

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *DARK HOPE*

“Young people are especially vulnerable to human trafficking, in great part, because there are not enough resources focused on prevention. *Dark Hope* fills that void. It is a compelling story that will appeal to young readers while giving them critically important information on how to escape this scourge and sparking conversations among each other.”

—Deborah J. Richardson, executive vice president,
National Center for Civil and Human Rights

“Monica tackles the real-world problem of human trafficking in the intriguing world of fantasy that is *Dark Hope*. Young adult readers will be turning pages quickly as the battle of good and evil unfolds before their very eyes. It is my hope that *Dark Hope* will inspire and propel another generation to action to protect children against trafficking.”

—Cheryl DeLuca-Johnson, president
and CEO of *Street Grace, Inc.*

“An effortlessly strong narrative voice, engaging writing style, and intriguing details that make you want to read on. What’s not to love?”

—Aaron Kite, author *A Touch of Poison*,
2012 Watty Award recipient for
Most Popular fantasy book

Dark Hope



Book One of *the*
ARCHANGEL PROPHECIES

M O N I C A M C G U R K



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BOOKS

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*To my husband and children, for their love,
patience, and support, and for my fan fiction readers,
for their inspiration and encouragement.*

*A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this book will
be donated to organizations that fight human trafficking,
especially the sexual trafficking of minors.*

PROLOGUE

When the SWAT team stormed the motel room, the first thing they saw was the little girl. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding her blankie and sucking her thumb, her bare legs hanging over the edge, absentmindedly kicking at the faded bedspread.

The television set blared—Wile E. Coyote getting crushed by a falling anvil, courtesy once again of the Road Runner.

The girl turned her big brown eyes and stared at the men. She didn't scream; she didn't cry; she just looked at them as if she had been expecting them all along, as if they were as natural a part of the run-down room as the peeling, speckled wallpaper and the rust-colored shag carpet.

They turned and fanned their guns around the room, looking for the man who had taken the girl, the bad man who had hurt other little girls, the man who was lurking in the corner or hiding under the bed. But he wasn't there. The door to the bathroom was closed, however, so they surrounded it.

Two of the men, who looked like bugs in their funny helmets and gas masks, began talking to her, touching her hair, her arms, as if to reassure themselves that she was there, really, really there. Was she all right? Was she hurt?

While they wrapped a blanket around her, another bug-man kicked in the bathroom door and rushed inside, brandishing his gun.

“Oh dear God,” he choked out, his voice sounding tinny and far away as he backed out through the door. An acrid smell floated out with him.

The other men rushed into the bathroom to see what he had seen. Suddenly, they had to strain to move their feet, as if springs were pulling them back. The faded linoleum had melted and was sticking to their boots, stretching apart like long strings of taffy. There, in the middle of a scorched, black circle of gooey plastic, lay a pile of ash flecked with little chips of white. Teeth. Bones. The body was still smoking, its whispery tendrils rising up to leave a film of soot on the ceiling. One of the men kicked the pile, revealing a few misshapen lumps. A putrid smell washed over them as he kicked around the remains, musky sweet and tangy, like copper.

One by one the men came out, holding their hands over their faces. One rushed to the little Formica table in the corner, thrust up the front of his helmet, and vomited into the wastebasket. Walkie-talkies started buzzing and bulbs started flashing and everything seemed to get hot and loud all at once.

The first man, the man who had kicked in the bathroom door, knelt before the little girl on the bed.

“What happened? Who did this?” he asked the little girl. “Was there someone else here with you?”

The little girl just stared at him with her big brown eyes and sucked her thumb. She had no idea what he was talking about.

“Let’s get you out of here,” the man said, his voice rough. He swept her up in his arms, pulling the industrial blanket tightly around her. She was so tiny, almost weightless. He wound through the crowded room and headed toward the open door, trying to block the memory of what he’d seen in the bathroom.

