I sat beside him and he handed me the knife. I opened it and said, “What do you want me to do?”

“Prick your finger. That’s all.” He took my hand in his left hand and held my forefinger.

I hesitated and then counted silently to three and jabbed the point of the knife into my fingertip.

He took my finger and squeezed the flesh on the tip until a bead of shiny, crimson blood welled up.

Lucky raised my finger up and deep into his mouth, biting down pressing his tongue against it. He sucked hard, dropping the knife on the coffee table and using his free arm to wrap me close to him.

My body thrummed with desire, and a moan came from low in Lucky's throat.

When he finally let my finger slide out of his hot, slick mouth, he said, "Jane, you're delicious."

He reached for the knife again and then tugged me up. He stumbled back against the coffee table and I grabbed him to keep him from falling over.

"Lucky, are you all right?"

"Never better." He led me to the bedroom and turned on the lamp by the bed. He dropped the knife on the bedside table and then wrested himself out of his jacket and dropped it on the floor.

He took my hand and fell back on the bed, looking huge in the small room, and he yanked me down on the mattress. He rolled atop of me heavily. I wanted to look in his eyes, to see what he was feeling. I didn't know if he wanted sex, and I didn't know if I wanted sex with him this way.

But Lucky focused on my neck. His lips were on my throat and at first kissing and then he nipped, as he'd done before. Then he bit harder, I shoved his chest and said, "Stop! You're hurting."

"Sorry," he mumbled. He lifted himself up onto his elbows and placed his large broad, sweaty hand palm down above my breasts. "You're as small as a bird. I can feel your heart pounding."

I wanted to be touched so much, and I was excited by his beauty and his need.

He stroked the inside of my arm, making my whole body shiver. "Close your eyes," he said in a low voice.

"No."

"It'll nick for only a second, a small cut. I *need* you so much. Can't you feel how I need you?" He pressed against me and I felt the hardness of his body. "Won't you let me have a few drops?"

"Why?" I whispered. "Please tell me why?"

"I like the taste. I *need* the taste. It's my strangeness and I can't share with anyone else."

He seemed so vulnerable then, his blue eyes focused on me, his breath shallow and rapid. “Please, Jane, *please*.”

No one had ever needed me before and somehow I understood a strangeness that couldn’t be shared. I said “Yes,” and closed my eyes.

I flinched as the knife pierced the skin on the inside of my elbow. Lucky clamped his mouth over the cut.

Outside the wind grew loud, whistling through the trees, and their branches trashed against the cottage, as Lucky nipped and sucked at the wound, opening the cut.

I clutched his thick golden hair and when he pushed against me, I tried to ignore the pain in my arm, the howl of the wind. I thought I should want more from him, but this was enough.

I shifted my legs so that when he ground against me, and pleasure began to rise in me almost making me forget the sharp pain of his teeth, the trees beating against the windows until they shook.

Then Lucky groaned and shuddered. When he lifted his head from my arm, blood was smeared on his lips. He licked at them with his red-streaked pink tongue. Then he laughed wildly. “That was fucking incredible,” he said, his eyes half-shut, like a cat dozing off. He rolled onto his back, crowding me against the edge of the bed, and passed out.

Chapter 14

“Birch Grove recognizes the complexity of alcohol and drug abuse and misuse among minors. Evidence of student use of alcohol and/or drugs shall first be addressed confidentially, so long as the student is willing to work on this problem.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

LUCKY was in a deep, drunken sleep yet I thought I’d never seen anyone so perfectly beautiful. I took off his shoes and his belt to make him comfortable and covered him with a blanket. The wind had died down and now the trees made a sad, low shush-shush-shush.

A cell phone began ringing at about four a.m. I found Lucky’s phone in his inside jacket pocket. Jack’s name flashed on the screen.

At first, I wasn’t going to answer, but Jack was probably worried about his brother. “Hi, it’s Jane.”

“Is he there? Let me talk to him.”

“He showed up and passed out.”

“I can’t believe you let him in. I thought you were smarter than that.”

“He’s my friend.”

“What kind of a friend? The kind that ignores you in public and then shows up for a...whatever. Why are you letting him use you, Jane?”

“It’s none of your damn business, Jack, how I choose my friends and what I do with them.” I felt myself go hot with anger and something else.

Jack was silent for a moment and then he said, “Let him sleep it off and I’ll cover with my parents.” He didn’t say goodbye before he ended the call.

As I reached out to put the phone on the bed table I saw the ugly red-purple wound on my arm. It was mostly bruising, but there was the bright red ragged edge of the cut. I went to the bathroom and washed the cut with hot water and soap.

There was a first-aid kit under the sink and I took out a tube of antibacterial

ointment and dabbed it on the cut. As I placed a large band-aid over it, I thought of the time I'd accidentally cut myself when I was making salad. I thought then that he'd seemed intense, but now a word came to me to describe his expression: avid. He'd been excited.

I returned to the bedroom and slid under the blanket beside Lucky. I was too shy to put my arm around him, so I let my leg touch his. Then I turned off the light and listened to his steady breathing.

When I woke up Lucky was sitting on the bed beside me and the blanket had slipped down to my waist.

"Morning, Jane," he said. He looked fresh and was staring at my left shoulder.

"Morning."

He pushed the strap of my tank off my shoulder. "What's this?" he said. He touched my scar and I jerked away.

"A scar from a childhood accident." I yanked the blanket up to my neck.

"It's not that bad. You should see my friend Brad's leg. Crashed into a rock snowboarding and needed forty stitches. Now that's something." he said. Lucky picked up his jacket and his cell phone.

"Jack called last night," I said. "He's got issues about our...our friendship."

"Who gives a shit what Jack thinks?" Lucky flashed a dazzling smile. He took my hand and stretched out my arm, looking at the bandage. "Hope I wasn't too rough. I got carried away."

"Have you ever done that before?"

"No, but I've thought a lot about it," he said. "I gotta go. I can't wait until the next time we do this."

"Lucky." I paused and then said carefully, "Do you think you're a vampire?"

"Do I *think* I'm a vampire? The undead kind that sleeps in coffins and is hundreds of years old?" he said with a laugh. "No, I think I'm a living human being and I can show you my birth certificate. Do *you* think I'm a vampire?"

“Of course not, but I thought you might believe it. You always wear sunscreen and...”

“Multispectrum sunblock, not sunscreen. The town’s founders moved here especially because of the crap weather. I sunburn worse than albinos.”

“Did you get the idea to do this from the stories your mother teaches?”

“Jane, it’s a total turn-off if you bring my mother into this. This is between us. I thought you liked it, too.”

“I like being with you, not the hurting part.”

“We’ll figure out a way so it doesn’t hurt.” He left the room and I got up to follow him to the living room. I got up and followed him to the living room. I wanted him to kiss me good-bye at least, but he patted my head, as if I was a pet or a child.

“Later,” he said and left.

In the shower, I kept thinking about the way Lucky had pushed against me. My soapy hands caressed my body as I imagined him touching me in other ways, in other places.

I’d just gotten out of the shower when the phone rang. I wrapped a towel around me and ran to answer it, thinking it must be Lucky. “Hello!”

“Hi, JW,” Mary Violet said. “We thought you were coming for breakfast. We’re making pancakes, and Constance wants to have a post-party review session.”

In the background, Constance said, “You’re the one who wants to gossip!”

“CA met up with her lover, Gerald,” Mary Violet continued. “The geriatric one in college.”

“Start breakfast without me,” I said. “I’ll be there soon.”

“Good, because Con says she needs an impartial opinion and that’s you – always watching and not getting involved.”

“Yes, that’s me,” I said, wondering how she’d react if she knew what had happened with Lucky.

I dressed in cargo khakis and a long-sleeved shirt, then gathered my library books, and my borrowed clothes and went to the Heyers’ in the cool gray morning

fog. It made sense that sun-sensitive people would live where it was always overcast.

Hattie was already there, listening while Mary Violet discussed who had worn what at the party and what they'd done.

I tried to return the green dress, but MV said, "It's yours. Agnes was serious about giving it to you."

I made her take back the cashmere shawl and the handbag.

Constance was more cheerful than I'd ever seen her and talked about meeting her ex again. "You should have stayed," Constance said. "Even though I heard that Sage was completely heinous."

"You should have slapped her!" Mary Violet said. "Everyone loves a catfight. You would have scored major points with the guys."

Hattie said to me, "Why didn't you call me back? I would have slapped Sage, too, and then MV would have gotten her catfight."

Constance said, "I heard that Jack shut Sage up."

"He did," I admitted.

"Jack, always the noble one," Hattie said with an edge to her voice. She immediately smiled and said, "That's why I like him."

"He's actually kind of hot when he's playing," Mary Violet said. "Not gorgeous like Lucky, but very sexy anyway. Don't you think so, Jane?"

"He seems talented," I said. "I don't know anything about music though."

"You don't have to know anything about music or sports to go groupie for someone, like Hattie," Mary Violet said. "Someday she'll tell us all about Jack's depravity."

"Oh, then he'd lose the mystery. A man with dark secrets is always sexier," she said and I wished I could tell them about Lucky's dark secret and his depravity.

As the girls talked about who did what at the party, I rubbed my thumb across the inside of my elbow, feeling the bump of the bandage under the fabric and the throb of the wound beneath. I told my friends that I had to get back and do homework.

When Mary Violet walked me to the front door, she said, “You should stay and do your work here. I can answer all your questions.”

I remembered what Jack had said, “MV, what did the king’s fool do in Shakespeare?”

“The fools are my favorites, right after the romantic heroes and the tragic heroes, and the heroines, and the villains,” she said. “The fool is the only one who’s allowed to tell the king the truth about things, but he can only do it in a joking, insulting way. He’s protected by the king unless he goes too far and then he’s exiled to some godforsaken place. Are you asking about this for *Night Terrors*?”

I shook my head and said, “I heard someone say it and wondered.”

“Well, we should totally take *Shakespeare’s Critical Works* together next year. Lots of field trips to see plays and they bring in Evergreen seniors to do scenes with us. I can be Ophelia and you can be one of those girls who masquerades as a boy and then the deluded hero is confused when he falls madly in love with him slash her.”

“I can’t wait.”

As I walked downhill into town, I felt the first bite of autumn in the air. Jack might think he was a truth-teller, but that didn’t make it so.

After I deposited my books in the library return slot, I went to a computer stall so I could do a web search for my Alpha friends under their screen names. When I tried to log in the computer, *Invalid User* flashed on the screen. I tried another computer and had the same problem.

A man at the information desk saw that I was having problems and came over. “May I help you?”

“Could you? I’m trying to get into my library account and the system won’t let me log in. I double-checked the account number and password.”

“May I see your card?”

When I handed him my library card, he said, “Are you a student at Birch Grove? You know there’s a no-computer policy for schoolwork.”

“This isn’t for schoolwork. I’m trying to contact some friends and set up an

email account.”

“I see.” He tried to log into my account and got the same error message. “One moment.” He went to the information station and tapped away at the computer keyboard there.

After several minutes, he picked up a phone. He had a brief conversation and returned to me.

“I’m sorry. We’re still dealing with glitches from a recent upgrade on our inter-library system.”

“Okay, is there any place nearby with public computers?”

He shook his head. “The community here likes to protect their kids from inappropriate material and online predators. Come back in a few weeks.”

“Thanks for checking.”

“May I help you with anything else?”

“No, thanks. I can find everything on my own.”

I found an aisle with books about psychology. I was going through the indexes, looking under *Fetishes* and *Perversions* for the word *blood*, when the librarian suddenly appeared at the end of the aisle.

“Excuse me!” he said in a loud whisper. “These books are for 18 and over.”

“I’m an emancipated minor,” I said.

“Be that as it may, you are *not* over 18.” He took the book from my hand and snapped it shut. “Is there anything else you need?”

“I didn’t realize you censored books here,” I said sharply and picked up my bag.

“It’s not censorship. It’s age-appropriate restriction,” he said tightly. “I think you better leave now, Miss Williams, or I’ll have to call your dean of students about this disruption.”

“Fine,” I said and left. I was fuming as I walked to the market. What kind of town restricted books on psychology, I thought as I bought milk, bread, and fruit.

While I waited for the shuttle bus back to Birch Grove, I saw Mrs.

Monroe's Mercedes slow down and pull over. She waved to me and I went to the window.

"Hello, Mrs. Monroe."

"Hello, Jane! I thought I saw you leaving the market. Would you like a ride back to campus?"

I shifted the weight of the grocery bag. "If you don't mind."

"Of course not."

I got in the car with the grocery bag on my lap. I was very aware of the bandage that itched under my shirtsleeve.

On the way back up the hill, she said, "Did you enjoy the party last night?"

"It was nice." There was no way she could have known that her son spent the night with me, unless Jack said something. I didn't think he would. After a moment I said, "I'd never been to a country club before."

"It's the center of a lot of our social life. Jack's a little bored with it, but he can't play at most places until he's 21."

"I liked his band. Does the name mean anything?"

"Dog Waffle?" she smiled. "Whenever I made waffles, the neighbor's old dog would come begging for his dog waffle. Jacob says it's also a play upon *dogging*, following faithfully, and *waffle*, to go back and forth between things. He may be joking."

"I can't tell when he's kidding and when he's serious."

"He's always doing both," she said. "He can't be serious without humor, and he can't be humorous without being serious, too."

"Like the king's fool?"

"Jacob's nobody's fool, even a king's," she said. "I'm so glad you're getting along with the boys. They seem quite fond of you. I hope you don't find tutoring Lucky to be too much of a chore."

"He's a good student."

We arrived at the school and Mrs. Monroe parked at the wrought-iron gate and stone pillars at the entrance. "Do you mind walking the rest of the way?"

I shook my head. "Thanks for the ride."

“See you tomorrow at dinner, Jane.”

When I got into the cottage, I rushed to the phone to see if Lucky had left me a message. He hadn't. I stayed inside most the day, working on my assignments and hoping that he'd call.

I hadn't slept much, so I closed my eyes to rest them, and I fell asleep. I dreamed of the birch trees walking toward me, surprisingly graceful for their enormous size.

Mrs. Monroe was sitting high in their branches, as if she was riding them. “All my Birch Grove girls are exceptional,” she said. “Jane, you're the most special of all because you're already dead!”

“I'm alive,” I tried to shout. “I'm alive.”

I awoke with a start and saw only darkness. I fumbled toward the wall, turned on the light, and looked at the clock. It was almost midnight.

I opened the front door and stepped out on the porch hoping that the cold air would clear my thoughts.

Someone was out there. I stayed motionless and listened harder. It sounded like several voices speaking together, and the sound faded beneath the rush of wind and rustle of branches. Through the trees ahead, I thought I saw a flash of a light, but it was gone in an instant.

Then something moved. Two deer stepped from behind the trees to the edge of light from the porch. They stared at me with liquid black eyes, and their ears twitched forward. This was the first time I had seen real deer and their beauty filled me with wonder.

Then they turned and slowly walked away. I went back inside and watched television until I fell asleep on the sofa.

The next day, I tried to be patient, but I couldn't wait to see Lucky again, so I went early for my tutoring session.

Mrs. Monroe met me at the door and said, “Lucky's not back from the movies yet. He went to a matinee with his friends.”

“Oh,” I said, thinking, *the friends he says he doesn't have*. “I can come back later.”

“Oh, no,” she said. “Would you like to wait in the family room?”

“If it’s okay.”

Mrs. Monroe gave me a glass of juice, and I answered her questions about my classes while glancing at the clock on the wall.

“I saw deer by the cottage last night,” I said.

“Did you? A herd lives here. We have other wildlife. There are the birds and squirrels, of course and raccoons, possums, and skunks. There used to be foxes, too, but no one’s seen one for years.”

“So some of the noises I hear at night are probably animals?”

“Certainly. One of the neighbors has peacocks, too, and their cries are eerie. They sound like a woman crying,” she said. “Please stay out of the grove at night, Jane. The raccoons aren’t cute cartoon characters – they’re huge and rough. They’ve killed cats and gotten into bad scrapes with dogs.”

“They wouldn’t attack a person, though, would they?”

“Not normally, but an unhealthy animal will behave unnaturally and so will a threatened animal. You’d be in danger if you got too close to a den with babies,” she said. “We like providing a habitat for the animals, but it means that we let the nocturnal animals have it at night.”

When I heard the front door open, my heart leapt.

Lucky came into the family room. He was wearing a narrow-brimmed hat, aviator sunglasses, a long-sleeved black t-shirt and jeans. He looked incredibly sexy.

“Hi, Mom. Hey, Jane.”

“Jane’s been waiting for you, Lucien.”

“I’m on time,” he said in a bored voice.

“Dinner will be in an hour and a half,” his mother said. “No hats in the house, young man.”

Lucky took his hat off and twirled it around on his fingers and said, “Come on,” to me.

I followed him, wondering about his gruff tone.

When we got upstairs and into the study he dropped onto the sofa with his

long legs sprawled out. His eyes were unreadable behind the sunglasses. “Could you be any more obvious?”

“I haven’t said anything!”

“You don’t need to say anything. Anyone can read it on your face.”

He sat there judging me, superior, and I snapped, “This is what you meant by using me. You want me when it’s convenient for you, but you’re embarrassed by me. You don’t think I’m worthy of you.”

My tone got his attention. He took off the shades and sat up. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how to do this so neither of us gets in trouble, Janey,” he said. “If we want to keep our relationship, we can’t let anyone know. You told me yourself how Jack acted. You saw Sage. Can’t you be patient?”

“For how long?”

“Not long. A few months.” He reached for me and pulled me onto his lap. “I don’t want to lose what we have, okay?”

I looked into his beautiful face and said, “Okay, but you have to be nicer to me, Lucky.”

He smiled and said, “How’s your arm? Let me see.”

I pushed my sleeve up above my elbow.

He slowly peeled off the bandage. The area was purple and yellow around red-brown scab.

He held me around the waist with one arm and bent his head to lick the cut, making me tremble with anticipation.

Suddenly he lifted me off him and fell back against the sofa, breathing heavily. “Not here. Someone could come in,” he said. “You are so good to me, Jane, and I’m such a tool.”

“Why do you always put yourself down? So I can feel sorry for you?”

He grinned. “No, because I know I should be a better person.”

“Then try to be a better person,” I said. “Lucky, why does Hattie have a knife like yours?”

“Lots of people have them. Didn’t your friends have knives?” He took the penknife out of his pocket and ran the blunt edge of it over the rough surface of

my new scab.

I tried to keep my voice steady, and said, “A couple, but for protection.” Wilde used to hide a jackknife in her Doc Martens.

“Maybe it’s a Greenwood thing. If you want one, I’ll get one for you. As a present. Maybe you’d like a Swiss Army knife, with all the attachments, screwdrivers and scissors.”

He ran the tip of the knife ever so lightly down the inside of my arm to my wrist. “The blood is a rush, like a drug,” he said. “It’s better than a drug because it makes me healthier and stronger.”

“It couldn’t. The amount you take is insignificant in terms of protein. What if I was sick?”

“You’re not sick.”

“It must wrong to let you do this to me,” I said, getting off the sofa and crossing the room.

“No, it’s an act of kindness.” His blue eyes looked into mine. “You trust me because you know I need you as much as... It’s not one-sided. I’ll always take care of you, too. I promise.”

We heard footsteps coming down the hall. Lucky folded the knife and put it back in his pocket right as Mrs. Monroe came into the room carrying a bowl of purple grapes. “You don’t even have your books out!”

“Sorry, mom!” He spoke with innocent prep boy cheeriness. “I was telling Jane what we’d reviewed last week in class.”

His mother handed the bowl to her son. “You were probably talking about the party last night,” she said. “Jane, don’t let him distract you from his chemistry.”

“No, ma’am.”

When she left the room, I said, “She’s paying me by the hour. Did you get back any of your homework?”

He brought out his work and I tried to focus on the numbers and symbols.

Dinner was quiet because Jack wasn’t around. It was homemade lasagna with thick tomato sauce. I’d glance at Lucky as he chomped into garlic bread and

think about what he'd done to me and then I'd wonder if the Monroe's had any idea about their son's *strangeness*.

Lucky walked me home after dinner. He talked about his school and his classmates. I tried to remember the names of his friends. Most of them had been at the party: tall, loud young men with longish hair and self-satisfied expressions.