He emerged, blinking, into the gray light. On the concrete sidewalk he paused, taking great gulps of fresh air. Emergency personnel swirled all around them while police barked at the gathering crowd, pressing them back from the caution tape where they surged, hoping for a glimpse.

The girl whimpered against his shoulder, clutching her threadbare blanket even tighter.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, patting her awkwardly on the back. “We’ll find your mommy and your daddy. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

He didn’t wait for her answer before striding purposefully across the parking lot, moving closer and closer to the flashing lights, the cameras, and the crowd.

“Hope!”

A wild-eyed woman broke through the tape, past the restraining arms of the police officer, and then was swallowed up in the crowd.

“Mommy!”

The girl squirmed in his arms, straining toward the voice.

“Hold on now,” the man cautioned, but the little girl was kicking at him now, determined to get to her mother. Carefully, he set her down on the cracked pavement. “Be careful, you’re barefoot,” he warned her, holding her back ever so slightly. It wouldn’t do to lose her now.

A pair of EMTs fell upon her, peppering her with questions as one shone a penlight in her eyes and the other took notes. Reporters crowded around them, microphones eagerly thrusting forward

like branches of trees, showering questions down upon the little girl's head.

The little girl shrank back against the SWAT leader, who instinctively wrapped her in a protective arm.

"Hope!" A desperate voice rose above the chatter of the reporters. "That's my daughter! Let me through!"

Slowly, the crowd parted for the woman who was clawing her way through.

"Hope!" she sobbed, falling on her knees before her daughter. In an instant, a man, eyes heavy with shadows, fell in behind her—the father.

The woman laughed through her sobs, running her hands over the little girl, checking that she was whole, as if she were a newborn.

"Oh my God, what did he do to you?" she choked out through her tears, clutching the little girl in her arms. Her husband wrapped them both in his embrace, weeping silently.

The SWAT leader cleared his throat, leaning in to speak to the parents. This part always made him uncomfortable, but it had to be said.

"She seems unhurt," he said steadily, low so that the reporters would not hear, "but we haven't had a physical examination yet. We don't know what he may have done to her. We need to take her in now. To be sure."

He locked eyes with the father, who blanched. He'd heard the father had been the one with her at the time she was snatched. He felt for the guy. It would be hard to live with yourself, if the worst had, indeed, happened.

The mother just kissed the top of her daughter's head. "Of course," she said. "But we go with her. I'm not leaving her side." She rose to her feet, shifting her baby girl in her arms. The girl made a

little sound of protest where she rested her head against her mother's shoulder.

"Oh, poor baby, your hair is caught," the woman said. She hitched the girl up on her hip and swept the girl's cascade of silky hair around her neck.

The SWAT leader started. "What's that?" he demanded, pointing at the little girl.

"What's what?" the mother responded, confused.

"There, on her neck."

The woman turned to face her husband. "What is it, Don?"

Her husband shuddered and reached out with a tentative hand to lift up her hair and touch his little girl's neck. She flinched from the touch.

Her husband's face hardened into a mask of fury as he let her hair fall back into place.

one

Ten years.

Mona straightened the picture frame on the bookshelf. There, captured under glass, three-year-old Hope smiled up at her with big brown eyes that were untouched by fear, by danger, or by sadness.

It had been more than ten years since that portrait sitting. She remembered holding Hope's favorite stuffed animal behind the photographer, making it dance and fly around his head in an effort to get her daughter to laugh. The sound had bubbled out of her, the sound of unadulterated delight, and with a snap of a shutter the photographer had frozen that moment in time forever.

They hadn't known, then, that their carefree days were about to end.

Mona ran her finger along the edge of the frame, checking for dust. She stepped back and looked at the other photos, taking them in one by one.

There was the snapshot of her and Don graduating from Georgia Tech. A gust had threatened to lift away her mortarboard, and

she'd lifted her hand to hold it down while the wind blew her long chestnut hair off her shoulders. She was laughing, and Don was turned, admiring her, the reflection of her face in his Ray-Bans and a broad, toothy grin lighting up his own.