"So like Julian, he borrowed his dad's new Beamer and when he came out of this club, it's gone, stolen. Hilarious," Lucky said and let out a loud laugh. "So I do him a bro *favor* and drive him home. He sneaks into the house and goes to bed, and when the car is missing the next day and his old man thinks someone stole it from the garage, and Julian acts all shocked."

"That's really irresponsible and dishonest."

"Whoever stole it is the thief, not Julian, and besides the insurance will pay. No need for the J-man to get hassled."

Once we got to my door, he said, "Maybe I'll come by sometime this week. See you."

As easily as that, Lucky established the ground rules for the relationship. He would visit me when he felt like it and I wouldn't complain. He got to indulge in his strange compulsion and I got to be alone with him, to touch and be touched by an exquisite man.

I was so fixated on Lucky that I didn't care about my secret enemy. Nothing else mattered, except having him with me as he fed his compulsion with my blood.

I took my composition book from its hiding place and wrote everything that had happened recently with Lucky, Jack and at the party. It was after 11 when I finished so I went to bed.

ON MONDAY, I raced home from class so I would be there if Lucky called or came by. I finished the rest of my homework before I tried to read my *Night Terrors* assignment, a story called *The Vampyre* by John William Polidari.

The story was about a young man named Aubrey, his best friend, mysterious Lord Ruthven, and a beautiful young woman. Aubrey goes into a

dangerous forest even though it was “the resort of the vampyres in their nocturnal orgies.”

When vampires kill the beautiful girl, Aubrey becomes sick from grief. Lord Ruthven cares for him. Then Lord Ruthven dies and returns to life, causing Aubrey go insane because he’s promised never to tell. Then Aubrey’s sister is slaughtered: “Aubrey's sister had glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!” The end.

It was the stupidest story I’d ever read. I looked up the words I didn’t understand, read the story again, and composed a 350-word synopsis.

Lucky didn’t call that night, and I fell asleep thinking, *tomorrow he’ll come, tomorrow he’ll call, tomorrow he’ll hold me close, maybe tomorrow he’ll kiss me...* Hope made me just as stupid as Aubrey going into the dangerous forest.

Chapter 15

“We believe that co-curricular activities enrich our educational experience. Students are encouraged to participate in clubs and activities. Every club must be approved by administration and will be assigned a faculty sponsor.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

“Jane? Jane?”

Mrs. Monroe was at the front of the classroom and I had been zoning out. Her navy suit had white piping along the edges. She always looked so stylish.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, could you repeat that?”

She said calmly, “I asked what you thought of Aubrey in and his predicament with Lord Ruthven.”

“The story makes no sense,” I said. “Why does Aubrey keep a promise to Lord Ruthven when he believes Ruthven’s a vampire?”

“Do you think he should have broken the promise?”

“Of course -- especially since his secrecy endangers others. Why is Aubrey so delicate that he goes crazy so easily?”

“It’s a metaphor,” a senior said.

“A metaphor represents something, and I don’t think this does,” I answered. “The author believes Aubrey’s stupid, too, because he describes him as trusting in poetry over reality.”

Constance said, “I agree with Jane. I don’t think the author put a lot of thought into the story. The structure was clumsy, the writing awkward, and the characters were cliché. The young girl is described as...” Constance looked down at her notes and read, “having an ‘almost fairy form,’ and being so innocent that she is ‘unconscious of his love.’ Hah!”

The other students’ laughed with Constance, who added, “The author had as many illusions about young women as his character did about life.”

The other students began speaking up about *The Vampyre*. One girl said, “The vampire is only used as a mechanism. The author could have used a

werewolf, or a ghost. It doesn't matter, because he has no larger meaning to his story."

I'd never heard students criticize an assignment so freely.

Mrs. Monroe said, "Do you see any similar themes or symbolism running through these works?"

We all began discussing how the main characters' pursuit of pleasure led them to ignore warnings of danger. Mrs. Monroe turned the discussion to the role of nature and symbols of life and death. She was tying all the stories together in a way that made sense.

I remembered something one of my Alpha pals said: "The whole is bigger than the sum of its parts." While it didn't work in math, I saw that it could make sense with literature and even with life.

I was thinking of the *Night Terrors* discussion as I walked to Latin class and bumped into Catalina in the doorway. I said, "Sorry," and stepped back to let her go through first.

She pursed her full lips and snapped, "Clumsy girl!"

"I *said* I was sorry." I followed her into the room and we both sat at our desks.

As she arranged her books, she said, "Sage is jealous to anyone close to the Monroes and always trying to climb the social ladder. You, at least, have no pretension," she said with a slow, bored bat of her long eyelashes. "So much foolishness over Lucien, who is exquisite, but this is a very small village.

Mundus vult decipi, ergo decipiatu."

I had studied the quote before: The world wants to be deceived, so let it be deceived. Her comment could have been interpreted in many ways, and I didn't try to puzzle them out.

The teacher called for class to begin.

At lunchtime, I decided to spend a few dollars of my tutoring money by going to the Free Pop with Hattie, Constance and Mary Violet.

"You should have seen Jane in *Night Terrors*," Constance said. "She told Mrs. Monroe the assigned reading was stupid."

“I didn’t mean it to sound that way.”

“I was glad you said it,” Constance said. “I always hate it when the love interest is so impossibly pretty and innocent.”

“I *adore* those heroines!” MV said. “If anyone ever wrote about me, I’d want them to say how impossibly pretty and innocent I am.”

“I’d rather say that you’re impossible and ignorant?” Constance teased.

“Mrs. Monroe likes it when students get riled up,” Hattie said. “She says they’re *engaged*.” Her brown, shining hair was pulled back in a ponytail showing delicate pink pearl and gold earrings. She sipped cranberry juice through a straw.

While my friends lingered over lunch, I dashed to the drugstore to buy candles in case Lucky came by. I went to the aisle with women’s products and glanced at the display of condoms. I picked up a box, just in case.

I walked out of the drugstore and saw a familiar red car about to exit the Evergreen Market parking lot. I waved to Orneta, who rolled down her window.

“Hi, Ornery!” I said.

“Hey, girlfriend. How you been?”

“Good. I was bummed that you left.”

“I got transferred with a raise,” she said happily.

“Some guy told me you quit!”

“Nah, I’d been trying to get a spot at the store closer to home, and there never were any openings before. This came outa nowhere. I came to pick up stuff from my locker.”

“Good for you!”

A car waiting to get out of the lot honked, and Orneta said, “Gotta run. You take care!”

As I waved goodbye, I knew I’d never see her again.

The next days were agonizing. I kept my arms covered during school, and every day I’d practically run back to the cottage. I’d change into jeans and a short-sleeved t-shirt, because I knew Lucky got excited by the mark on my arms. I brushed out my hair and put on makeup and cologne.

Then I’d wait. Lucky didn’t come by or call. Several times I picked up the

phone to make sure it was working. I thought about calling him, or walking up to the house, but I didn't want him to think I was being obvious again.

I also kept watch for the big girl who'd left messages. My locker was undisturbed and there were no messages, though. Once I heard a strange creaking sound. I went into the gloaming, all murky shadows just before real nightfall.

"Who's there?" I said.

The creak, like someone stepping on an old floorboard, came again. I turned to the sound and there was a darker shadow by a tall birch. "What do you want?" I asked.

I stepped toward the shadow, expecting someone to step out.

Creak!

The shadow seemed to grow denser, darker, and I stood still. I could run back inside if I needed to.

I tried to focus on the shadow, to see who was there, and wished I had more light.

Creak!

The sound sent a shiver down my spine and then I heard another, more familiar sound of a bike's wheels crunching on leaves. I turned my head to see Jack riding from the direction of the drive.

I quickly turned back to the shadow and watched as it faded into until it was just as dark as the shade around it. My arms were covered in goose-bumps. Nothing was there, but I had seen *something*. Or maybe I hadn't.

Jack skidded to a stop, and hopped off his bike, letting it rest against the porch banister.

"Hey, halfling, what are you doing outside?" He was breathing hard and his t-shirt clung damply to his wide chest.

He acted as if he hadn't given me shit the last time we talked. "Are you going to tell me I shouldn't stand outside, because you always know what other people should and shouldn't do."

"Stand where you want, and, yeah, I know what you *shouldn't* do, if it's letting a drunk guy in your place in the middle of the night. Especially when the

guy's mother could expel you."

"Why would she expel me when he was the one---"

"Moral turpitude. *Turpitude*, it's in the handbook and probably one of your SAT words. Your headmistress doesn't only disapprove of impropriety. She disapproves of the *appearance* of impropriety."

Being annoyed with Jack kept me from being afraid. "You keep telling me how important appearances are, yet you don't care how you look or what you say."

"Irritating, isn't it?" he said. "When I saw you standing here, so motionless, I was worried that an evil witch had turned you to stone. What would bring a pixie back to life? A jar of angel's tears, or maybe I'd have to answer three trick questions?"

"I'm sure you could answer any trick question. You like playing with people."

"Not me," he said with a cool smile. "*I* don't play with people."

"You play with language, which is the same thing."

"No, it's not. We could talk about it. I get the feeling, though, that you don't want my company."

I couldn't tell him how relieved I was that he had come. "Why should I? One minute you're so nice to me and the next you're lecturing me. You're the one who asks trick questions, and talking to you is an exercise in futility."

"Hattie doesn't think so. I understand her and she understands me. Isn't that what love is, knowing another person so perfectly well that there are no surprises?"

"Why do you always bring up Hattie when you're talking to me? I know she's beautiful and talented and I'm ordinary," I said. So ordinary that Lucky didn't come or call and didn't want to be seen out with me. I felt my eyes welling up. "If you want to know about love, ask Hattie, because I don't know what it is."

Jack stood there looking at me with his moss green eyes and then his glance moved down as he saw the yellow and violet bruising around the scab on my arm.

Stepping to me, he gently put his warm calloused hands on my wrists.

“Oh, halfling, what have you done?” he asked softly.

He knows, I thought, he knows that Lucky did this to me.

All my loneliness and pain rose up in me and I felt as if I couldn’t bear it anymore. His head dropped so that his chin rested lightly on my on head, and I had an inexplicable urge to lean into him, to have him hold me, to breathe in his scent of leaves and earth.

Then my phone rang, saving me from myself. I pulled my wrists away from Jack and ran inside, slamming the door behind me.

I grabbed the phone on the second ring, thinking *he’s calling!* “Hello?”

“Hi, Jane, this is Penelope from Latin. I wanted to know if you wanted to join our study group.”

“Oh, uhm, that would be great.”

The phone call was brief, and when I looked outside, Jack had already gone and the last of the dim light was gone, leaving only darkness.

The next day, Friday, I watched Hattie carefully, wondering if Jack had said anything to her about me, but she was the same as always.

Constance and Mary Violet told us about a party at the house of an Evergreen Prep junior.

“His home theater’s got the biggest sofa you’ve ever seen,” Mary Violet said. “It’s orgy size. Twenty people can fit on it. And he’s got one of those old-fashioned popcorn machines. You should come. We’ll have sexy nonversations and raid his parents’ bar.”

“Will anyone I know be there?” I asked, wondering if Lucky would go.

Hattie said, “Not me. I have to work on my report for Music Theory and History. I’ll be listening to scratchy recordings all night.”

Constance and Mary Violet named some of the people who’d be there. They didn’t mention Lucky.

“I think I’ll pass,” I said.

At home, I changed into my good jeans and a cami so that my fading bruise

showed around the dark scab on my inner elbow. I pulled my hair into a high ponytail so that my neck was completely exposed, and put on makeup. I dabbed the last of the citrus perfume sample behind my ears and imagined Lucky nuzzling me there.

I ate cereal for dinner and watched television with the sound low so I could hear anything outside. The hours came and went. Lucky had never promised to come, but I couldn't help feeling hurt because he hadn't. I began to think about all the things he'd said and done that were self-centered and mean.

It didn't matter. I still hoped he'd show up and when I heard rustling outside, after eleven, I peeked through my curtains thinking that he'd come.

A doe was carefully stepping onto my porch and nibbling at the flowers in the pot. As quietly as I could I got the flashlight and returned to watch her. Another deer was grazing at the lower branches of a birch.

After the doe had finished eating the flowers, she and her partner moved off into the grove. I waited a few seconds before slipping out of the cottage. I looked toward the tree where I thought I'd seen something. Superstition wasn't going to control me.

I flicked on the flashlight followed the deer, staying as far behind as I could without losing sight of them.

Suddenly the deer stood alert, ears pivoting forward, tails flicking, and then they bolted off. It took me a moment to realize what had startled them: voices rising and falling. In the distance, people were singing.

Keeping the flashlight to the ground, I walked up the path toward the sounds. Soon I spotted yellowish light flickering through the white tree trunks. I wondered if someone had snuck into the amphitheatre and was having a party. I wondered if Lucky was there.

I stayed hidden in the trees as I approached the amphitheatre. I clicked off my flashlight and took one careful step after another, waiting to hear the usual noise of a beer bash.

Instead I saw people wearing hooded scarlet robes, standing in a circle and chanting in a strange language. The words were harsh, full of hard consonants.

Their faces were hidden in the shadows of the hoods and each held a lighted torch, the flames slanting in the breeze.

In the center of the circle was a man wearing robe trimmed in gold embroidery. He stood by another man in a black robe whose profile seemed familiar. Silver pitchers and a goblet, surrounded by purple grapes, pomegranates, red apples, and walnuts were set atop a rough wooden table.

I moved closer to get a better view. Sticks were set in a fire-pit made of large rocks.

When the chanting stopped, the man in the ornate robe spoke in the strange language. He touched his torch to the wood in the pit. Yellow and orange flames licked upward.

He lifted something from the mounds of fruits. It caught the light and glittered. It was a gold knife with a long, narrow blade.

I stood absolutely still.

The man picked up a pomegranate and cut into it, releasing dark crimson juices that ran over his hands and into the sleeve of his robe. He spoke again and let the juices fall into the fire.

I relaxed too soon.

The man in the red robe held out his palm and the other man slashed quickly with the gold knife. Blood dripped and sizzled in the flames.

Something rustled behind me and I turned my head. Mr. Mason was standing there watching the spooky scene, and I felt an immense relief to see someone who was sane and reasonable.

I stepped toward him and he jumped back, startled.

“It’s me, Mr. Mason,” I whispered. “Jane Williams.”

He put his hand to his chest and exhaled. Then he crooked his finger, signaling me to follow him and turned on a flashlight.

The chanting abruptly stopped and the grove was eerily silent except for the swish-shish of branches. Mr. Mason raised his flashlight, illuminating his face so that the others could see him, and then he walked with me back down the path.

I was trembling with cold or fright or both. Mr. Mason opened the door to

my cottage and led me inside.

“I think we both need a cup of hot tea,” he said. “You nearly scared me to death. I didn’t see you there at all.”

“Mr. Mason, what was that! Are they a cult?”

He smiled and said, “Oh, no! The older families here having one of their folk celebrations. Have a seat and let me get the kettle on first, and then I’ll explain.”

I sat on the sofa and he went to the kitchen. I forced myself to relax, and I heard him turning on the faucet and putting the lid on the kettle. He opened and shut cabinets. He came out a few minutes later. “This place is really cozy. I haven’t been here since it was fixed up.”

“Mr. Mason?” I said and looked up at his friendly face.

“Well, here we are,” he said and sat in the armchair. “The founders of Greenwood, including those who founded the school, emigrated from Eastern Europe. They’d been persecuted because they practiced pre-Christian folk traditions, and they’d developed a habit of secrecy. Funny, how some pre-Christian ideas, like the Easter Bunny and the Christmas tree, become part of popular culture and others are despised.”

“Was that a religious ceremony?”

“It’s symbolic, like Valentine’s Day, not religious. The founders came from farming people, and the ceremonies are based on crop cycles.”

“That man’s hand was cut.”

“It’s a minor surface cut, less than you’d get scraping your knee,” he said, and I was aware of his eyes on my arm. I pressed my elbow close to my side to hide the bruise.

Mr. Mason said, “Did you know that tonight is the autumn equinox? That’s why I was out – so I could watch the ceremony. It’s in honor of the ancient sun-god, who was connected to fire and the autumn harvest.”

“That’s why they had the fruits and torches.”

“Yes. Not everyone gets to witness such an ancient rite. Consider yourself lucky.”

Lucky. “What language were they speaking?”

“My wife told me it’s thought to be a dialect of Dacien, an ancient Slavic language. Like the Latin you study, it’s long dead.”

It wasn’t hard for me to piece things together. I said, “The founders moved here because it was foggy and they’re sensitive to sunlight.”

Mr. Mason took off his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. “Go ahead, Jane,” he said encouragingly.

“They used blood in their ceremonies and people thought they were vampires.”

“You get an A,” he said. “Now, for extra credit, do *you* believe they’re vampires?”

“I don’t believe in the supernatural. I believe in what can be proved by science and reason.” Even as I spoke an image of a mysterious green and shadowy place flashed in my mind.

“You’re a smart girl, Jane,” he said proudly. “Their genetic anomaly makes them highly sensitive to sunlight and gives them a craving for red foods.”

“Red food like rare meat, tomato sauces, strawberries, blood...”

The tea kettle whistled and Mr. Mason said, “Back in a minute.” He returned shortly with two mugs. “Sweet and milky for you.”

“Thank you.”

Sitting back down he said, “Yes, they crave blood, but they don’t need it. There’s a psychological component to their metabolism which requires considerable protein in their diet. Red foods and drinks can satisfy the cravings.”

“But they *do* drink blood?”

“Generally animal, like many peoples in the world. The Maasai live on blood and milk. The English have blood pudding and the Italians have blood sausage.”

“Using animal blood as food may be common, but drinking human blood isn’t.”

“It’s only done consensually,” Mr. Mason said. “If any of them took blood without permission, he’d be dealt with seriously and immediately. So now you

know it all.”

I looked into his eyes and said, “Do I really, Mr. Mason, or is there anything else you’d like to tell me? Does the genetic anomaly have any other effect?”

“Nothing significant. They live a slightly longer than other people and they’re immune to most diseases. They’ve got excellent eyesight and slightly more muscle mass,” he said.

“That sounds very significant to me,” I said, thinking of how quickly meningitis had killed Hosea. “Does everybody here know?”

He shook his head. “Only a few of those most trusted – some in town and a handful of us at the school. I learned about them through my wife’s relationship with the headmistress’s family. They took her in and gave her incredible opportunities.”

“Mrs. Mason was a scholarship student, too, wasn’t she?”

“Yes. She wasn’t one of them, though. The condition can only be passed genetically. We have a few students with the condition.”

I thought of Hattie, so pale, so close to the Monroe family, so helpful to the new scholarship student. “Harriet Tyler’s one, too.” When he nodded, I asked, “What do you call them?”

“Most of them avoid using the term vampire, which is too dangerous to use in a society that prefers superstition to science.” He shrugged and said, “Superstition is easier because it requires no analytical thought. The Monroes and most of their kind in this area call themselves Family.”

Family. The word had a lot of power to someone didn’t have one.

There was a knock on the door and Mr. Mason got up to answer it. Mrs. Monroe stood there in dark slacks and a light coat. “Hello, Albert, Jane,” she said and came in.

“Hello, Hyacinth.” He gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Jane was watching the ceremony and I’ve been telling her a little about the Family.”

She slipped off her coat and said, “May I sit?”

I nodded and she joined me on the sofa. I was trying to digest what I’d just

seen with this proper woman beside me.

“Would you like me to stay?” Mr. Mason asked her. “I’m usually not up so late.”

“No, go on to bed, Albert,” Mrs. Monroe said. “You’re a dear for helping.”

“Always glad to be of service. I told Jane the basic facts about the Family, but I’m sure she still has lots of questions. Goodnight, Jane.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Monroe,” I said and watched him leave, closing the door behind him.

Mrs. Monroe gave me a concerned look. “Well, Jane, I’d hoped to let you know when you were more settled in at Birch Grove. Well, not everything in life can be planned. I can’t imagine what you thought!”

“I thought it was a cult.”

“Oh, heavens, we’re not that adventurous,” she said. “We try to carry on some of the old celebrations. One of our members is a cultural anthropologist, and she says it’s important not to lose all the old ways even if they’re merely ceremonial.”

“Mrs. Monroe, why am I here?”

She leaned forward with the same kind, intelligent expression that she’d had when we first met. “Do you know how hard I searched for a bright, ethical, level-headed young woman who could fully appreciate the opportunities Birch Grove offers?”

“There are thousands of smart, ethical girls who would want to come to Birch Grove on scholarship, ma’am. I was selected because I don’t have any family.”

“I won’t deny that your isolation was a factor, since secrecy is of the utmost importance to us,” she said. “However, you do yourself a disservice if you assume that every compliment is merely flattery, Jane.”

“I prefer information to compliments.”

“I’ll try to explain,” Mrs. Monroe said with a smile. “Our young men have powerful cravings for blood and like most young men, they lack impulse control. One mistake and they endanger themselves and expose us all. They need a

companion, a faithful friend who is intelligent and caring who will help steady them. These companions become part of our extended family, trusted and cared for.”

Taking my hands in hers, Mrs. Monroe said, “We would be honored if you would agree to be Lucien’s companion, Jane.”

Chapter 16

“Birch Grove endeavors to support students as they learn to take on challenging moral decisions about their personal lives.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

MRS. MONROE’S HANDS were soft and pale. “If you say yes, we’ll take care of you for the rest of your life, Jane. You and Lucky would go to college together and graduate school. We will pay for your tuition, a comfortable apartment or house, a car, food, clothing, and incidentals.”

Lucky and security, I thought.

“You’ll stay close to Lucky,” she continued. “You’ll have to make compromises, of course, but in exchange, we’ll offer you all of our resources, and our support so that your life is as enriching and fulfilling as possible.”

I saw it all before me. I would be free from poverty and loneliness. I would be safe. Lucky would be beside me and I wouldn’t have to hide our relationship.

“And what would my responsibilities be?”

“Lucky will want to taste human blood now and then,” she said with an apologetic smile. “Only a few millimeters at each feeding, which won’t endanger your health at all. He may ask you to act as his assistant occasionally, however, I don’t want him relying on you to be his housekeeper or to do his schoolwork. You’ll be a liaison between Lucky and the Family. If anyone gets suspicious of him, or if you feel that he needs our help, you’ll act to protect him.”

“No one believes in vampires.”

“No one with any common sense, but that leaves the majority of the population,” she said. “Our people have been treated too brutally in the past – though those atrocities never made the history books – and we’re very cautious now.”

“No one would hold a genetic anomaly against you now.”

“New times bring new dangers.” She turned my hand so that the inside of

my elbow was visible. “Did Lucien do that?”

“Yes.”

“He was supposed to wait and he’s not supposed to...” she shook her head and looked upset. “He’s not supposed to leave this kind of mark. Have you told anyone?”

“No. Is Jack...?”

“Jacob’s normal. He knows why we brought you here, though.” She let go of my hands and stood. “We have things in common, Jane. We’re careful, smart, decent. You can give me your answer tomorrow.”

“What happens if my answer is no?”

“No one’s ever turned us down,” Mrs. Monroe answered. “However, if you decided that you don’t want to be Lucien’s companion, we would certainly honor our agreement to provide you with a Birch Grove education, and we would look for someone who is interested in my son’s well-being.”

“Just as I was brought in to replace, Bebe.”

“She never turned us down, Jane. She left before we made the offer. And I like you much better than Bebe. All of us, do. Goodnight, Jane.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Monroe.”

I didn’t even try to go to sleep that night. I wrote down everything that had happened, everything I’d been told, in my composition book. I drew a diagram, thinking that if I organized the information I’d be able to understand it better.

My diagram didn’t help because there was no way to factor in my pleasure at being with Lucky, and his feelings for me were an unknown quantity.

Eventually, I turned off the light and stared out the window as night gave way to day.

Shortly after sunrise, I saw Lucky coming down the path. I opened the door and waited for him on the porch.

“Hi,” he said. “Come for a walk.” He started up the path, then veered off on a narrow trail that had been hidden by tall shrubs. Leaves crunched under our feet and birds chirped in the trees.

I studied Lucky as he walked ahead of me. His shoulders looked wide in a

thin black sweater and his legs looked long in dark jeans. Occasionally a ray of sunshine pierced the fog and trees and brightened his gold-streaked hair.

Soon we arrived at a small creek that wound around a boulder. Lucky climbed atop the boulder and reached toward me. I gave him my hand and he pulled me up to sit beside him.

“Jack and I used to play here. We built dams and had sword fights. He was Jacob, Defender of the Grove, and I was Prince Lucien, heir to the Throne. He’d still be happy playing here, but I grew out of that a long time ago.”

The water in the creek pooled down below, the same color as Jack’s eyes, and the smell here was like Jack, green and fresh.

Lucky said, “My mom’s totally pissed off at me for not waiting.”

“She was calm last night. She told me about all of you like it was completely normal.”

“She keeps it all in,” he said. “So, you saw them doing their freak show last night and now everything’s out.”

“You said you weren’t a vampire.”

“I don’t *think* I’m one. I *am* one, only not the imaginary undead, supernatural kind. I planned on explaining things later.”

“So Bebe was supposed to be here with you.”

“Yeah, I spent two years getting to know her, and then one day she bailed on all of us,” he said sounding hurt and angry. “Her uncle, someone she’d never told anyone about, asked her to live with him and his family. I didn’t even get a fucking goodbye.”

“Were you in love with her?”

“Bebe? No way,” he said. “I could talk to her and she was cool. We were buds.” He hesitated and said, “My folks were waiting to ask her about being a companion, but I told her, and she was psyched, so when she left...”

“You were hurt?”

He nodded and then smiled ruefully. “Hattie said I should get used to girls blowing me off.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t take them for granted. So Hattie knew all the time

that I was brought here for you.”

He nodded. “She knew it would be hard for you to adjust and she wanted to help you. Hattie’s like that, a nicer friend than anyone deserves. She likes you.”

Hattie had told me she had to be careful, and now I understood. “I like her, too.”

“I like you, too, Jane. You’re smart and level-headed. Like last night, Mom said you listened and thought about what they said. You didn’t flip out about the geezers’ ceremony and you didn’t flip out about the knife.”

“Lucky, what you said to me before, about girlfriends being temporary...”

“We marry our own,” he said. “We have to because we can’t have children with normal people. It works out for everyone. My father’s companion, Claire Mason, was with him since they were our age. That’s why he’s so out of it when you see him. He misses her.”

“She was your mom’s best friend, right?”

“They were more like siblings, like me and Jack. Aunt Claire and Dad were best friends,” he said. “My mom keeps telling Dad to find another companion, but he’s still grieving.”

As I thought about what all this meant, Lucky shifted his weight to one hip and then reached into his pocket. He brought out the penknife and opened it with one hand.

“Jane, I know that maybe you want a different kind of relationship with me, but being my companion is really important. It’s lifelong and it’s physical, too, a different kind of physical, but it can still be good.”

Lucky lifted his hand from my thigh and brushed my cheek. “I know you don’t mind. I think you even like it.”

“I like being with you.”

“Stay then. Two more years and we’ll get out of this stupid town and go to college somewhere cool. We’ll travel and have adventures. My family will pay for everything.”

“You’re talking about a lot of money. I can get scholarships.”

“They’ve *got* a lot of money,” he said. “You won’t have to worry about anything except being there for me, Jane.”

He rubbed my earlobe between his thumb and forefinger, and my face grew hot. “Will you stay with me?”

I wanted Lucky to keep touching me. I wanted to be needed. I wanted a future where I wasn’t poor and powerless and, worst of all, alone and anonymous. I wanted one beautiful thing in the gritty grayness that had been my life. “Yes.”

“Good,” he said, continuing to rub my ear. “The ear doesn’t have many nerves, but it has lots of capillaries.” As he said this he turned my lobe to expose the back. Then he brought up his knife and I felt the pain, like burning, as he cut it, and I cried out.

The wind gusted through the trees, sending branches rattling and creaking as my blood came out in a gush, sticky and warm and metallic smelling.

Lucky watched with an exhilarated expression as the thick blood trickled down my jaw and then along my throat. He pushed me back against the hard cold rock and began licking my skin.

The branches above me swayed as the wind grew stronger, and Lucky moved his body against mine rhythmically as his tongue rasped upward along my neck. When he reached my earlobe, he took it between his teeth and tugged, worrying at the cut and making it bleed more.

I closed my eyes and slid my arms around Lucky. I would only pay attention to this moment, the press of his body. I wrapped my legs around him to increase the friction of his movements against me. My breath quickened as pleasure intensified.

Then I opened my eyes and above me in the white branches of the trees against the cloudy sky, I saw a dark shadowy shape.

I blinked and looked again and the shape seemed to grow denser, looming above us and not moving even though the branches thrashed violently, raining the narrow leaves down on us.

The shadow became larger and I said, “Lucky...” but he kept sucking at my earlobe and shoving against me and then he grunted and shuddered.

As he lay atop me, breathing heavily, the shadow dissolved like mist, like nothing.

Lucky's face was nestled against the side of my head and I didn't move even though a bump in the boulder jabbed my shoulder blade. After a few minutes he sighed and flopped off me. He licked the traces of blood off his lips and made a *mmmm* sound.

I kept starting up at the branches, which had stopped rustling as the breeze died down.

"Goddamn noisy trees," Lucky said, brushing leaves off his shoulders.

"I thought I saw something up there. A dark shadow."

He glanced at me and raised his eyebrows. "The trees are nothing but shadows and leaves and mess. When I get my share of the school, I'd like to cut them down."

"You couldn't!"

"No, I couldn't. Jack wouldn't let me and he'll be on the board, too."

I felt relieved and said, "They're so beautiful and I love the sound – it's as if they're talking and singing."

"I wish they'd shut the fuck up. Let's go back and I'll take care of your ear."

We walked silently to the cottage. He went to the bathroom and returned with a tube of antibiotic ointment. I stood still while he smeared the ointment on the back of my lobe.

"This is between us," he said. "I'm supposed to wait until you officially agree and then we'll get a lecture on doing safe tastings and there's an initiation ceremony."

"We could have waited."

"I couldn't. I waited for two years for Bebe. My dad gets it, but my mom doesn't know how *I* feel and what I need. What goes on between us isn't her business."

"I know," I said. "It's awkward having her know what we do."

"That's why you need to remember that you're *my* Companion," he said.

“You want to come up for breakfast?”

I washed up and changed into clean clothes and then we went up the path to his house. Lucky asked me to wait in the living room. I pulled my hair forward to cover my aching ear and looked at the family photos.

Lucky had been a stunning child, with luminous blue eyes and pale blonde hair. Jack as a child was a smaller version of himself, a sturdy kid with a mischievous grin.

“Jane, come on.” Lucky was in the doorway and I went with him to the family room.

His parents were drinking coffee, and Mrs. Monroe still wore her clothes from the night before and her eyes looked tired.

Mr. Monroe said, “Lucky told us the good news, Jane. Welcome to the family.”

Or maybe he said, *The Family*. “Thank you, sir.”

“My own companion, Mrs. Mason, was a very important part of my life.” His voice was heavy with sorrow.

Mrs. Monroe shot a look at her husband and said, “We *all* loved Claire. Jane, come have breakfast.”

I sat at the table, which had a basket of pastries and a fruit salad with strawberries, raspberries, and blackberries. A glass pitcher held dark red juice.

Lucky picked up the pitcher and poured a glass for me. “It’s orange juice from blood oranges. They taste the same.”

Jack came in as we began to eat. He grabbed a cranberry muffin and said, “Hi,” to no one in particular.

“Jacob, sit down and eat a proper breakfast,” Mrs. Monroe said.

“Can’t. I’ve got practice. See you.”

He left without even looking at me, which hurt me more than his criticisms.

Mrs. Monroe watched her son walk out and said, “Jacob’s not a morning person.”

Mrs. Monroe began talking about the improvements at the country club, a surreal twist to the morning. I tried not to stare at Lucky and kept pulling my hair

forward to make sure it covered my ear.

“We’ll sponsor you into the club, Jane,” Mr. Monroe said. “You can’t join on your own until you’re twenty-five, so we’ll sponsor you and take care of the fees.”

“Thanks, but I’m not really interested in joining,” I said.

“The club is part of Lucky’s life, of life here in Greenwood, so it will be part of yours, too,” Mrs. Monroe said. “Joining the right clubs and organizations is always a good idea. Knowing the right people can make your life much easier.”

“I’d rather be judged by what I do, not who I know.”

“Not me,” Lucky said. “Why not make things easier?”

“In an ideal world, one is judged by one’s accomplishments,” Mrs. Monroe said. “And in an ideal world, friends help friends.”

The doorbell rang and Mrs. Monroe said, “That must be Hattie.”

Lucky jumped up. “I’ll let her in.”

Turning to me, Mrs. Monroe said, “I hope you don’t mind that I told Hattie our good news. I know you’re friends and I thought you might want her to help you through the initiation ceremony.”

“That’s fine. Do Mary Violet and Constance know?”

“Goodness no!” she said. “They are exceptional girls, of course, like all my girls, but we don’t confide in outsiders unless we have a special relationship with them. Until you learn who is Family and who is not, don’t tell anyone about us.”

Mr. Monroe, who was reading the newspaper, looked up and said, “Eventually you’ll be able to spot a Family member at a glance. We have friends among the long-established townspeople, too.”

About ten minutes later, Hattie came in by herself. “Welcome to the Family, Jane!”

“Thanks!”

“I’m so glad I have another girl my age to talk to about this stuff. Where’s Jack?”

“He went to practice,” Mrs. Madison said.

“He doesn’t have... Oh, that’s right. I forgot that he’d told me they were starting early.”

No one asked where Lucky had gone, and so I didn’t either.

After breakfast, Mrs. Monroe said, “Jane, you’ll need more clothes now that you’ll be accompanying Lucien here and there. Hattie’s going to take your shopping and help you pick out suitable things.”

“I could use a winter coat,” I said.

“You need dresses, Jane,” Hattie said, “Skirts, more casual clothes, accessories. It’s okay.”

Mrs. Monroe smiled at her husband. “Tobias, will you deposit enough to cover Jane’s expenses?”

“I’ll take care of that now, dear,” Mr. Monroe said and left the room.

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said, thinking more about the money in my account than new clothes.

“You’re very welcome, Jane. Make sure to listen to Hattie. She knows the importance of picking quality over quantity.”

“Bye, Mrs. M,” Hattie said. As we walked outside to her car, she pulled on a canvas hat and sunglasses. “We can go to Millerton. It’s not too far and they have a good mall.”

“Good, because the stores down the hill are too expensive.”

Hattie leaned against the car and looked at me. “It’s a business deal. Lucky and his family are definitely going to get what they need from you. You make sure you get what you need, too. Is he already taking your blood?”

I didn’t answer and Hattie said, “I thought so.”

Chapter 17

“The Community Service Program (CSP) is incorporated throughout our curriculum in order to raise students’ awareness of and action on behalf of the poor and unfortunate in our society. Moral growth is integrated into all aspects of our education.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

HATTIE DROVE to a midsize suburb with most luxurious mall I’d ever seen. Water splashed in big fountains and a classical guitarist played on a patio.

We went into department stores I’d only heard about. Hattie glanced at price tags without much concern, but I knew the cost was coming out of the money that had just been deposited in my account. That meant that I would get the receipt and could return things for cash.

While Hattie pulled casual dresses from a rack, she said, “Most of these pants and skirts are too long, but we can have them altered at Eunice’s. You’ll need a few LBDs.”

“What?”

“Little Blue Dresses, the young woman’s equivalent of the Little Black Dress. The Family likes us to look put together for their parties.”

We stopped for lunch at a dark little restaurant with white tablecloths waiters dressed in black t-shirts and black jeans.

“You haven’t had any more incidents, have you?”

“None, and I keep looking around, trying to figure out who the girl could be,” I said. “Lucky told me that Bebe was into being a Companion and MV told me she was big and stocky. What if Bebe’s the one harassing me?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Hattie said. “Why would Bebe leave and then come back to harass you?”

“What if she didn’t leave on her own?” I said. “Maybe she was asked to leave. Lucky said she had an edge. Maybe she’s angry that she’s been replaced and trying to scare me off.”

Hattie shook her head. “It’s impossible. The Family knows who comes in

and out of Greenwood and they're too careful to let anything like that happen. I'm sure they know exactly where Bebe is now, and they've made it worth her while to keep quiet."

"Well, it was a theory," I said.

"It's probably someone like Sage," she said, "hassling you secretly because she'd get expelled if she was caught."

"Hattie, I've been wondering if being a companion is so great, why did Mrs. Mason commit suicide?"

"Poor Claire." Hattie's eyes glistened and she blinked. "None of the adults will talk about it so all I can tell you is what I've guessed. The Masons never had kids and when she finally started getting a belly, we all got excited. Then she miscarried and her whole personality changed. She had major mood swings, laughing one minute and crying over nothing the next."

Hattie took a sip of her cranberry juice. "Mr. Mason was going to take her on a vacation so she could rest and recover. The night they were supposed to leave, she jumped off the roof."

"Poor woman, poor Mr. Mason!"

"I think she had post-partum depression. Everyone felt horrible because they didn't get real help for her."

"Isn't it strange that Mr. Mason stays at Birch Grove?"

"It's his home. The Family will always take care of him and, who knows, he might meet someone else eventually."

"I liked him from the start," I said. "Is it only the men who have companions?"

"Only the men. Girls have to learn how to control ourselves and act like ladies, even when we want to rip someone's throat out and drain their bodies." She saw my expression and added, "I'm kidding. Supposedly, the guys can be dangerous because they're impulsive *and* strong."

"Why do you say 'supposedly?'"

"How can I know for sure? We women have to take their word for it, but what if the men only say that they need companions, when they really *want*

them?”

“Hattie, what’s tasting blood feel like to you? Is it sexual?”

She hesitated. “Animal blood is just really pleasurable, like good wine, I guess. But human blood is more like a drug, and it can be very erotic. Or maybe it just depends on *whose* blood you’re drinking,” she said. “That’s one of the reasons I find the companion relationships so confusing. Everyone else seems happy with things the way they are.”

“Hattie, you have your family and *The Family*. I have no one. This offer... how could I refuse it when I’d want to help Lucky anyway?”

She reached out to touch my hand. “I didn’t mean to judge. I’d do the same thing if I was in your situation.”

By the time that we were done shopping, I had several new tops, pants, skirts, dresses, and shoes. Hattie led me to the accessories section of a store where the handbags were in stunning displays under pinpoint lights. “Mrs. Monroe doesn’t like Trendy Status Accessories, but if you want something, we can get it.”

“Won’t people wonder why a scholarship girl has a TSA?” I asked. “Not to mention the new clothes.”

“We’ll say a donor gifted the clothes to you. The trick is to find TSAs that aren’t obviously TSAs.” Together we picked out a tote, handbag, and clutch that didn’t have noticeable labeling. The shocking totals gave me my first real concept of how my life would be different from now on.

On the way back, Hattie stopped in Greenwood. “I need the jeweler to fix something,” she said as she parked in front of a small shop.

While she showed the jeweler the broken clasp on a necklace, I stood near the door, glancing at the spotless glass cabinets filled with jewelry, watches, and gold pens.

Hattie called me to the counter and said, “Jane, come try these on.”

The jeweler was bringing out a blue velvet tray that displayed sparkling rings.

“Hattie...” I was used to neighborhoods where stores posted signs saying

One student at a time!

“It’s okay to look,” Hattie told me. She held out an emerald ring for me. “Try it on.”

I slipped it on my finger and it slipped sideways. “It’s too big.”

“You have delicate hands,” the jeweler said. “This might fit better.” He took my hand and slid on a sapphire and diamond ring. He wiggled it and said, “How does that feel?”

I held my hand up and studied the way the gems caught and refracted the light. “Perfect. Thank you,” I said as I took it off and handed it back to him.

Hattie was playing with an ornate topaz and diamond ring. “This is the sort of big, shiny thing Mary Violet would love.” She flipped her hands and said, “So tragic that everyone isn’t as glamorous as me!” and I laughed at her imitation.

Hattie moved along the counter to a display of penknives. “Maybe Lucky will get you one,” she said.

“He offered.” Now I knew why she had one.

When we got back to campus, Hattie helped carry my shopping bags to the cottage. “You seem very calm about all this,” she said. “I’d be tripping if someone told me there were werewolves and they’d like me to be a werewolf’s BFF.”