They'd had jobs—good jobs—lined up: she as an analyst with a consulting firm and he as an engineer. They were young and crazy in love; it was there, plain to see in that simple snapshot taken by one of their friends. They were going to conquer the world. And they were unaware that at that moment a new life was already forming inside of Mona, a new life that would change everything.

So young, she thought wistfully. So young to have so much responsibility thrust upon us. But what could you do? She lingered over the wedding portrait that was tucked behind the others. Their marriage had been hastily arranged. She hadn't really cared about the fancy wedding—after all, she had no family to speak of, no one to impress or to worry about tradition—but Don had insisted.

"You deserve the whole thing," he'd stated emphatically when, after tallying up the budget for the affair, she'd suggested once again that they should simply elope to Savannah. "The big dress, the flowers—all of it. And I want it in a church," he'd said. That was the only part of the deal, she knew, that wasn't open to negotiation. "I want the holy bonds."

Mona pulled out her portrait and held it up close, peering at it with a critical eye. She'd chosen the dress wisely, she thought, always knowing what flattered her petite frame. The long column of white was elegant, the Empire waist just enough to hide the tiny bump that was beginning to show. If you didn't know it already, you'd have never been able to tell that she was already five months along in that photo. The studio had expertly wiped out the red of her eyes, eyes that had become bloodshot from the horrible morning sickness that never went away. She smiled, grimly remembering

the intersection where, every morning on her way to work, she'd had to pull over and vomit, the fumes from the commute too much for her roiling stomach to bear.

She set the picture down. A mother at twenty-two. She wouldn't have believed it herself if it hadn't happened to her. It was definitely not a part of her plan. But Hope—well, Hope was worth it.

She turned back to the photo of her three-year-old daughter. There was a big gap after that: no pictures for a long, long time. Then just a trail of obligatory school pictures, her daughter in school uniform, her eyes wary, her spirit seemingly snuffed out. In each one, she seemed to shrink behind a curtain of hair, willing the camera away, hoping she could hide from it.

Ten years.

Had she done the right thing? she wondered. After Hope's abduction, she had tried to make it work with Don. She hadn't ever blamed him for what had happened. She knew how often she, herself, at the playground would sneak a glance at her mobile while her daughter played on the slide or in the dirt, trying to catch up on what was going on in the office. She knew how quickly it could have happened, and it could have happened on her watch just as easily as it had happened on his.

No, she had never blamed Don. But he had been unable to forgive himself. Even though Hope had been returned to them whole—undamaged except for that damned mark on her neck—he couldn't let go of the feeling that he was somehow responsible, and that there was more to the story. He couldn't accept that their daughter had been taken randomly by a sick, sick man, a man who had died a fiery death, a man who was no longer a threat.

Don's vow to never let it happen again had been the poison that had destroyed their marriage. His vigilance became obsession until it was the defining thing in his life, crowding out the happiness

they'd once had together, crowding out even his love for her, Mona, until there was nothing left but paranoia.

She'd had no choice. She still believed that, even after all these years. She'd had to leave him, even though it had torn her apart—because, after all, she had still loved him. Or at least she had loved the memory of him: the man who had sold his beloved pickup truck to buy her a diamond ring, which she'd found inside her fortune cookie after wolfing down some kung pao chicken; the man who had gone out in the middle of the night without complaining to buy her Dutch apple pie when that had been all she craved, always coming back with an extra pint of ice cream; the man who'd cried when the doctors placed his infant daughter in his arms and whose voice, like magic, was the only thing in the world that could stop Hope's angry, newborn wailing.

Mona had made her decision, thinking that with a separation she'd be able to shield her daughter from Don's increasingly crazy rantings. On her own, she could filter Hope's exposure so that she saw only the best of her father. So while Mona couldn't bring herself to divorce him, she'd filed for a formal separation and custody, thinking that would be enough.