“Can I ask you something, Hattie?”

“Sure.”

“Do you know why Jack doesn’t want me to be around Lucky?”

She paused before speaking. “Bebe had a long time to get to know us, and I thought we really knew her, too. She was so motivated by the money and the Family’s power that I never thought she’d bail.” Hattie shrugged. “You’re different. I think that worries Jack.”

“The way he talks to me is so confusing. I thought he might not like me.”

“The only thing you’ve got to worry about is if *Lucky* likes you,” she said. “I’ve got to go and hit the books.”

“Thanks, Hattie, for everything. For being so nice from the start.”

She smiled. “Jane, it’s easy being nice to you. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye.”

After she left, I took my new clothes out of the shopping bags, and selected the least useful ones. I set them on one side of the closet and put the shopping receipt in my wallet.

I had a place to live, clothes and cash, a position and security for life, and a relationship with a gorgeous guy. So why did I suddenly feel so empty and worn out?

I remembered that I hadn't slept last night. I showered and went to bed.

ON SUNDAY MORNING, I stayed in bed fantasizing about going to college with Lucky. We'd have heavy, unmarked textbooks, desks with new laptops, wonderful classes... It would be fun to live in a dorm, but we might have to live off-campus for privacy.

The phone startled me out of my reverie. Mrs. Monroe asked if I'd come up early. “We'd like you and Lucky to meet with a counselor about your responsibilities and about the initiation ceremony. We'll have lunch together after.”

She made it sound so normal. I spent too long trying on my new clothes, wanting to look right, and finally decided on a plain navy skirt and a white blouse because I thought Mrs. Monroe would approve.

When I arrived at the house, she smiled and said, “You look like a young lady now. You'll be meeting in my husband's study so you'll be free to talk,” she said.

She showed me to a dark room with a big dark wood desk in the middle of the room and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on all four walls. Lucky was slouched in an armchair, his legs sprawled out, and an older woman sat at the desk.

She had a chic, short haircut that showed off a small, angular face. Rimless glasses were propped on her button nose. She wore a soft yellow sweater, a floral print skirt, and a dramatic necklace of turquoise and amber stones.

“Nina, this is Jane Williams,” Mrs. Monroe said. “Jane, this is Nina Rector.”

“Hello, Jane. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you!”

“Hello, ma’am.”

Mrs. Monroe said, “Nina, I’ll be in the family room if you need anything.”

She left, closing the door behind her.

“Have a seat, Jane,” Ms. Rector said and I sat next to Lucky.

“Hey,” he said to me.

“Hi.”

“Congratulations, Jane! I know how very exciting this is for you. My parents died when I was young, drugs, and I was living on the streets before The Family rescued me,” Mrs. Rector said. “I became a Companion when I was about your age. It was the best thing I ever did.”

She was so polished and well-spoken that it was hard for me to imagine her on the streets and alone.

“Let’s start with an overview,” she said and then went over the things that Mrs. Monroe had told me. “I tell you these things because I’ve been assured that you comprehend our need for confidentiality.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Excellent! Now let’s go over safety precautions. I cannot stress the importance of being careful in your interactions. Jane, Lucien’s blood could be fatal if it contaminated your blood-system.”

“I had no idea,” I said, stunned. I turned toward Lucky. He yawned and stared at his shoes. “Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“I was being careful,” he said. “The very last thing I want to do is infect you. I told you – I want you healthy.”

Ms. Rector nodded. “It’s an unfortunate problem. If you have an open cut on your skin or your mouth, touching his blood or even ingesting it – and don’t object because I’ve seen everything – could be deadly. Don’t take that chance.”

“What happens if he’s hurt, or in an accident?” I asked. “Shouldn’t I help him?”

“Lucien, would you please demonstrate to Jane?”

“Sure,” Lucky said. He pulled out his penknife and, before I could stop

him, he scratched the back of his hand with the blade. The cut turned red with blood and then, as we watched, the skin mended itself. Lucky licked off the blood to reveal unmarked skin.

“Thank you, Lucien,” Ms. Rector said. “Jane, members of the Family heal easily from minor injuries, so don’t worry about them. If Lucien’s badly injured, you’ve got to contact us immediately so that our medical teams get to him before anyone else. Never, *ever* rely on any other medical assistance.”

She reached down and lifted a dark brown leather satchel onto the desk. “Let’s move on,” she said. She took out surgical gloves, antiseptic spray, rubbing alcohol, bandages, a scalpel, a hypodermic needle, disinfectant wipes, a length of rubber tubing, and small glass cylinders. “Here are some popular tools for safe and healthy blood-letting. Come take a look.”

Lucky was instantly alert. He went to the desk, his lips parted with the same expression he’d had when he saw my cut finger..

I went to the desk and picked up a cylinder with a needle at one end.

Ms. Rector said, “That’s a venepuncture vacuum system, a very good way of taking a sample. Of course, some partners prefer a more *intimate* transfer, which is acceptable since the condition isn’t contagious through saliva.”

There was something perverse about the matter-of-fact way she mentioned it: *intimate* transfer.

Ms. Rector said, “You need to talk about scarring. Some partners enjoying seeing evidence of their relationship, and others want to minimize scarring. Have you talked about it?”

“We’ll figure it out later,” Lucky said, but I knew the marks on my skin turned him on.

“I don’t want scars.”

Lucky glared at me, and Ms. Rector said, “That’s a wise decision. Over the course of many years, scar tissue builds up and interferes with blood draws.”

She showed us the different ways to take blood and said, “Jane, while we don’t condone under-age alcohol consumption, we make an exception for use as pain-management during more *intimate* withdrawals. A glass of wine can help

you relax and enjoy the experience. There are also topical anesthetics. Obviously they interfere with your partner's pleasure. Or you may relish the *intensity* of a withdrawal without any dulling substances." She smiled suggestively.

"It doesn't hurt too much," I said.

"Hurt doesn't have to be bad, dear. It's all how you choose to interpret the sensation. But we can discuss that another time," she said. "There is one area of concern. Lucien, you may be aware that some Family members have been using custom-made dental devices – fangs -- for blood-letting."

"I know," he said. "They're kind of cool."

"Your parents are of the opinion that animals have fangs, not humans. The Council is debating this now, and until further notice, I'd really recommend that you don't use them."

"My mom's already ragged on about them," he said.

"I'm so glad you understand!" Ms. Rector smiled at Lucky, who was rolling a hypodermic in his long elegant fingers.

"What council?" I asked.

"The Council acts as our governmental body, since the Family can't go to the standard authorities for many matters," she said. "Now we've got a brand new instructional video to illustrate the techniques I discussed."

I felt queasy watching the couple on-screen siphon red-purple blood with a needle and use a scalpel to cut skin. Lucky had that glazed look in his blue eyes that I now recognized as bloodlust. This was his porn.

He could barely pay attention to the rest of the session, which dealt with the initiation ceremony. I would be presented and have to recite a few lines of the old language. Hattie would help teach me the lines phonetically.

"It's a very simple and touching old ceremony," Ms. Rector said. "It will be held in a few weeks and then you'll officially be Lucian's Companion."

She gave each of us a bag with blood-letting supplies and told us that we could call her if we needed more.

"Great, thanks!" Lucky said. "Can I keep the video, too?"

"Of course," she said with a pleased smile. "Will your partnership – or

does it already – include sexual activity? I can advise you about special precautions.”

“No, that’s not necessary,” Lucky said quickly.

“In the old days, you know, it was customary and it’s still not uncommon.” Mrs. Rector gave me a sympathetic look. “All of our discussions and dealings will be completely confidential. Lucien’s parents will not be told, whatever your decision.”

Lucky glanced at me and then said, “We’ll work it out. When can we start?”

“The Council’s given their approval,” she said. “You can start now, although your parents would probably prefer if you waited until after the initiation. Let me put these things away and we can talk more at lunch.”

“Thanks for the info,” Lucky said. He grabbed my hand and said, “Come on.”

I thought he was going to lead me to the family room, but he pulled me toward the front door. Jack was walking into the hall from upstairs.

Lucky said, “Tell Mom we can’t make lunch.”

“Tell her yourself,” Jack said.

“I have *Family* things to do.”

“What? You’re going to suck the elfkin dry of her vital fluids? Big man.”

“Shut up. You don’t know anything.”

“I know more than you think.” Jack looked at me and said, “So you’re going to drink the Kool-Aid? Why am I even asking?”

“What do you care what she does?” Lucky said and shoved Jack. Jack raised a fist, about to swing, when Mr. Monroe came to the hallway. “Boys!”

Lucky smirked and said, “Hi, Dad, Jane and I are having lunch at her place. See you later.”

I went with Lucky as far as the front porch before pulling my hand out of his and stopping. “No.”

“What?”

“Lucky, you can’t drag me around like a dog on a leash. I already said I’d

be at lunch and I want to talk to Ms. Rector. When I say I'll do something, I do it."

"Are you lecturing me?"

"I'm stating facts."

For a moment, I thought he was angry with me. Then he grinned and his face was transformed. His eyes were dark blue here in the shade. He was so handsome that it was too easy to want to please him.

"Okay, you're right. That was totally rude. Jane, keep me grounded, okay? Tell me when I'm a jerk."

"Okay. You're being a jerk."

"I'm sorry. Now can we go and play with our new toys?"

"It's not playing and they're not toys. I do it because you need it." I turned and walked back to his house and after a moment Lucky followed.

Jack and his father were in the family room with Ms. Rector and Mrs. Monroe, who looked relieved when she saw us return.

"Can I do anything?" I asked the headmistress.

"Why don't you help Jack set the table?" she said.

Jack didn't look at me as I copied his placement of forks, knives, and glasses. As we passed by each other, he leaned so close that his breath tickled my ear as he whispered, "The Halfling rebels against her master."

I stomped on his foot and said, "Oh, sorry."

Lucky was already over his confrontation with Jack and acting as if nothing had happened. Which was the real Lucky, the smiling, joking, easy-going guy, or the vulnerable, aggressive blood-drinker?

I only had a few minutes alone with Ms. Rector after lunch. "It would be great to talk to you sometime about all this."

She reached out and squeezed my hand. A red gem on her gold ring glinted. "I'll be coming for your initiation and staying a few days. How about then?"

"That would be great."

Lucky waited through the long lunch. Then he asked, "Jane, may I walk

you home?”

“I’d like that.”

He tried to walk at a relaxed pace, but halfway down the trail he said, “Come on,” and began jogging. We were barely inside the door when he said, “Will you please let me?”

“All right.”

“Do you want to try the topical anesthetic?” he said.

“It’s okay, Lucky, but be careful.”

He opened my bag of supplies and picked out the lancet. It was like a scalpel with a two-sided blade. He disinfected it and then said, “Lie face-down on the bed.”

I did as he asked and he sat beside me and began to stroke my back under my blouse, making me tremble. He hitched my blouse up and unhooked my bra. He began rubbing my skin, all the way from my shoulders to my waist. His fingers kneaded and found the tense places.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the pressure of his fingers on my skin. He worked his thumb into a spot high up on my shoulder. Then he made a swift cut.

I bit into the pillow and Lucky groaned before putting his mouth to the cut and feeding from me. He slid atop me and moved rhythmically as he alternately sucked the wound and probed it with his tongue.

I tried to relax, to enjoy the contact of his body and his pleasure, but I kept thinking of the lust in his eyes when he’d seen the video, lust that had nothing to do with me.

When Lucky was done, he rolled to my side and dozed off.

I got up and went to the bathroom. I struggled to put ointment and a Band-Aid on my back before changing into a t-shirt and jeans. I looked into the bedroom and saw Lucky sprawled asleep on the bed.

An hour later, I shook him awake. “Lucky, we have to go over your chemistry and I have some studying to do for my classes.”

“Hmm? Oh, I’m okay with chem. We did that so you’d get to know me.”

“Oh.”

“Well, okay, my folks *did* hope you’d push me to do better, but it’s not like I’m going to major in the sciences. Do you want me to take care of your cut?”

“I already did that.”

“Okay. I gotta get going. See you.”

“When?”

“I’ll want a taste again in a few days,” he said. “We can try something new with our to--- I mean, medical equipment.”

Chapter 18

“The academic year is comprised of six periods that are about six-weeks each. Each of our three terms is approximately eighteen weeks. Major exams are given at the end of each term.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

IN THE NEXT few weeks, I tried to balance my new role with the demands of class work as mid-terms approached.

Lucky stopped by twice a week to get what he called his taste. Like a junkie, I let him prick places that wouldn't show marks. Afterward he'd help me clean the wounds and stay for to talk about his friends.

He kept asking if he could use the venepuncture kit and I finally said yes.

His pupils dilated as he wound the rubber hose around my arm and tapped at my vein as it grew full. He was transfixed as he filled the tube with dark red blood. “I'll save this for later,” he said and put it in the pocket of his Evergreen Prep hoodie.

“You don't have to go so soon,” I said, but I was thinking about two-pages of Latin that I had to translate.

“You've got tests coming up. I don't want my mom getting on your case about grades.”

“Thanks for thinking of that.”

“Besides I'm going for burgers with Mack.”

“Who's that?”

“My friend, Christopher MacElroy. I told you about him. We're on a paintball team.”

“Oh, okay.”

“You never remember any my friends.”

“I might if I met them.”

“Do you *want* to meet them?” he asked, annoyed.

His friends seemed to have too much money and no self-discipline. Just

like Lucky. “I’ve got too much to deal with already.”

My Latin study group met weekly, and I was even looking forward to the annual Latin Class Skit Night.

Mary Violet had made a toga for me from a sheet, and I’d rehearsed my part for two scenes from Roman plays by Terence. Although I’d also read the English translation of the plays, I got lost with the complicated plots in which everyone is manipulating everyone else.

Catalina was hosting the event at her house. My study group picked me up and we drove to an imposing gray stone mansion. The interior was starkly modern with a few abstract sculptures on bare stone floors and huge paintings on vast walls.

Catalina’s younger sister led us downstairs to the ballroom. I didn’t even know that private houses could have ballrooms. A maid took our coats and a man in a uniform served lavish non-alcoholic cocktails. Catalina’s toga draped so gracefully that it must have been made for her.

My teacher, Ms. Ingerson, wore a bright blue toga and looked happier than I’d ever seen her. She got on the small stage and welcomed us in Latin. Then the seniors did their skits, with the girls wildly exaggerating their parts as both male and female characters. My group didn’t go for laughs, though, but our skits went well.

Everything lately made me think of my situation with The Family, including one of my lines: “*Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto*,” or “I am a man, I consider nothing that is human alien to me.”

After the skits and dinner, Catalina came to me and said, “I thought you might humiliate yourself, however, you performed competently if somewhat dully.”

“I’m not stupid, Catalina.”

“No, but still naïve, I think, and odd. A frog out of water.”

“You mean a fish out of water.”

She winked an amber eye and said, “No, a frog, because a frog is a graceless thing, yet it can breathe both in and out of water. A fish dies out of

water, but a frog can survive.”

It almost seemed like a compliment. Before I could respond, Ms. Ingerson called over Catalina to thank her for her hospitality.

Night Terrors became even more interesting to me as I sought out clues about my situation. We studied vampire poetry by Keats, Byron, and Southey. We read *The Vampire Mistress* by Elizabeth Grey and *The Cold Embrace* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon.

Once, while visiting the Monroes, the headmistress and I were alone in the family room and I said, “Mrs. Monroe, what made you decide to teach *Night Terrors*?”

“I started reading vampire mythology when I was about thirteen. I was trying to understand why people hated us. The more I read, the more I realized that fictional vampires are really reflections of zeitgeist, which means the cultural climate of an age,” she said. “I became fascinated with the progression of vampire literature in conjunction with social movements, and that’s how my course developed.”

“What does current vampire fiction tell you about our zeitgeist?”

She smiled. “I’ll tell you when I prepare my class for next year.”

I WAS INVITED up to the Monroes’ to meet a special guest, a member of the Council, the mysterious group that governed the vampires.

It was twilight and there was a gleaming black Mercedes in their driveway. I was wearing a dress that Hattie helped pick out, burgundy with black stitching on the neckline and pockets.

Mrs. Monroe opened the front door and said softly, “Be yourself, Jane, and you’ll be fine.”

She led me into the living room. Vases of fresh flowers were on the polished tables, a fire burned in the fireplace, and there was a cart set up for drinks.

I’d expected Lucky to be here, but there was only Mr. Monroe and another man, a man who made Tobias Monroe look worn and shabby.

The visitor had dark curly hair, hooded eyes, and a broad chest, and he wore a flawless black suit and snowy white shirt. He emanated power even as he stood casually with a glass of red wine.

“This is Jane,” Mrs. Monroe said, but didn’t introduce him to me.

“Hello, Jane,” the man said. His disarming smile made me feel as if we had just shared a joke. “Hyacinth and Tobias, do you mind if I talk to Jane alone?”

“Not at all,” Mrs. Monroe said, blushing. I’d never seen her nervous before.

When they left, the man said, “Would you like a drink, Jane?”

“No, thank you, sir,” I said. “You know my name, but I don’t know who yours.”

“I’m Ian Ducharme. I represent this region on the Council. Not that Hyacinth gives me much to do. She’s likes to control every detail of her school.” Although his English was perfect, he seemed foreign. “Shall we sit?”

He waited until I sat on the sofa and then sat near me, making the hair on the back of my neck rise. Despite his elegant exterior, I sensed that Ian Ducharme was an extremely dangerous man.

“Jane, you’re too young to fully comprehend how long a life-long commitment is. A Companion may come to regret her decision, but she rarely regrets her compensation.” He smiled cynically. “We buy loyalty, Jane. Most people are so very eager to sell it.”

I studied him and he studied me.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“You remind me of Jack Monroe,” I said. “He likes to say things to unnerve me. There’s a physical resemblance, too.”

Mr. Ducharme laughed. “So I’m of a type? Now I’ll have to get to know Jack better to discover if you’ve given me a compliment or not.”

“It wasn’t meant one way or the other.”

“Why not? Don’t you desire to cultivate my favor? I’m very powerful, you know, and quite rich. Women find me extremely attractive.”

“Wealth and power are usually considered synonymous with

attractiveness.”

“Indeed they are, Jane. The very people who find me so handsome might realize they are quite mistaken should I suddenly lose my fortune and position.”

I liked him because he treated me like an equal and I found myself smiling. “I think you’d survive.”

He had a rich, low laugh. “Now it’s my turn to tell you what I think about you. I think that perhaps Hyacinth may have miscalculated. I don’t think you are someone who is eager to please. Are you someone who will be loyal for a price?”

“Loyalty that can be bought isn’t loyalty. I’ve already promised Lucky that I’ll be his Companion. I’m going to follow through on my promise.”

“That’s what Hyacinth says and she’s made a profession of being infallible,” he said. His deep brown eyes looked into mine and he said, “I read your files, even those closed off to your headmistress. Tell me, how did you get so high in that tree when you were shot?”

“I wouldn’t want to remember, even if I could,” I said. “I was told that I must have climbed.”

“How does a seven-year-old climb almost thirty feet with a lethal gunshot? You were dead when they found you. The paramedics gave up trying to resuscitate you.”

I shook my head and said, “They must have made mistakes in the report.”

“I think not, Jane. One only has to look in your eyes to see that you’re not the young, simple girl you appear to be,” he said, giving me an eerie feeling that he knew more about me than even I knew.

“Having survived a murder attempt doesn’t make me special. It makes me unfortunate. I don’t want anyone to know. I don’t want them to pity me.”

“As you wish,” he said and finished his glass of wine. “I’m rarely contacted in these petty domestic affairs, but the Monroes asked me to interview you on behalf of their son. What do you want me to say?”

I answered, “What I *want* you to say doesn’t matter, does it?”

“No, I wanted to see if you would try to plead your case, though,” he said with a sly grin. “You remind me of someone, too, a young friend of mine who is

more than what she seems.”

He stood and so I stood, too.

“Jane, a word of warning – this branch of the Family does not take betrayal lightly. You can go now.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Ducharme.”

“Until we meet again, Jane.”

Mrs. Monroe asked me to wait in the family room, and a little later she came to tell me that Mr. Ducharme had been satisfied with me. Why had he told her that when he didn’t believe it?

Hattie stopped by soon afterward, and we walked to the amphitheatre.

“So what did you think of Ian Ducharme?” she asked.

“I liked him, even though he scared the hell out of me.”

“He does that with everyone. Not that I’ve never talked to him personally, but Mary Violet would say that he seems deliciously depraved – and she’d be right. Mrs. Monroe won’t say a word about what he actually does for the Council.”

Hattie showed me where I would wait at the beginning of the initiation ceremony, how to circle the clearing before walking to the center, and where to stand. She taught me the strange words I’d have to say and rehearsed them with me.

The language was full of sharp angles, like broken glass in my mouth, and I struggled over the few sentences.

“Don’t worry. Nobody can pronounce it,” Hattie told me. “I’m pretty sure that’s why it died out. As long as you try, you don’t have to get it exactly right. Once you say your lines and Lucky says his lines, there’s a small cutting of your fingertip.”

“I thought that that was private.”

“It is, except for this official event. It’s a tiny jab, enough to get a few drops for symbolism. The worse part is this awful green liquor made with herbs. You and Lucky each have to take a drink. The Monroes will make sure it’s watered down and sweetened so you don’t automatically spit it out.”

“What do I have to wear?”

“You’ll get a robe. Eunice will make it the right length so you don’t trip.”

“That’s good because wearing a toga at the Latin Skit Night was harder than I thought it would be,” I said. “MV would say that it’s my tragic fate to wear crazy gowns and speak in dead languages!”

Hattie and I laughed and she said, “Anyway, whole thing takes fifteen minutes and then you and Lucky will be able to suck your blood happily ever after.”

Although she smiled, she had a bitter tone.

“Hattie, are you absolutely sure this okay with you?” I thought of all that I’d been offered and I thought about how much I liked this lovely, kind girl. “If you don’t want me to do it, I won’t.”

She pressed her lips together and her hazel eyes turned to the ground. After a moment she said, “I’m doing it again – letting my own problems with The Family interfere with others’ decisions. Don’t lose something important because I’ve got issues.”

“If there’s anything I can do, Hattie...”

Her smile was sorrowful. “Thanks, but I have to accept that things are the way they are.”

I stayed quiet so she could talk more, but she changed the topic to a new store at the Millerton mall.

The Monroes gave me my own cell phone and told me that they would take care of all the bills. The sleek silver phone was pre-programmed with the Monroes’ numbers, and I could use it to call any of my friends, too.

I wanted to call the Alphas, but even if I could find out their phone numbers, there was so much that I *couldn’t* tell them. There was so much I couldn’t tell anyone other than Hattie.

Constance had us over to study, and her mother seemed as sensible and sharp as she was. Her ten-year-old twin brothers were noisy and kept running into her bedroom while we quizzed each other for *Night Terrors*.

When the boys jumped on her bed and began wrestling, Constance said to me, “This is why I like to hang out at MV’s.”

Mary Violet often asked me over, too. One afternoon as we were studying out on the lawn, I asked, “Have you ever been to Hattie’s house?”

“Only a few times and I’ve known her forever. I don’t even want to go since Mrs. Tyler is a terrible horrible snob and she said something mean about Mom’s paintings,” Mary Violet said. “No one’s allowed to say how appalling they are, except us, you know, and that’s because we know they’re actually very good. Besides I think Hattie argues with her parents all the time.”

“She told me they don’t get along very well.”

“Her family is so uptight that I wouldn’t be surprised if Hattie ran away and joined the circus. One of the surrealistic European circuses, though, not the tacky freak show kind.”

“Hattie’s not snobby at all, though,” I said.

“No, she is, as Mrs. Monroe says, an exceptional girl.” Mary Violet looked more serious than I’d ever seen her and said, “Hattie’s so friendly, but it’s hard to get below the surface. I always feel like she’s keeping some deep dark secret, like you and your mysterious past.”

“MV, my past isn’t mysterious...” I stopped. “My life was really depressing. It was like I’d been looking at the world through a filthy window and everything was murky and ugly. When I came here, everything changed. Colors were so bright, sounds so clear, and I don’t feel numb anymore. I don’t feel so alone.”

Hattie leaned against me, her golden curls brushing against my face. “You can share my family if you share the shame of the paintings, too.”

“I love your mom’s paintings.”

“Pants on fire!” she said and started tickling me.

“I love the *birch* paintings!” I said before laughter overtook me.

SIX DAYS BEFORE the initiation, Hattie met me in the hallway by the lockers and said, “I have something for you.” We went to an empty music practice room

and she took a small black velvet box from her book bag. “It’s from The Family.”

I opened it and saw a gold ring with three small dark red stones, similar to the ring Ms. Rector had worn.

Hattie said, “It’s a Companion ring. The gold was mined from the Apuseni Mountains and the garnets come from the Banat Mountains in Romania.”

The inside of the ring was inscribed with an L over a J in curlicue script. Lucien and Jane.

“Try it on,” Hattie urged. “It goes on your right-hand ring finger.”

It fit perfectly. “Is this why you made me try on rings?”

She smiled. “Smart Jane. You’ll need it for your initiation and you can wear it after that. Take good care of it.”

“I will. Thanks, Hattie.” I placed it in my locker hidden behind a stack of books.

My last class that day was Expository Writing in the basement of Flounder. We were compiling a special sports edition of the paper, and I’d been assigned to write about the modern, ballet, and jazz dance classes.

The editor, a senior, came to my desk and said, “I need you to cut another 250 words.”

“I’ve already cut it to the bone,” I said, repeating a phrase I’d heard from a junior.

Ms. Chu came over and said, “How are we doing?”

“Jane’s article is too long and we need the inches.”

“I’ll lose important content if I cut any more any more,” I said. “And dance deserves the space. A larger percentage of students study dance than any single sport.”

“Sorry, we don’t have the room,” the editor said.

We both looked at Ms. Chu. I expected her to take one side or another.

“I know you can work it out,” she said and left us there.

The senior blew out an exasperated breath and said, “It’s too long and I don’t want to bump someone else’s article, but you’re right about dance being a big deal here. Got any suggestions?”

I thought for a second and said, “What if we do my article in two-parts? Part one, in this edition, can be on jazz and modern, and part two in the arts edition can be about the history of the dance program and ballet. That will give you more space than you need.”

“Not a shabby idea for a girl from public school,” she said with a grin. “You’re on.”

After I finished my rewrite of section one, I submitted it to the editor and also filed a copy in the archives. Then I helped proofread the other articles. The sun had almost set by the time I walked back to the main building to get my books.

The building was as dark and empty as it had been the other time I’d been here this late. Because of that experience, I peered around the corner to the hall with my locker anyway.

The student in the hooded sweatshirt was moving in the shadows. My locker door was open and she was rummaging inside. Her head was ducked and hidden, and I caught a glimpse of brightness from a flashlight.

Staying close to the wall, I edged forward. My elbow brushed against a locker and made a small thud. I froze in place hoping she hadn’t heard, but she turned and shined her bright flashlight right in my eyes.

Although I couldn’t see, I dropped my book bag and ran toward her. She bolted away. My leather-soled shoes slipped on the polished linoleum, but I knew where she was going.

She rounded the corner to the music practice rooms and I was right behind. She’d vanished again!

There was an explanation, I told myself and looked carefully around. That’s when I saw it: a section of the wood paneling that didn’t line up evenly along the wall.

When I examined it, I discovered a push-release latch. I shoved in gently and it popped open. I swung the door open and saw a dark tunnel, only about four feet high and four feet wide. Ahead the flashlight flickered against the wall.

My smallness gave me an advantage and I moved swiftly in a low crouch

after the girl. She bashed her head on the ceiling and stumbled. I took one jump forward and tackled her.

“Shit!”

It was a man’s voice.

I grabbed the flashlight and shone it in his face as he rolled over with me atop.

Jack Monroe blinked in the bright light and said, “How’s it going, Jane?”

“You!”

He said, “Cozy in here. I’m like a troll taken down by elf in her warren of tunnels.”

I realized that our bodies were intertwined. I looked into his green eyes and his long, dark lashes. His arm came up around me so that I was balanced atop his strong body and I felt his chest rise and fall. One side of his mouth tugged upward and desire surged in me, shocking me more than anything else.

“I can’t believe you’re laughing about this!” I said angry and confused, turning away from him.

“Come on, it *is* kind of funny,” he said. He stayed on the floor of the tunnel. “Did you close the door behind you?”

“I was trying to catch you.” I pointed the beam of the flashlight along the wall and noticed the same birch paneling that was used in the auditorium. The flashlight’s beam only pierced about twenty feet of darkness.

Jack said, “Okay, go back and close the door on your way out. See you around.”

I grabbed his ankle as he began to scramble away.

“No, you don’t. You’re coming with me.”

“When did you get so bossy? I kind of like it. Beat me, whip me, make me write bad checks.”

“Shut up.”

We turned in the narrow space and made our way back to the hall. He closed the secret panel.

“What’s this tunnel for?” My heart was racing and couldn’t look at him

directly until I got control of myself.

“It’s an escape route in case vampire-haters come to round us up,” he said and we walked to my locker. “Although that may seem incredibly paranoid to you.”

“No, SWAT teams used to raid my old neighborhood. I understand being careful.” I talked just to get away from the feeling I’d had. “We’d hear the helicopters overhead and then their search lights would blast into our yards and our houses and the pit bulls would go crazy and the cops in their black gear and assault weapons and the gunfire...”

We’d arrived at my locker. I used the flashlight to examine the interior. The velvet box was gone.

Holding out my hand, I said, “Give it back.”

Jack reached into the pocket of his sweatshirt and brought out the ring box.

Taking it, I said, “Why? Why do you hate me?”

He stepped close and said in a low voice, “I don’t hate you, Jane. I’m trying to save you.”

The feeling came back and I wanted to press myself against Jack and feel the roughness of his beard on my face and taste his lips. I took a step back. “Lucky won’t hurt me.”

“Let’s get out of here, and I’ll tell you what I know.”

As we walked away from the school, I looked backward. The chem lab’s lights were on. It always struck me as so heartbreaking that Mr. Mason was there by himself at night.

“Does Hattie know you’ve been leaving the messages?” Hattie got to kiss Jack and more, whatever she wanted.

“No. I didn’t want her to get in trouble if I got caught.” Jack reached over and pulled at my bag. “I’ll carry it.” He hefted it on his shoulder. “What the hell do you have in here?”

“Books.”

“You could have said something funny, like ‘the weight of the world.’”

“You’re the king’s fool, not me.” I glanced at his profile and wanted to

touch his dark curls. “How many secret passages does the school have?”

“There’s one on the third floor, right across from the science rooms, and one by the library. There’s one in Flounder. They lead to inside staircases and a sub-basement that has tunnels out. You’re not supposed to know this.”

“Where are we going?”

“For pizza.”

“Why can’t you tell me what you know *now*?”

“I think better when I’m consuming melted cheese and tomatoey crust,” he said. He looked up at the night sky.

The moon had risen and shone icily among the clouds.

Jack smiled at me and said, “It was my childhood dream to discover a halfling at midnight.”

“It’s not midnight.”

“It’s midnight somewhere in the world. Maybe we’ll meet your kin, gremlins and elves, and you can sing one of your fairy songs to me.”

I turned my head so he wouldn’t see my smile.

Once down the hill, Jack led me to a lane off the main street to little restaurant. It had red and white checked tablecloths and candles in wine bottle. Clusters of plastic grapes hung from a trellis on the ceiling, and the walls were painted with murals of gondolas on canals. The customers were all old.

A waiter came to us and said, “Hi, Jack. Here or to go?”

“We’ll get a table, thanks.”

“Sit wherever you want.”

Jack chose a table in an empty corner. He leaned back in his chair, and the candlelight brought out his cheekbones, his strong nose, his firm jaw, and his sensuous, expressive mouth.

I suddenly realized that I’d been attracted to Jack from the first moment we met.

He said, “Only the old coots come here and me. The food is good. What do you like on pizza?”

“Pepperoni and mushrooms.”

Jack ordered and after the waiter had brought us our sodas and a basket of breadsticks, he said, “You’ve got some dust here.” He was about to brush my shoulder, but I jerked away, too afraid of how I’d react to his touch.

“How do you know when I’m away from the locker?” I said.

“I can see through the basement windows of Flounder when you’re there late with Ms. Chu, or up in the chem lab.”

“Now that I know *how*, I want to know *why*.”

“That’s more convoluted. What have you heard about Bebe?”

“Only that she was another scholarship girl who lived in the groundskeeper’s cottage. She was supposed to be your brother’s Companion, but then she went to Europe with her uncle.”

“Does that sound entirely credible to you?”

“Which part specifically?”

“The part where she goes to live with her uncle.”

“I had a roommate his grandfather came and got him. Two months later, the grandfather dumped him off at a bus station with ten dollars and a bologna sandwich.”

“It’s funny how you say that so matter-of-factly. That’s what you expect from the world – SWAT raids and abandoned kids,” he said. “I knew Bebe pretty well, and she never mentioned any uncle. One day she was here, happy to be hanging out with Lucky, and the next day she was gone.”

“Maybe she changed her mind.”

“I don’t think so. She knew that Lucky was her ticket to the good life.” Although no one was nearby, he leaned forward and dropped his voice. “I think something happened to her.”

“You don’t think your brother did anything?” I asked, thinking of how excited Lucky got when he was tasting blood.

“Lucky’s egocentric, not dangerous,” Jack said. “It wasn’t him. We were in San Francisco the weekend she disappeared. When we got back, my parents were on the phone behind locked doors. The Council sent a security advisor, and they never send anyone unless it’s important. Then my parents announced that

Bebe had gone to be with this unknown uncle.

“Mary Violet says that Bebe hasn’t called or written. What do you think happened?”

“My parents claim that she’s called them while traveling, but I don’t believe them and Lucky doesn’t care now that you’re here to be his Companion.”

“Jack, why didn’t you talk to me about this instead of trying to scare me?”

“I couldn’t tell you at first because you didn’t know about The Family. Then I thought you wouldn’t listen to me,” he said. “If you left Birch Grove or complained about harassment, the Family would be put on alert. I’d get more time to convince Lucky that there was a cover-up and I could try to convince my folks not to go forward with the initiation until things are cleared up.”

“If you think something really happened to Bebe, you should have gone to the police.”

“The Evergreen police won’t investigate if the Birch Grove headmistress says an emancipated minor left for Europe with a relative. Besides, I’d never expose the Family, *my* family to trouble. They’re good people, even though they screw up sometimes.”

“Maybe your parents were covering up the fact that they’d paid Bebe to leave, or maybe she took off on her own,” I said. “Kids run away all the time. It’s no big deal.”

The pizza came and, as we ate, Jack and I went over what we knew – which was not enough.

“What did Hattie say when she found out Bebe was gone?” I asked.

“She was thrilled. She hates the Companions and swears she’ll never marry a man who has one.”

“That’s why she dates you.”

He smiled, his teeth gleaming white in the dark restaurant. “Yes, why else would anyone date me?”

I could have told him, because you’re funny and caring, because you’re strange and wonderful, because you make my every nerve tingle, because I love the touch of you, the smell of you, the sound of your voice, your eyes the color of

leaves....

But I said, “I know living with secrets is hard for Hattie. I know she hates the Companion relationships.”

“You have no idea, Jane. She’s an amazing girl, though, and I’m going to do everything I can to see that she gets all the love she wants.”

Lucky, lucky Hattie.

Jack asked the waiter to call a cab. Then he paid the bill and we walked out to the sidewalk as the cab pulled up to the curb.

“Jack, I don’t think you can be so sure that Bebe didn’t leave voluntarily. Maybe the money wasn’t enough of a reason for her to stay.”

He opened the passenger door and said quietly so that only I could hear him, “Even if it wasn’t, halfling, and it was, she had one thing in common with you. She was a lonely girl madly in love her fantasy of the rich pretty boy.”

I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t find the words, so I stood there stupidly.

Jack reached into the cab, handed the driver money and said, “She’s going up to Birch Grove.”

I got in the cab and Jack closed the door. I stared straight ahead and thought, he thinks I’m predictable and foolish. I replayed all our conversations in my head, and it seemed clear that he’d always treated me as an object of pity.

AT HOME I took the composition book from its hiding place and documented everything. Then I drew a new chart with myself in the center of this one. In the outer circle, I wrote down all the people I’d met at Birch Grove and their possible interest in me.

When I was done, the lines connected and intersected around me, like strands of a spider web tangle around a moth. I put the notebook away and counted my money to make sure it was all there. Then I hid the Companion ring, too.

I woke in the middle of the night and remembered something that never made it into my notes: Ms. Chu had said that another student started writing a

story about scholarship program. Had that girl interviewed Bebe?

The next day, I went to the Flouder basement at my lunch hour. The door was locked.

I ran upstairs to Ms. Chu's office. She was reading a magazine, and a salad was on the desk in front of her. She paused with a forkful of lettuce halfway to her mouth neatly lipsticked mouth. "If it's not urgent, Jane, I have office hours later."

"I was wondering if I could see something in the archives, Ms. Chu."

"Now?" She looked longingly at the mixed greens on her fork.

"You told me that someone had started writing an article on the scholarship program. I wanted to compare it to the article I wrote."

"Competitiveness isn't always healthy. Go ahead and look so I can have my meal in peace." She opened a drawer and pulled out a ring of keys. "Read it, return it to the archives, and bring my keys back before the end of lunch. It's by Roseanne Henley-Grunberg."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"And, Jane?"

"Yes, Ms. Chu?"

"I was happy to see you speak up for your article and come to a good solution with your editor."

"Thank you."

I raced back to the basement. I checked the file drawer with old articles. There was nothing under H. I tried G. There it was, misfiled. When I skimmed the piece, I didn't see Bebe's name.

I sat down on a desk and read more thoroughly, moving my finger under the words to make sure I caught everything. "Bebe, Bebe," I was saying to myself. Then I saw the name Breneeta Brown. BB, like MV.

Breneeta was quoted as saying, "My parents were only children and when they died in a car accident, there was no one to take care because all of my grandparents were dead, too."

There was no uncle.

Chapter 19

“A student must present a doctor’s note if she is absent for three or more days. If a student is absent for a total of ten days during a term, she may not be eligible for class credit. Exceptions may be made for absences due to extraordinary circumstances.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

HATTIE was in the cafeteria, chatting to a pasty freshman. A *very* pasty freshman. I’d been noticing the pale girls more. There were only a few in each class and they always seemed to be aware of one another.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Hattie, could we talk?”

“Sure.” She took one look at my face and said, “Let’s go to the garden. It’s quiet there.”

We crossed the drive and sat on a stone bench under a tree turning autumn colors of yellow and orange. Hattie skin was perfectly smooth, and her hazel eyes were as clear as a child’s. Of course, Jack would adore her.

I looked across the drive to the majestic androgynous stone angels guarding the school’s entrance.

I said, “*Ut incepit fidelis sic permanent.*”

“As loyal as she began, so she remains,” Hattie said. “The perfect motto for a school established to educate Family girls and Companions.”

“Hattie, BB stood for Breneeta Brown, right?”

“She hated Breneeta, so we never called her that.”

“I looked up an interview she gave for the paper. Her parents were only children and she had no living relatives.”

“What!”

“There’s more. Jack was the one leaving the notes. I caught him yesterday.”

“Oh, god, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. He told me what you already know – that his parents are

keeping something from him and Lucky about BB's disappearance."

Hattie pursed her lips and then said, "I never told Mrs. Monroe this, but I've always thought that the 'uncle' was some guy BB met."

"Jack said she wouldn't have left Lucky."

"That's because Jack has the delusion that every girl is madly in love with Lucky," she said scornfully.

At first I thought she was talking about me, too, but she was looking away.

"So Jack's wrong and BB *wasn't* in love with Lucky?"

"No, she was definitely in love with him, but she could see that he'd never treat her as an equal, only as someone to serve his needs."

"So it's entirely possible that BB left on her own?"

"I think it's the most likely thing that could have happened. She was like you -- used to looking out for herself, and I know she was flirting with guys online at the library."

"The last time I went to there, I couldn't log on the computers. And I saw the library guy at the harvest ceremony. Could someone have blocked my library account so I wouldn't get into the online social networks?"

"Sure. The library dude is a thrall. Thralls are the people who serve the Family. Isolating you encourages you to bond with The Family." She looked at me and said, "I was part of that, too. I told Mrs. Monroe about your friend at the grocery store, but I made her promise not to have her fired."

"Orneta got a transfer she wanted," I said. "What else did you tell Mrs. Monroe?"

"Let's just say I was selective in giving information. She may be the headmistress, but you're my friend. At least I hope you still are."

"I still am, Hattie."

She smiled and said, "We'll look out for each other, won't we, okay, Jane?"

"We keep making deals, but, yes, we'll watch each other's back."

After school, I phoned Lucky and asked him to come over.

"I'm busy," he said.

"It's important."

“I guess I can make it later.”

He didn’t say how much later, and by eleven, I’d thought he wasn’t going to come. I changed into the pajamas I’d bought with Hattie, a rose-pink cami and matching boxers. I’d finished brushing my teeth when I heard knocking.

I couldn’t find my robe, so I went to the front door as I was. I glanced through the curtain and saw Lucky standing there impatiently. He was wearing a charcoal-gray leather jacket over a black t-shirt and jeans.

I pulled my hair forward over the scar on my shoulder. When I opened the door, Lucky said, “I thought you might have gone to sleep.”

“I thought you weren’t coming. You should have called.”

He gave me a chilly look. “I already have a mother.”

“Then you *are* lucky, aren’t you?”

His smiled and said, “I’m sorry, Jane.”

“You always do that, Lucky. You act so apologetic after you say something rude. If you were more careful before speaking, you wouldn’t have to apologize.”

“Correction noted,” he said. “What’s up?”

His eyes skimmed over my body and I knew he was looking at the marks he’d made on me and looking for new places to draw blood, because of the way his lips parted.

I crossed my arms over my chest and said, “I wanted to talk about BB. I found out that she didn’t have an uncle.”

He walked to the bedroom and I followed.

“I didn’t think so,” he said.

“Hattie thinks she ran off with some guy, and Jack thinks something happened to her. What do you think?”

“I think you’ve been talking to a lot of people. You look good, Jane. I like seeing your skin.” He reached out and touched a bruise on my shoulder.

I asked, “What do you think happened?”

He kicked off his shoes and took off his jacket. His hair shone golden against the dark t-shirt. “If Hattie said BB got sick of me and left, she’s probably

right. Hattie's always right. Maybe I should have paid more attention to BB. I'm not going to make that mistake again. Come here."

I stood in front of him and he pulled me onto his lap. "I want you to enjoy this, Jane." He pivoted and laid me down on the bed. Then he pulled off his own shirt and revealed his sleek chest.

He was so beautiful, but I tensed as he lay beside me and ran his hand up my leg and up along my thigh.

"Lucky..."

"Ssh." He nuzzled and kissed and bit and sucked at my neck.

Then his fingers slipped under the edge of my shorts and further up, making me gasp.

And even though the sensation was amazing, I realized that I didn't *like* Lucky, not that way. "Stop," I said and pushed his hand away.

Lucky pulled back puzzled and said, "I thought you wanted that."

I moved away from him and sat up. "I don't. I want it to be just friends. No more freaking on me. It's all gotten too confusing."

"Whatever," he said. "I'm gonna draw a taste since I'm already here."

He got up and went to the bathroom. When he came back with the venipuncture tube, he said, "Can I do it behind your knee? There's a good vein there and you wear pants all the time."

"Okay." I turned onto my stomach and remembered that I was doing this for a college education, for a home, for security. People sold their blood all the time for less.

There was the sharp jab of the needle and I heard Lucky's intake of breath. A few seconds later, I felt him pull the needle out. He said, "No sense wasting any," and he bent to lick at the puncture mark.

"That's enough," I said.

"I'll clean it."

He got the first-aid kit and swabbed cold antiseptic on the puncture with a cotton ball and stuck on a Band-Aid.

"You've gotten really efficient at this," I said and sat up.

“Thanks. It’s better this way anyway, isn’t it? Less complications, because I like you, but...” He gazed longingly at the tube of blood.

“I like you, too, but...” I said. “Maybe we can set up a regular schedule so it won’t interfere with our classes and other things.”

“Sure. Gotta go.”

As I watched Lucky putting his shirt and jacket on, I realized that I’d wanted him like some girls want a diamond ring, or an expensive car. I’d wanted him as a beautiful *thing* and not as a person.

Lucky patted my head and said, “A few more days until the Initiation. Sleep tight, Janey.”

After he’d gone, I got up to check the lock and turn out the lights. I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. My neck was red where he’d sucked, but nothing that I couldn’t cover with make-up.

When I went to sleep that night I dreamt that I was trapped in the school’s dark secret passages. I called out for help, and then I saw the tunnel open up into a room. Mrs. Monroe sat in a chair reading a book. I shouted, “Help me!”

She looked up from the pages and said, “I am helping you, Jane. Knowledge is power.”

I heard something scary coming toward me and I ran through the low tunnel into darkness. A wall was in front of me and there was no escape.

When I awoke, I was tangled in sheets and sweating. I opened the window so I could feel the cool breeze and listen to the comforting song of the trees.

The next day, Mary Violet yanked me aside after Chem Ho and said, “What is going on with you, Jane? You’re on another planet. Has something happened between you and my future husband? Are you still tutoring him?”

“Yes, I’m tutoring him.” I wanted so much to confide in her. “What could happen between us?”

“Oh, please, JW, I have two stunning blue eyes in my gorgeous blonde and brilliant head. I’ve seen girls fall for Lucien Monroe since he was eating paste in pre-school and I can diagnose the symptoms. The only reason *I’m* not madly in love with him is because he’s too busy admiring himself in the mirror to worship

me.”

I laughed. “You still plan on marrying him?”

“He’s one of the nominees. I may hold out for a minor royal. Seriously, JW, is everything okay?”

“Seriously, MV, I admit that I was dazzled by Lucky, but I’m so over that. Right now I’m more concerned about my classes.” By this time next week, I’d be Lucky’s Companion.

“Well, it’s an exceptional school for exceptional girls. I insist that you come over for tea and we can review Chem Ho together.”

We walked to the Heyers’ after school, and I buttoned my jacket against the cold.

MV’s brother and sister were chasing each other through the house and they shrieked, “Hi, Jane!” as we came in. Mrs. Heyer came out of her studio to say hello and invited me to go with them to the museum soon.

Mary Violet and I sat on the floral carpet in her room and went through our chemistry assignment. When we closed our books, I said, “MV, HT says that BB used to go online to meet guys.”

“Oh, juicy gossip! Yes, BB used to tell us about older guys who talked dirty to her. She said she was looking for a sugar daddy.”

“Didn’t she have enough money with her stipend?”

“Old habits die hard. I didn’t know if she was serious, or trying to shock us.”

“Could she have pretended that one of them was her uncle and run off with him?”

“That’s the first thing I asked Mrs. Monroe, because even though BB’s an emancipated minor, old guys are still creepy. Mrs. Mason said, no, she’d checked the uncle out,” Mary Violet said. “I’m still mad at her.”

“At Mrs. Monroe?”

“No, BB. I thought we were friends, but I guess I was just another shallow rich bitch to her.” Mary Violet blinked away tears. “Jane, promise you won’t ever leave like that, without saying goodbye?”

“I promise.”

“Do you think I’m a shallow rich bitch?”

“No, I think you’re a brilliant and beautiful poet and scholar.”

Her smile cheered me up and she said, “Just for that I’m going to write a poem in honor of you.”

I stayed for dinner and Mary Violet offered me a ride back, since it was almost dark, but I wanted to walk and think. I wished I hadn’t agreed so quickly to becoming Lucky’s Companion. I wished I knew what had happened to BB. I wished I could start all over again, from meeting Jack on the path in the grove. But Jack loved Hattie.

When I got to the school, I saw Mr. Mason’s lighted classroom. If I ever married, would my husband be like him, standing and watching the Family, yet not a part of it?

I WENT to my cottage and took the Companion ring from its hiding place. I felt foolish hiding things in my own place, but, as Mary Violet said, old habits die hard.

Which meant that BB must have had a hiding place, too.

I searched the laundry room. I tapped on walls and floors, listening for any hollowness, and checked behind and under every item I could lift. I did the same in the kitchen, before going to the living room.

I tested the stones of the fireplace, going from top to bottom and right to left. Then I took all the books off the shelves.

It took me almost two hours to reach the bathroom. I checked the obvious places, like the toilet tank. The tiles around the bathtub were secure, and there was nothing behind the medicine cabinet. I glanced up.

The paint was scratched off on the screws that held a plaster wreath surrounding the light fixture.

I got a screwdriver from a drawer of tools in the laundry room and carried my desk chair to the bathroom. The chair wasn’t high enough to let me reach the ceiling, so I piled up big books to step on.

The slick paper covers of the books slid under my feet as I climbed up.

I loosened the screws around the plaster wreath and lifted it off carefully, revealing an opening in the ceiling around the light fixture. I used one hand to clutch the plaster piece to my chest and the other to hold onto the wall as I stepped back down. I set the plaster wreath on the sink counter.

Then I climbed back up. I reached through the opening, and didn't feel anything. BB was taller and could reach farther, so I stretched as far as I could, too far, because the books slipped from beneath my feet. I crashed down, my arm banging against the bathtub and my left ankle twisting as I hit the floor.

I cried out and toppled over on my side. When I tried to stand, pain shot from my ankle upward and I cried out again.

Someone banged on the front door and yelled, "Jane! Are you okay? Jane! It's Jack."

I hobbled around the fallen chair and made my way slowly to the front door as Jack kept banging and yelling. "I know you're in there, Jane! Open up."

I wiped the tears from my eyes and balanced my weight on my right foot before I opened the door.

Jack had one hand on the doorframe and the other raised to knock again. He was wearing jeans and long-sleeved t-shirt that said Dog Waffle Research Laboratories Ltd.

"What was that crashing? I heard you scream."

"What are you doing here?" My throat constricted, but I didn't know if it was because of my ankle or seeing Jack again.

"I asked first. What happened?"

"I fell." I leaned against the doorway.

Jack looked down and then scooped me up in his arms. "I've captured a wood sprite. Do I get to make a wish?" He carried me to the sofa.

"Put me down." I was embarrassed that he was seeing me like this. I tried to pull down my skirt, which only brought me closer to his chest.

"Do I get a pot of gold?" He set me sideways on the sofa with my feet up. "If you don't mind, I actually have some experience with busted ankles."

The pain was so bad that I said, “Fine.” I leaned back on my elbows and watched as he slipped off my shoes and socks. His calloused fingers gently explored my left ankle. When he hit a tender spot, I flinched with a small sound.

“Sorry,” he said. “It’s swelling, but since you can put weight on it, I think it’s probably okay. Let’s ice you up.”

He went to the kitchen and I heard him banging the ice trays around on the counter. He came back with a plastic bag filled with cubes. “I always keep ice packs at home.”

“And Band-Aids.”

“I’m the only one who needs them.” He placed a cushion under my foot to elevate it and put the ice bag on my ankle. “I’m because I was thinking about apologizing to you. I shouldn’t have said what I did. If you’re in love with Lucky...that’s none of my business.”

I looked away from him. “You were right about one thing. BB didn’t have an uncle. I found an interview with her in the newspaper archive. Hattie and Mary Violet say that BB was looking online for older guys with money.”

“Hattie told me.” He grabbed another cushion and moved to put it under my head and shoulders. As he was doing this, he touched my shoulder and the scar there pulsed warmly as it had when he’d braced himself on me to get on his bike.

He sat on the sofa next to my legs. The feel of his body next to mine filled me with longing and regret. I wanted him in a way that I’d never wanted Lucky, which is why I’d been willing to settle for quasi-sex.

“Halfing, I’m sorry I made you think someone here hated you.”

I said nothing.

“Lucky will never love you, Jane. You’re not for him.”

My face went hot with anger. “Don’t you think I know that, Jack? I know that I’m not beautiful or sophisticated or fun. I’m just plain Jane, a lonely, delusional foster girl – but that doesn’t mean I don’t deserve love. That doesn’t mean I don’t want love and it doesn’t mean my heart can’t break, because it can and it does.”

“I never said you didn’t deserve love, Jane,” Jack said quietly. “From the first time I saw you standing there on the path, appearing out of nowhere in the grove, like an otherworldly creature, I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind.”

I looked to see if he was being serious and his green eyes stared into mine and he said, “Are you love with Lucky? Do you and he...because I don’t think I could take it if you are.”

“No, not Lucky.”

Then Jack leaned over and kissed me. His lips were soft and warm and his kiss was firm. His arms went around me and I knew how perfectly *right* this was, being here with him. I put my arms went around him and kissed him, my whole body arching to him.

His lips were on my face, kisses lighting on my eyelids and my cheeks. I wanted to make love to him. I wanted to stay with him here and now forever.

But I pushed Jack away. “I’m not doing this to Hattie.”

“Hattie and I are friends, no benefits,” he said and took my hand. He kissed my palm and then my fingertips and ripples of pleasure went through me.

“Really?”

“Really,” Jack said. “Halfling, I want you to leave Birch Grove.”

I leaned away from the lamp’s light, into the shadow, so he couldn’t see the hurt on my face. “Am I so pathetic that you think you can give me a little attention and that’s enough to convince me.... Oh, god, just go. Leave me alone and don’t come back.”

“Jane—”

“If you don’t go now, I’ll tell your parents and Ian Ducharme what you’ve been doing.”

“Let me explain.”

“I don’t want your explanations,” I said, a sob catching in my throat. “I never want to see you again.”

He stood and reached up to the silver chain on his neck. “This is for you,” he said.

“I don’t want anything of yours.”

He pulled the chain out of his shirt and then lifted it over his head. He dropped it into my lap and I saw a silver leaf dangling from the chain. “I want you to have it anyway.”

When Jack walked out and closed the door, I cried as I hadn’t since my mother’s death. I cried for her, for Hosea, for myself, all of us who had died.

Chapter 20

“Acts of vandalism, including defacing school property and neighboring property, will result in discipline that includes restitution and may include suspension or expulsion.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

MY ANKLE was still swollen the next morning, and my mood was as flat and hopeless as it had been in my years at Mrs. Richards. I was about to leave my cottage when I saw the silver necklace on the sofa where I’d left it.

The leaf hanging from it was as delicately etched as the leaves on the birches and *JFM* was engraved on the stem. Even though I hated how he’d tried to manipulate me, I put it on now, sliding the medallion under my blouse where it would be close to my heart. The metal felt warm on my skin.

I limped to the nurse’s station before my first class.

She felt my ankle and said, “It’s a sprain, but you should rest and keep it elevated as much as you can.” She wrapped a stretchy beige bandage tightly around my ankle and my foot.

“No, I need to go to class.”

She handed me a packet of Advil for the swelling. “How did you do this?”

“I fell off a chair when I was trying to reach something.”

“You should get a stepladder before you break your neck. Would you like crutches?”

“No thanks, ma’am. I can get around.”

Mr. Mason was standing at the chemistry lab door as I went into class. He said, “Is that a limp?”

“It’s only a sprain. I’ll be fine in a few days.”

“If you need to take a few days off to recover...”

“No, I don’t want to get behind.”

“That’s why you’re my favorite student, Jane.”

His smile eased my mood for a moment, and I took my seat next to Mary

Violet.

“Why are you hobbling?”

“I fell off a chair. It’s only a sprain.”

“Ouch, that’s not very exciting, unless you were dancing on top of the chair.”

“Tragically, MV, I was only using it as a ladder. MV, did BB take chem with Mr. Mason?”

“No, JW, although BB did have AM for homeroom I think. Why?”

“Just wondering.”

“My mother is concerned that you aren’t eating home-cooked meals and she wants you to come over more. However, I told her that her gallery of super-sized genitalia upsets your sensitive digestive system and offends your feminine modesty.”

“You didn’t!”

“Yes, and I wrote the poem I promised. It’s called, ‘Ode to an Innocent.’ I’ll recite it to you later. It’s not as deeply moving as my possum poem, but it’s still poignant.”

“Class, may we begin?” Mr. Mason stood at the front of the room looking at Mary Violet and me. I slid down in my chair and hoped he hadn’t heard what Mary Violet had said.

I’d felt as if I was moving slowly through water all day. It was more than my hurt ankle. I looked around at the dignified school, the breathtaking setting, and the smart students and I wished that I’d never met Jack Monroe so that I could enjoy everything that being a Companion offered.

If I left Birch Grove, I would have nothing again, not even a foster home to take me in while I finished school.

I hid in a music room at lunch because I didn’t want to talk to anyone. As I left it, I passed the panel hiding the secret tunnel. I remembered how Jack had joked when I caught him and the sparkle in his green eyes and the way his mouth curled up when he was teasing.

When I got a message during history that Mrs. Monroe wanted to see him, I

wondered if either of her sons had said anything about me. “Come in, Jane, and close the door behind you.”

I sat on the chair opposite her desk. “Is anything wrong, ma’am?”

She smiled her serene smile and said, “Nurse said you’d hurt your ankle. I wanted to make sure you were feeling all right.”

Everyone at Birch Grove was always asking if I was all right. “I fell off a chair when I was reaching for something on a shelf. It’s one of the problems with being short.”

“I’ll have one of the staff to take a stepladder to you. How is everything else? Hattie says you’ve rehearsed your lines for the initiation.”

“I have, but my pronunciation is not very good,” I said and recalled Jack’s silly reading of Latin.

“Your best effort will be good enough, Jane. How are things between you and Lucian?”

“We’re fine, ma’am.”

“I’m glad you two get along so well. Jacob has been so moody lately, and he’s usually my sunny one.” She sighed. “I’d like to take you to brunch on Saturday. We can go over everything that will happen at the initiation that night and have some one-on-one time.”

“Yes, ma’am.” When I looked into her calm gray eyes, I wondered what she really knew about BB’s disappearance.

“You look tired, Jane. If you’d like, we can use the injury as an excuse to postpone your midterms so you can rest and relax.”

“Thank you, but if I can’t keep up with the schoolwork, I shouldn’t be here.”

“That’s the right attitude, Jane.”

My day lasted forever since I had to stay late to help get the *Birch Grove Weekly* done. Night had almost fallen when I finally left Flounder. I walked slowly to my cottage and wished I could slow down everything – including the initiation that would bind me to Lucky forever.

And that meant that I’d never get away from Jacob Monroe.

A ladder was leaning against the railing by my front door. I lugged the ladder inside, banging the door and furniture as I maneuvered it to the bathroom. The plaster wreath was still sitting on the sink counter.

I needed to screw it back up so that no one would see what I'd been doing. Then I could change out of my uniform and crawl in bed.

I set the ladder up and placed the plaster piece, screws and screwdriver on the shelf meant to hold paint trays. My ankle hurt as I climbed up. I was higher now that I had been on the chair. On impulse, I reached into the opening of the ceiling and felt around.

My hand hit something solid and rectangular. I grabbed it and pulled it to the opening. It was a homemade jewelry box. I placed the box on the ladder's shelf and hobbled awkwardly down.

When I was sitting at my desk, I turned on a lamp to see the box better. Glue-on rhinestones formed the letters BB.

I lifted the lid and saw a thick stack of cash, mostly in twenties and tens, bound by a rubber band. Beside the money was a black velvet box that held a gold and garnet Companion ring.

There were photos of Lucky and programs from student plays, a dried corsage, movie ticket stubs, wristbands from parties, and notes from friends.

A red matchbox held three wooden matches and a tiny plastic envelope of weed. A lock of golden hair was tied with a red satin ribbon. At the bottom of the box was a passport. I opened it and saw a photo of a smiling girl. She was ordinary looking, like me. The pages were empty of any travel stamps.

None of the items mattered as much as the money. No one who'd grown up poor would ever leave so much cash behind.

Which meant that Jack had been right: something terrible had happened to BB.

But what could I do? There was one person who knew about the Family and had always been helpful and understanding. I thought I could trust him to help now.

I left my cottage with the jewelry box under my arm. The wind gusted,

making the birch branches swish and sway, whispering in the night. Their black and white bark made them look as if they were dressed for a formal party.

I picked up a sturdy birch branch from the path and used it as a cane as I returned to B-Gro. The lights in the third-floor chem lab glowed in the darkness.

I went around to the only unlocked entrance, a side door by a stairwell. Climbing the dimly lit stairs took ages, because I had to constantly lean against the wall and rest.

Before I reached the third floor, I realized that adults would see BB's weed and assume that she was another druggie foster kid who ran away. I put the matchbox in my blazer pocket as I limped to the chem lab.

The door was ajar and I saw Mr. Mason setting up an experiment on the table by the elements chart. The dark windows reflected the lab.

"Mr. Mason?"

He was startled, and then he smiled. "Hello, Jane. You always come out of nowhere. What are you doing here so late?"

"May I talk to you?"

"Of course. Come and give your leg a rest," he said and moved a chair by his desk for me. After I sat, he sat, too. "What's up?"

"You knew BB, Breneeta Brown, right?"

"Yes, she was in my homeroom last year, when I had sophomores."

"Everyone said she left the school to live with an uncle, but I don't believe that."

"Really?"

"I found an interview she gave for a story that was supposed to run in the *Weekly*. She didn't have any living relatives, and I found this hidden the cottage." I handed the jewelry box to him.

He looked at the initials on the box and then lifted the lid. He took out the money, passport, and lock of golden hair.

"Where was it?"

"Behind the light fixture in the ceiling. BB would have needed her passport if she was going to Europe, but the money's even more important. A foster would

never leave that money, no matter what.”

Mr. Mason lifted the ring from the velvet box and held it up, so that the stones glittered under his desk light. “You’re right. How could someone with nothing reject an opportunity for an education, financial security, a family? Claire, my wife, couldn’t.” He looked from the ring to my face.

“We all want families, Mr. Mason.”

The kindness in his face vanished and his voice became harsh. “The vampires prey on girls with nothing, not even beauty, girls without options, like my wife. But Claire was beautiful to me.”

I didn’t understand his strange expression. “Everyone tells me that they loved her. What can we do to help BB?”

“We can help her by helping other girls.” He opened a desk drawer and took out something metal and shiny and kept it hidden in his left hand.

Then he pulled out a hunting knife with a wide, gleaming blade and pointed it at me. I went motionless, terrified that a sudden movement would make him react.

He said, “I thought BB would be the last Companion, the end of vampire’s exploitation of vulnerable girls. After all, even the local police couldn’t ignore a murdered student. You girls have suffered so much in your short lives so I made sure she didn’t feel any pain.”

He spoke with the assurance of the self-righteous. “Someone took her body before the police could find her,” he said. “Tobias probably discovered her on one of his midnight rambles. I’ll have better results this time.”

“What are you doing, Mr. Mason?” I kept my voice calm, hoping to keep him calm, but I had an awful, sick feeling.

“I’m saving you,” Mr. Mason said. “I tried, I tried so very hard to save Claire from them, but she wouldn’t listen to reason.”

I kept my eyes on him, while trying to think of how I could get away. “Your wife committed suicide.”

“Only after miscarrying Tobias’s child. She never wanted *my* babies, but she kept trying to have *his*, hoping he’d leave Hyacinth for her.” Mr. Mason’s

eyes became glassy and his face flushed. “They’ve told you about that problem, haven’t they? Just in case you have any romantic dreams of marrying Lucien Monroe.”

“I’m sorry about your wife, sir.” I couldn’t reach the door faster than him and I tried to think of another way to escape. “It must have broken your heart.”

“I loved Claire so much that I put up with sharing her, even though she hated when I touched her. That’s what love is -- sacrifice. I thought I could prove my love, but she was obsessed with Tobias.”

Wake Not the Dead, I thought.

He tapped the hunting knife on his desk, and the clinking sent a chill down my spine.

“Mr. Mason, I’m sure there’s another way to stop them. You’re an analytical man. We’ll go to the police.”

“The police will pay more attention if I’ve got a body and witnesses, Jane,” he said. “I was going to wait until after your initiation, and then you came to me. We’re going down to the auditorium for our own bloodletting ceremony. When the students arrive for tomorrow’s assembly, they’ll find you there, slaughtered by bloodthirsty vampires.”

He opened his left hand and showed me jagged metal fangs. “I had to special order these. I’m only using them to prove to everyone that these vampires are monsters.” He put the fangs in his pocket. “Stand up, Jane.”

I stood, gripping the birch branch for support and to keep from shaking. If I screamed, he might decide to kill me quickly.

Mr. Mason kept his eyes on me as he opened a desk drawer and took out a folded white cloth. “This was Claire’s initiation robe. I took up the hem for you. Put it on.”

I leaned the branch against my leg and put the garment over my head. The scarlet-trimmed, ivory silk billowed down over my school uniform.

Then he tossed BB’s ring to me. “Put that, too,” he said. “It’s a pity, Jane, because you really are an exemplary student and you’ve done it all on your own. I wish I could use one of these spoiled bitch students, like Mary Violet with her

stupid purple assignments.”

I slid the too-large band on my finger while keeping watch of Mr. Mason.
“I can gather evidence for you.”

“That won’t work, Jane, because you’re already under their spell. The spell of money and security, of being close to Lucian Monroe.”

“I think for myself, Mr. Mason.”

“You have to trust me on this, Jane.” He reached into the desk again and took out a small brown bottle and a handkerchief and put it in his pocket. “Once we get to the auditorium, I’ll give you diethyl ether and you’ll enjoy a pleasant drowsiness and then it will all be over. You won’t feel any pain or loneliness ever again. You’ll have the kind of peace that Claire and BB finally have. Shall we?” he said, as if he was asking me to dance and not to my death.

I began hobbling to the door, leaning on the branch as if I was weaker. When I reached the door, I took hold of the branch with both hands and swung it back with all my might.

Mr. Mason cried out at the blow, and the knife clattered away on the linoleum floor. Then he grabbed the branch back and jerked it out of my hands. Before I could get out of the door, he caught hold of the robe and yanked it, throwing me backward to the floor. He slammed the door shut.

I screamed, “No!” and scrambled under a lab table trying to reach the other end of the room.

“Jane, be reasonable. You have nothing to live for anyway.” Mr. Mason shoved chairs out of the way as he came toward me. I stood up and looked around for anything to protect me. The jar labeled *Potassium* was on a far shelf.

“Fire!” I screamed, because at City Central no one answered cries for help, but they did respond to fires. “Fire!”

I grabbed a rack of test tubes and flung it at the window. Mr. Mason turned to see the glass shattering, and I turned on a Bunsen burner. The gas hissed out.

Mr. Mason didn’t notice what I’d done. “No one can hear you.” He circled around as he tried to back me into the corner of the room.

I stepped to one side and pushed over the cloth chart of elements. It fell on

top of the open Bunsen burner. “Let me go, Mr. Mason. I’ll leave Birch Grove and never say a word.”

I snuck my arm into the wide sleeve of the robe and felt for the box of matches in my pocket.

“They’d only replace you with another sad orphan. Girls like you can always be replaced.”

“Claire wasn’t replaceable.” I shifted away from the Bunsen burner. “I’m not replaceable.

I’d spent my life avoiding predators, and I anticipated his lunge. As he stumbled into a chair, I slashed a match against the box and threw it toward the cloth covering the Bunsen burner. The match lay there burning for a split second and then the ancient cloth began to burn.

Mr. Mason grabbed the edge of the cloth and yelled, “Stupid girl!” He pulled it away from the Bunsen burner and dropped it on the floor. While he tried to stomp out the flames, I grabbed bottles of chemicals and threw them at him and at the fire.

Mr. Mason rushed me and knocked me down. My head banged so hard against the leg of a table that tears instantly came to my eyes. My teacher stood over me as he took out the brown bottle of ether and opened it. He poured ether on the handkerchief and leaned toward me.

I kicked his shins and the ether joined the other chemicals that had spilled on his clothes.

“Goddamn you!”

I slithered away on the smooth linoleum and stood up. On the shelf above me, a silvery hunk of potassium with its red oxidized edge rested safely in a jar of mineral oil. On the table someone had left a beaker of water.

The ether evaporating on his clothes made Mr. Mason move slowly. Fear made me swift. I grabbed the jar with potassium and threw it so that it smashed close to the smoldering banner. Then I threw the beaker of water and prayed that it would hit its mark.

As the water splashed down, the reactive metal combusted in a brilliant

burst of violet flames.

Fire flicked out to Mr. Mason and his clothes, soaked in chemicals, caught fire. He shrieked and fell down, trying to roll and suffocate the fire. Then everything that was flammable ignited and everything that was combustible exploded.

Mr. Mason's screams were an unholy sound that transformed me into the terrified child I'd once been. I shook with fear and my only thought was to run away, run into the night.

The fire drew the oxygen and light from the room, and the noise was overwhelming — crashing, creaking, rumbling. I crawled toward the door, holding my breath against the scorching, poisonous air.

I finally felt the doorsill when a hand gripped my sprained ankle and I screamed in shock and pain.

I reached forward and my hand touched something long and solid on the floor. The birch branch. I twisted my body upward and then bashed the branch down upon the burning man until he let go.

I wrapped my hand in my long sleeve of the robe, reached for the burning hot doorknob and turned it. The air rushed in, feeding the voracious fire, and the flames blazed out to grab me. I ripped the robe off and flung myself into the hall.

My eyes were so hot and it was so dark that everything lost shape. The sprinklers in the hallway began showering water and the fire alarm's screech was deafening. I slipped on the slick floor and fell.

The thunderous roar of fire and the cold water spraying down and the twisted face of a madman --- suddenly I remembered everything.

I remembered my stepfather's rage as he dragged me from my mother's body and told me, "Now it's your turn." I remembered the yellow linoleum, the pool of blood, my mother's face. I remembered running into the night and looking for someplace safe.

I needed to be safe. Jack had said there was a passageway across from the lab. I dragged myself across the hallway until I reached the wall and pressed frantically against the panels, struggling to stay conscious. I pulled myself further

down the hall and tried pressing against the bottom corner of another panel.

It popped open. I crawled inside the dark passage and closed the panel behind me, shutting out the ferocious fire and muffling the blaring alarm.

The tunnel was pitch black and musty. I leaned against the birch-lined wall, gasping for breath and I thought, *please, please, please*.

And when I next inhaled, the air had a delicious clean scent, green and earthy like Jack, and I was in a lush forest. I recognized a path and took it to a crystalline stream. I bent my head and drank from it, soothing my throat.

Something, *someone* moved toward me. I knew her immediately because she had lifted me from the ground on that terrible night.

The Lady of the Wood smiled at me.

Someone far off called out, “Jane! Jane!”

Jack, I thought, Jack, I’m here.

The Lady of the Wood whispered in her leafy language and I knew she was telling me to go back, that she would always be with me.

I opened my eyes and saw darkness and felt intense heat. I tried to shout, “Jack! Jack!” but my throat was so dry, I could only cough. I kept trying to scream his name, because I needed to tell him that I loved him, because I wanted to live, but no sound came from my throat.

No one would ever find me here, hidden completely in the dark. I’d die here, trapped in the shadows that I’d once sought.

Chapter 21

“Each of our students is indelibly marked by her education. As she goes out into the world, she will recall her experience at Birch Grove Academy as remarkable and life-changing.”

Birch Grove Student Handbook

WHEN I came to, red emergency lights were flashing in the night. I was lying on the cool marble bench that faced the main building. Fire trucks and police cars crowded the drive and fire fighters aimed hoses at the blaze on the third floor.

Everything was unnaturally orange, reflecting the flames coming from the third-floor of the school. The stone angels on the façade looked as if they were rising from the apocalypse.

Paramedics were rushing medical equipment toward me and shouting directions to each other, while Jack gripped my hand and looked toward them.

“Did I die again?” I asked, my voice a painful rasp.

Jack turned to me and smiled his beautiful smile. “Jane!” Then he shouted to the medical team, “She’s conscious.”

When paramedics tried to give me oxygen, I pushed them away, saying, “No, I’m fine, I’m okay.”

“Your heart stopped!” one said. “We thought... Lucky, your boyfriend saved you.”

I looked up at Jack’s wonderful sooty face and wide green eyes. “Jack saved me, not Lucky.”

Someone wrapped a blanket around me as I began to shiver in my wet clothes.

A firefighter, who’d been hovering behind the medics, now came forward and asked, “Miss, was there anyone else inside?”

“Mr. Mason was in the lab,” I said.

The firefighter shook his head and hurried back to talk to his crew.

“We’re going to take you to ER,” a paramedic said.

“No,” I said and I reached out to Jack, whose wet clothes clung to him. He helped me sit up and I leaned against him on the bench.

The paramedic said to Jack, “We can take care of her better at the clinic. Do you have her parents’ number?”

“She’s an emancipated minor,” he said. “She makes her own decisions.”

The woman shrugged and then quickly examined my eyes, lungs, and pulse. Her clever fingers found a scab on the back of my earlobe and a bruise on my inner elbow.

She looked sharply at Jack and said, “Is she a *companion* of the Monroe family?”

“She’s our friend,” he said and she nodded.

“Okay, you have minor smoke inhalation,” she said. “Other than that, you’re okay. It’s a miracle.”

“It’s magic,” Jack said. “She’s a magical creature. She can vanish and appear at will. She can talk to the trees.”

The woman looked at him and shook her head. “Whatever you say.” She packed her gear and returned to the ambulance, leaving us alone.

Jack kissed my brow and I smelled his singed hair. He said, “I thought I lost you, halfling. This is why I wanted you to leave – to keep you safe.”

“I came back for you,” I said. “Mr. Mason killed BB and he was going to kill me and make it look like the Family had done it.”

“Oh, God,” he said. “Poor BB. I can’t believe Uncle Albert would...” His eyes welled and he said, “My parents couldn’t have known.”

“I don’t think they did.”

Despite the clamor, I became aware of someone weeping. I searched through the crowd and saw Mrs. Monroe.

She stood staring at the building and sobbing. Tobias Monroe was motionless beside her. Lucky was there, too, watching the fire. He looked as glorious as the stone angels in the eerie light, and I felt as much for him as I did for the angels.

The fire was horrible and magnificent, too, and I thought of the vampires’

blood sacrifice to the ancient sun-god and the harvest.

Jack said, “I have to talk to my parents and then I want to get you away from here. Will you be all right for a minute?”

“Yes, go ahead.”

I watched as he went to his family. He must have been telling them what Mr. Mason had done. Mr. Monroe turned to his wife and put his arms around her. Lucky put his hands over his face, and Jack hugged him.

Jack left his family and went to talk to one of the cops. Then he came back to me and said, “One of the officers is giving us a lift to the Heyers.”

On the short ride, I saw all the neighbors outside of their homes, watching the fire at Birch Grove. Mary Violet and her family were waiting for us in their driveway.

“Jane!” my friend cried out, and her family talked in an excited jumble, asking if I was all right, telling me that I was welcome, wanting to know if I needed anything.

Mr. Heyer said, “All of you, quite the heck down, and let Jane rest.”

Jack helped me inside.

Mrs. Heyer led the way to a first-floor guest room and Mary Violet helped her take off my shoes and my wet uniform and the dirty bandage on my ankle. They wiped off my hands and feet with a warm washcloth and smoothed lotion on my skin and wrapped a clean stretch bandage over my ankle.

As they lifted my arms to slip them into a flannel nightgown, I looked at the wall and saw a pink, rose, and beige swirly painting on the wall.

I smiled, because now I understood that the painting celebrated life and womanhood, and I was so happy that I was alive.

Mrs. Heyer held out two pills and a glass of water. “This will help the pain and help you sleep.”

I shook my head. “I spent so long not feeling anything. I want to feel things.”

Mary Violet placed a silver bell on the bedside and said, “Ring it and we’ll come right away.”

When they moved aside I saw Jack standing in the doorway in sweat pants and a clean t-shirt. “I’ll stay with Jane.”

Mary Violet’s eyes went wide and her pink mouth opened in surprise.

“I want him here,” I said.

Mrs. Heyer took Mary Violet by the hand, pulled her out of the room, and closed the door behind them.

Jack came to the bed and lay down beside me.

I curled toward him and said, “How did you find me?”

“You were calling me so loud,” he said. “I followed your voice.”

I cupped his face in my hands and fell asleep.

A long time later, I heard a child say, “This room smells like a barbecue.”

“You are a vile pestilence upon this earth.”

When I opened my eyes, the room was bright with sun and Mary Violet and her brother were watching me.

“You’re awake!” my friend said. She came and sat on the bed, telling Bobby, “Tell Mom that Jane is awake.”

He went running out the room, shouting, “Mooooom!”

“Where’s Jack?” I asked MV.

“He went to his house. He’ll be back soon. I’m not supposed to bother you with questions even though I am consumed by curiosity.” She blinked away tears and said, “You could have been killed, JW, and Mr. Mason died in the fire.”

“I thought so.”

“How did it start?”

It was such a simple question: how had it all started? Had it started with Birch Grove, or before that with the Alphas, or with Hosea’s death, or on the night that I ran out into the storm?

Telling the truth wouldn’t help BB or punish Mr. Mason. “Mr. Mason was setting up an experiment and that old elements chart fell over and caught fire. He tried to put it out.”

She nodded and said, “Everyone guessed it was an accident. School is closed for a week and when we go back some of the classrooms will be moved to

Flounder and the Gin.”

Mrs. Heyer brought me tea with honey and a blueberry muffin. “Hi, sweetie,” she said. “The kids baked these for you this morning.”

The Heyers were careful with me. They didn’t ask too many questions and then Mary Violet filled the tub with a scented bubble bath for me. Agnes brought by a brand new set of pink warm-ups and tennis shoes and said, “I think these will fit even though pink is for silly bitches and you’re not a silly bitch.”

“Thanks, Agnes.” I couldn’t resist saying, “Your sister loves pink.”

Agnes laughed. “My sister is a secret genius.”

The warm-up pants fit perfectly.

Jack rode his bike over at noon. I was resting on a lounge chair in the back garden, soaking in the rare sunshine.

“Hey, halfling,” he said and he sat down on the grass by my lawn chair. His hair had been haphazardly cut shorter.

“Thanks for finding me last night,” I said. “Were you in the building already?”

“No, I was still in the grove when you left the cottage. I followed you to the main building and I was waiting outside when the fire alarm went off.”

“Were you spying on me again?”

“No, I was thinking about apologizing.” He wove his strong, calloused fingers with mine. “I couldn’t bear having my fairy creature hate me. She might cast a spell that turned me into a real jackass, instead of a guy who acts like a jackass.”

When I laughed, my lungs hurt. “Are you actually going to apologize or just think about it?”

“I hereby issue an open-ended apology to Jane Williams for all my past, present and future behavior.”

“Apology accepted. Who cut your hair?”

“I hacked off the singed parts. I needed a haircut anyway,” he said. “Do you want to tell me what happened last night?”

“Yes,” I said and told him about finding the jewelry box and going to Mr.

Mason. “When he’d talked to me before about the Companions, he acted as if it was a wonderful opportunity.”

I hesitated and Jack said, “It’s okay. I knew about my father and Aunt Claire. We all knew, but we pretended that everyone was just friends.”

“Was it awful for your mother?”

“It’s hard to say. She accepted it as normal for the Family, and with Aunt Claire there, my mother didn’t have to worry that she was ignoring my father,” he said with a sad smile. “My mother’s real passion has always been for Birch Grove, her exceptional school for exceptional girls.”

“Mr. Mason’s passion was his wife. Losing her made him lose his mind.”

“How did you get away?”

“Knowledge is power. Even a small person can wreak havoc with a basic understanding of chemistry,” I said and grinned. “Mr. Mason didn’t know what happened to BB’s body.”

“My parents won’t say and may not know. The Family’s clean-up crew has already arrived and is doing damage control.”

Clouds began to move across the sky. The sunshine hadn’t lasted long.

Jack said, “My parents want you to come up to the house and talk to them. The Family will offer you something in exchange for your silence about Mr. Mason. Hattie will be here at three to take you to the meeting.”

“Will you be there?”

“I wasn’t invited, but if you want me there, I will be.”

“I’d like that,” I said. “Are you *really* just friends with Hattie?”

“I’m really just friends with Hattie.” He stood up and brushed the strands of grass off his shorts. He kissed me softly. “I’ll see you soon.”

After he left, Constance and Mary Violet joined me outside. They pulled lawn chairs beside mine.

“I absolutely can’t stand it anymore,” Mary Violet said. “You *have* to tell me what’s happening, or I shall perish from insatiable nosiness.”

“Mary Violet is going through gossip-withdrawal,” Constance said and leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Everyone is asking her for details and she

doesn't know any, except that Jack Monroe slept with you last night, which she has told me repeatedly. Look in the dictionary under *reiterate* and you'll see her picture there. ”

“I'm stunned,” Mary Violet said. “Except that Jack Monroe is a babe magnet. I thought you were all hot for Lucky. My photo is probably cross-indexed with *clueless*.”

Constance pushed her glasses up her narrow nose and said, “The Fire Chief already made an announcement about the accident, and you don't have to tell us anything else. If you want to talk, though, we're here, Jane.”

“Poor tragic Mr. Mason,” MV said. “He was never the same after his wife died. It was as if he couldn't leave Birch Grove because her spirit haunted him.”

“You over-dramatize things,” Constance said.

“I think MV is right,” I said. “Mr. Mason talked to me about her. We don't want to forget the people we love.”

Mary Violet tilted her head and said, “JW, Mrs. Monroe said it was rude to ask, but that was before and this is now. How *did* your mother die?”

“My stepfather shot her. I don't know why because I was only seven. He drank and went into rages.”

“That's horrible!” Constance said and Mary Violet said, “Oh, you poor thing!”

“He shot me, too.”

They said, “Oh, my God!” together and then put their arms around me.

When they let me go, Mary Violet said, “Is that how you got that scar on your shoulder?”

“Yes. I guess I didn't hide it very well. I'll tell you what I remember later, but it's not much. I don't want pity.”

Mary Violet huffed out her pink cheeks. “Sympathy is not pity.”

Constance nodded her head. “Neither is empathy, or comfort, or compassion.”

“Speaking of passion--” MV said.

“We weren't,” Constance cut in.

“How did you actually steal Jack from Hattie?”

“He says they’re friends and that’s it,” I answered.

“I thought so,” Constance said.

“I thought it first,” MV said, “so I win. My mother said I’m supposed to cheer you up, so I’ll now recite the poem I wrote for you, ‘Ode to an Innocent.’”

“Please don’t,” Constance said and fell off her chair onto the grass as Mary Violet stood.

“She’s going to throw her arms out now,” I said.

“I am,” she said and threw out her arms.

*“Oh, sweet maiden Jane, so thoughtful and true,
Your heart as pristine as the morning dew
You journey forth to an academic activity,
Only to find paintings of graphic proclivity.
Ladies’ privates in size so crude, so vast
Vulgarity of which is unsurpassed,
What’s once seen cannot be unseen, alas,
Thus Birch Grove again sullies a blameless lass.”*

HATTIE ARRIVED arrived at the Hayers’ drive at a quarter to three. She gave me a strong hug and said, “I’m so glad that you’re okay.”

I leaned against her as we went to her car.

On the short drive, Hattie said, “Jack told me what happened. I’m so sad for BB. I’d really hoped that she’d escaped us and was off somewhere with someone who loved her.”

“You think of it as escape, but she probably saw the Family and Birch Grove as safety, security,” I said. “Last night when I was watching the Monroes together, I thought, that’s what family is, people who support each other in happiness and grief.”

“Jack says I’m supposed to tell you that we aren’t really dating.”

“Why do you pretend you are?”

“Because it drives Lucky crazy. Stupid, spoiled, selfish Lucky. He can go to hell. Good luck to you with Lucky.”

“I’m not going through the Initiation, Hattie.”

She glanced at me with an amazed smile. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Because?”

“Because you’re right and Mr. Monroe, in his own crazy way, was right. It’s unhealthy for everyone involved.”

Hattie parked in the Monroes’ drive behind a Crown Victoria with a police antenna and the black Mercedes, and said, “Let’s go face the firing squad.”

She helped me to the front door and she rang the doorbell.

Tobias Monroe opened the door and said, “Everyone is here. Please join us. Hattie, you can wait in the family room.”

“I’m coming to the meeting.”

“It’s not appropriate,” he said in a tired voice.

“Mr. Monroe, you have no right to tell me what’s appropriate.” Then she marched into the living room.

Mrs. Monroe and her sons sat on one sofa. She was as well-groomed as ever, and if I hadn’t been looking for it, I wouldn’t have seen the sorrow in her eyes and the tension in her jaw.

Jack smiled at us, and my heart lifted at the sight of him.

Lucky said, “Hey” to me and gave a worried look at Hattie, who took a chair across the room.

Ian Ducharme, the Council member, wore an impeccable dark blue suit and sat in a leather chair set back in the corner of the room. When he saw me looking at him, he tipped his head and smiled.

Then I noticed a man and a woman in business clothes who were standing by the fireplace.

Mr. Monroe introduced me to them, saying, “Jane, this is Detective Fox and Officer Thurmond, from the Evergreen Police Department. They’re following up on the accident last night.”

The woman, Detective Fox, said, “Miss Williams, we’re grateful you weren’t hurt, and it’s quite sad that the Mr. Mason didn’t survive.”

“He was a terrific teacher,” I said.

“We have the fire chief’s initial report, and we need your statement because

there was a death,” she said. “We know your memory may be hazy. People in crises have trouble recalling incidents.”

I knew that she was providing excuses and I said, “A cloth chart caught on fire and set off the chemical supplies.”

Detective Fox smiled. “Thank you. I have all I need.” She looked at Mrs. Monroe and said, “Mrs. Monroe, please give me a call if you need anything.”

“I will, Katie.”

The detective’s partner jotted something down on a notepad and Detective Fox said, “Miss Williams, I know this is traumatic, but I’m sure you’re going to have a very successful life. I’m a Birch Grove alumna myself.”

When she reached out to shake my hand, I saw the gold and garnet ring shining on her finger.

After they had left, Mrs. Monroe looked at me and said, “What happened was a dreadful shock to all of us, Jane. We never expected that Albert Mason would try to hurt anyone.”

“You knew someone had killed Breneeta Brown,” I said.

“Breneeta went missing,” Mrs. Monroe said smoothly. “We assumed she left the school, which was her legal right as an emancipated minor.”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Monroe, but you’re lying. You or Mr. Monroe found her body in the amphitheatre. You made up a story to cover her absence and you’ve been pretending that she’s been in contact with you.”

Ian Ducharme watched with interest as Mrs. Monroe’s expression froze and her husband clutched his hands nervously.

Finally Mr. Monroe said, “I can’t deal with this anymore. Nothing’s right since Claire...since she left. I need a drink.” He rushed out of the room while his wife looked on with annoyance.

Then her composure returned. “Jane, I want to assure you that this incident has nothing to do with the way we feel about you. We’re postponing the initiation, and we’re happy to do whatever we can to reassure you.”

“I’ve decided that I don’t want to be a Companion,” I said.

“You’re in a state of shock. You need to rest. You already have the week

off, and you and Lucky can go somewhere, anywhere. We have a ski lodge, or if you'd like to be by the ocean... Why not see Paris, Jane?"

"A vacation won't change my mind and I've got to study for my mid-terms."

"Lucky," Hattie began.

Mrs. Monroe turned her attention to my friend. "Harriet, you're not a part of this discussion."

"Yes, I am," Hattie said. "Lucky, I am giving you one last chance. Are you going to insist on having a Companion?"

Lucky lowered his forehead like an animal threatening to charge. "It's the tradition and it's my right. I already told you so in the grove that night. You can get used to it like everyone else."

"I'm not everyone else, Lucky." Hattie stood and went to Lucky. "You know that I have always loved you. I know that you have always loved me. It's time for you to stop being a spoiled child and be the man I know you can be, someone I can respect."

Lucky looked at Hattie with all the adoration that I'd once dreamed he'd have for me.

"Let her go, Lucky," his mother said. "You can continue the tradition and do better than Harriet Tyler."

That's when Lucky stood up. "You're crazy, Mom. There's no one better than Hattie. She's smarter than me, she's nicer than me, and she's the most amazing girl I'll ever know. If she's willing to put up with me, then I'd be an idiot to let her go. Hattie, let's get out of here."

He took her hand and they left. The front door slammed on their way out.

Mrs. Monroe crossed her ankles gracefully, but her voice shook when she spoke. "He'll change his mind, Jane. Lucien's always been impulsive, but he won't break an important custom."

"Oh, give it up, darling," said Ian Ducharme.

"But—"

"Do you really want to argue with me?" Even his smile looked dangerous.

“Now, go comfort your husband so he doesn’t have to seek it in a bottle. I’d like to talk to Jane.”

“I’m staying,” Jack said. He leaned forward as if he would jump into action.

Mr. Ducharme gave the headmistress a look, and she got up stiffly and left the room.

Then the Council member moved to the sofa facing me. “Well, Jane, you hardly gave me a chance to leave before you proved me right.”

“Why did you tell them I’d be satisfactory?”

His dark eyes shone with amusement. “Curiosity. Life is change and I suspected you’d bring that.”

“Where is Breneeta’s body?” I asked.

“The dead are gone, Jane, their ashes scattered to the wind,” he said. “Now since young Monroe declines the privilege of a Companion, I don’t think we have a problem. You will be compensated for your trouble. What would you like?”

I knew immediately. “I’d like you to establish a scholarship at my old school, City Central, in honor of a friend of mine, Hosea Sabatier. It should cover all the college texts for a student.”

“A reasonable request,” Mr. Ducharme said. “Is that all, Jane?”

“No,” Jack said. “Jane was promised a Birch Grove education, as well as funding through graduate school, including all living expenses. Since she could have died, she should get that in addition to the scholarship.”

Mr. Ducharme smiled at Jack and said, “You’re her advocate?”

“The halfling’s usual counsel only comes out in moonlight.”

“Ah, I thought I was the only one who noticed that in her, something not of this world,” Mr. Ducharme said. “Yes, that would be fine. Jane, after you’ve completed your studies, we can revisit your relationship with the Family. We are not all as conformist as this particular branch and there’s always a place for a trustworthy, educated ally, especially one who mysteriously survives deadly situations.”

He glanced at his thin gold watch. “I must go. Is my offer amenable to

you?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Will you walk out with me, Jane?”

Mr. Ducharme offered his arm to me and we went outside. He paused in the shade of a pine. “I can trust in your silence?”

“There’s no reason for me to expose The Family. I might even feel sorry for them if they showed any sympathy for others.”

“That is very generous of you.”

“You’re laughing at me, Mr. Ducharme.”

“I must, because you’re such a solemn young woman. Don’t stay so serious or you’ll turn into someone like Hyacinth.”

“I’ll try to avoid that, sir.”

“I’ll make the necessary arrangements for our agreement. Birch Grove’s Companion program here has been suspended until further review.”

“I’m glad.”

“Good-bye, Jane.” He took my hand in his strong hands. “I believe that we shall meet again someday under happier circumstances. Perhaps then you’ll tell me the secrets behind those brown eyes.”

“Only if you tell me yours.”

He chuckled and said, “You are already taking my advice. I have something for you.” He opened the trunk of his car and took out a sapling. “This was found in the passageway near the in the school. I believe it’s yours.”

“Thank you,” I said taking it and looking in wonderment at the fragile new roots and leaves on the branch.

Then he got in the Mercedes and drove away.

I looked down the hillside to the school. The charred roof of the rose-colored main building looked like scabs.

I didn’t want to go back into the Monroes’ house. Carrying the sapling carefully in my hand, I hobbled slowly around the house to the path that led to my cottage.

When I reached the amphitheatre, I sat on a bench to rest my ankle. The

marble was smooth and cool. What had Claire Mason and BB hoped and dreamed for when they'd been initiated here? What we all dream about: love and security.

I looked above me into the branches and saw a darker shadow there. I didn't know if it the Lady of the Wood, or BB, or a trick of the light, but I wasn't afraid this time. The darkness expanded, growing fainter, and then was gone.

Jack found me at the amphitheatre. He sat beside me and said, "You left without telling me."

"I needed to come here."

Wind rustled the autumn leaves, and we sat so quietly that a trio of deer came out of the trees toward us. They looked at us before ambling off.

Jack said, "I'm glad you decided not to transform into a doe and leap away with your friends."

"I thought about it, but something is keeping me here."

"Will you help me get to the cottage?"

"Halfling," he said with a broad smile, "did you actually ask for help?"

"It's okay to ask friends for sympathy and comfort."

"May I carry you?"

"No, you can support me." I picked up the branch and leaned against him to stand.

"What's that?" he asked.

"It's the branch that helped me last night. We can plant it."

Jack was patient as I limped slowly down the hill. Once we reached the steps to the cottage, he ran ahead and opened the door, then returned to swoop me up and carry me inside.

When he put me on the sofa, I looked around the room and noticed small changes. "Someone's been here. Things are moved."

"The Family's security team probably came through last night. What now, halfling?" he said as he sat beside me and took my hand.

"I don't know. I thought about transferring to another school, but there are things keeping me here."

“Such as?”

“Such as Mary Violet’s poetry and the Free Pop and *The Birch Grove Weekly*.”

“Those are awesome reasons to stay. Anything else?”

“Yes, I love the grove and I have friends here and there’s this guy... He’s incredibly aggravating. He teases me and tells me to leave. But he brings me pizza and makes me laugh. He’s amazingly sexy and talented. He’s funny, too, and considerate. I suspect that he’s very smart.”

“I’ll never be able to compete with such a paragon. Is that one of your SAT words?”

I nodded. “Don’t try to compete. Be yourself. The problem is that he’s been so inconsistent that I’m not sure he really cares for me.”

Jack put his arm around me, and I inhaled his scent of pine and warm earth. He said, “I think he was conflicted because he thought you loved someone else and he was trying to get you to safety, even though he wanted you to stay.”

“Does he want me to stay now?”

“Yes, because he’s in love with you. He’s never met a prettier, braver, smarter halfling, and all he wants, Jane, is to be with you.”

I pulled Jack to me and kissed him.

When our lips parted he said, “You know this is going to be complicated.”

“Compared to what I’ve been through, it will be a cake walk.”

Jack grinned and said, “My beautiful elfkin made a joke!”

Then he kissed me again and again, his mouth tasting like the stream I’d tasted in the Other World, his arms as strong as the arms that had carried me up on the night of the storm, and his eyes the color of spring. And when he said, “Jane, stay with me,” I said, “Always.”

I slipped my hand under his shirt, feeling his warm body, and he pulled off his t-shirt. I kissed his bare shoulders, stroked his chest, and then he unzipped the pink warm-up jacket.

His body kept me warm even though I trembled at his touch. He said, “Does your ankle hurt?”

“Not much. Be careful.”

“I’ll only do what you want. Tell me what you want.”

“I want you.”

He hesitated and then said, “We don’t have to rush. I can wait.”

“I’ve already died twice, Jack. I may not come back next time. I’m not going to wait to live anymore.”

He took me to the bedroom and slowly undressed me, nuzzling, kissing, and stroking me until I forgot the pain in my ankle, I forgot everything but him. His naked body seemed miraculous to me and when I touched him, he gasped and said, “Jane, Jane.”

Because we were so new to each other and he was trying not to hurt my ankle, we fumbled, our damp bodies sliding and slipping, but Jack laughed and I laughed, too, because it was better not to be too serious.

And when we found our rhythm and the sensation built up in me, I clutched his shoulders and it was better than I could have imagined, because he was looking right at me, seeing *me*, and I cried out in pleasure and happiness.

IN THE MIDDLE of the night, when the birches danced in an autumn wind and sang their song, Jack and I built a fire and wrapped ourselves in the comforter.

His calloused fingers went to my scar and it throbbed warmly, as if it craved his touch. He asked, “It’s shaped like a leaf. What’s this from?”

“My stepfather shot me, and I climbed into a tree,” I said. “No, what really happened is that the tree lifted me up and saved me. That was the first time I died. I always thought the scar was the mark of the bullet, but now I realize it’s the mark of the tree that saved me.”

“So I was right, and you are magic.”

“Not me. The Lady of the Wood.” I looked up at my painting and listened to the branches brushing against the cottage. “She watches over me.”

“No, I think it’s *you*, Jane.” His fingers traced my tattoo. “What does this mean?”

I told him about Hosea and how I had loved him.

“He sounds like someone who wanted you to be happy. H is also for happy and for hope, and...” He thought for a moment and said, “And for honey, which is both an endearment and nice with peanut butter in a sandwich.”

“It’s for hilarious, which you think you are.” I ran my hand along his muscular leg. I thought he was so beautiful.

“H is for Halfling, and I love Halfling.” Then he said, “I have something to say to you,” and then he spoke very slowly and carefully:

*‘Karissima, noli tardare
studeamus nos nunc amare
sine te non potero vivere
iam decet amorem perficere.’*

I translated the poem in my head as he spoke: “My dearest, do not hesitate! Let us now study the art of love. Without you I cannot live. Now is the time to perfect our love!”

“But I want to say it in English because I can’t run to Catalina for old Latin poems every time I want to tell you something,” he said. “I love you, Halfling.”

“I love you, too, Jack.”

He stayed with me during the week that Birch Grove was closed. He brought down his guitars, bikes, grubby shorts, and several t-shirts, including an extra-small Dog Waffle Research Laboratories tee for me.

He took care of me, making tea and toast in the morning and bringing pizza at night. He washed the dishes and played songs for me. He hung the birch painting above the fireplace and planted the sapling outside my bedroom window.

And when Jack touched me, I felt every nerve come alive, as it had on the day that we’d met when he’d placed his hand on my shoulder.

Mary Violet and Constance visited, bringing Mrs. Heyer’s cupcakes, movies, and flowers.

Mary Violet waited until Lucky had gone to band practice to say, “Hattie’s so busy with Lucky that we haven’t seen her in years.”

“She stopped by yesterday,” Constance said and winked an almond eye at me.

“Only for a nanosecond.”

Constance said, “It was at least four hours.”

MV looked at Jack’s things scattered around the room and sighed.

“Everyone’s got lovers, but me. Even Constance is seeing Joe, who’s our year at Evergreen. When we were in seventh grade, Joe laughed out loud when I got beamed in the head with a softball at the Fourth of July picnic, so I don’t approve of him at all. My self-esteem is in shambles.”

“She’ll recover,” Constance said to me. “Three guys already asked her to the Winter Ball.”

“They don’t count. I’ve known them since we were all embryos and our mothers were in the same birthing classes. I think I’ll dress my sister Agnes in a tux and take her as my date.”

“You wouldn’t!” Constance and I said together and then we all started laughing.

AFTER A FEW days, when I could walk short distances, Jack and I would go into in the grove at night. We’d stop at the amphitheatre and he’d wrap his arms around me, keeping me warm, as we talked.

I began remembering more things about my life before: my mother pushing me on swings at the park, a gray cat we’d had, blowing bubbles on a summer day...

The pieces of me began coming together. Sometimes I could even imagine the woman I would become: quiet, thorough Jane Williams, who loved solving problems in a laboratory and was happiest when she came home every evening to her family.

When the week ended, I said, “Jack, you have to move out of here and go back home.”

“There’s too much drama there. Hattie and my mother are always going at each other. Besides I want to be with you.”

“Classes start on Monday, and I won’t be able to study if you’re here all the time,” I said. “Don’t forget the moral turpitude requirements. Mary Violet is already writing poems about my lost innocence.”

He grinned and said, “We wouldn’t want a scandal. Okay, but I demand visiting privileges.”

“Constantly and maybe you could start looking into colleges.”

“Are you tired of me already?”

“Colleges with a good music program and a great chemistry department and terrific pizza. A college set in the woods,” I said. “I want to live where there are trees. I want to live with you.” I fiddled with the silver leaf necklace that Jack had made. “JFM. What’s your middle name?”

“Forrest,” he said. “It’s my birth family’s name. Jacob Forrest Monroe.”

IN SCIENCE AND MATH, one is always trying to find an elegant solution: an answer that is at once simple and true. Jack is that to me, my elegant solution, and I stepped out of the shadows forever.

I still dream about the nights that I died. Sometimes I have nightmares about being lost in the hidden passages, unable to find a way out. The escape has become the prison.

More often, though, I dream that I am in the grove. The wind is blowing and the birches have lifted their roots from the soil and are doing a lumbering, yet graceful dance. They’re singing their whispery song in a language that predates time.

I’m very young and playing Ring-around-the-Rosey with other small girls. We’re singing, “Ashes, ashes, all fall down.”

Somehow I know that my playmates are Claire Mason and BB. There are others girls here, too, and many wear Companion rings, the stones glinting like blood, on their small hands.

We are the ghosts of childhoods lost, and we will always haunt this place.