Instead, she'd lost her daughter when the judge deemed that her work schedule would prevent her from being a good mother. The injustice of it burned even now. The loss of custody had been bad enough. The court-ordered visitations—her tenuous link to her daughter's love—had been continuously strained by Don's insistence on keeping up security, approving every place they went, screening each site carefully for risks. Her gifts had been rejected, as if somehow the wrong blouse or dress would paint a target on their daughter, exposing her to harm. So as Hope grew older, Mona's attempts to connect with her became strained and forced, their entire relationship carefully controlled by Don's vigilance.

For ten years, Mona had mourned the loss of her husband and her daughter. She'd mourned the loss even as she soldiered on, advancing to partner in her firm, making sure that if nothing else, her broken family's material needs were met.

And now this. Hope had asked the court for a change of custody, and this time, the court had listened. This time, Hope was coming home with her.

This sudden change of events was a gift, one she was determined not to waste. She'd done everything she could to make her house ready. Hope's room had been updated to what she supposed would appeal to a young teenager. Her closet was stocked with clothing—not too much, because she still didn't know exactly what her daughter's preferences would be, but enough to see her through the start of school. She'd bought a new treadmill so her daughter could keep up with her beloved running—her only pastime, as far as Mona could tell.

No, she would not waste this opportunity. She stuffed down the pang of sympathy she felt for Don. She'd lost her daughter before. She was not going to let it happen again.

Her cell phone began ringing, the no-nonsense, anonymous tune that she'd never bothered to reset interrupting her reverie. It was Clayton Ross, the managing partner of her consulting firm and closest thing she had to a boss. And a friend.

"Checking up on me, Clay?"

"You know I'd never do that, Mona. But I did want you to reconsider my offer to drive with you to Alabama. That's a long way to drive alone."

"You'll let me fly halfway round the world to negotiate nasty mergers, but I can't handle a leisurely weekend jaunt up I-75?" she teased.

She could almost hear him smiling over the line.

“You know that’s not it. But it’s a big day. Thought you might like some backup if he doesn’t play ball.”

Clayton was referring to her husband, of course, and whether or not he would respect the order to absent himself when Mona came to pick up Hope and take her home for good.

“He wouldn’t do that to me. Not now. He’s been oddly cooperative since the mediator made her decision.”

“If you say so. I wouldn’t put anything past him.” Clayton had had an up-close view of her troubles with Don over the years, and it had soured him from having any optimism. “Drive safely, then, and call me if you change your mind.”

I won’t, she thought to herself as she ended the call. I’ve waited too long for this moment to share it with anybody else.

two

I didn't have much to take with me from Alabama: my school, Holy Innocents, had required uniforms, so I had little clothing of my own. Dad had always deemed the things my mother kept sending me "too showy," and he'd promptly packed them up to send to Goodwill. Mom had said to leave my treadmill; she'd get me a new one. So I loaded up the backseat of her Audi convertible with my books and climbed in, ready to put my past behind me.

As Mom backed out of the long rutted driveway, I took one last look at the house in which I'd lived for almost ten years. Dad wasn't there to wave goodbye. When I'd told the judge I was afraid he'd make a scene, he'd ordered him to vacate the premises for the hour before and after my mother was supposed to collect me. He was probably down at the church, praying for a miraculous intervention to keep me from moving to Atlanta. Resentment flooded through me, and I crossed my arms, refusing to acknowledge the fluttering in my stomach.

“Ready to go?” Mom asked, looking expectantly into the back-seat at me. I nodded and she accelerated. In an instant, a cloud of dust obscured my view of the house.

We rode in silence. My request for a change of custody had come as a surprise to my mom. She’d never challenged the original arrangements over the years, had never pumped me for information or probed to find his failings as a father. It was like she wanted him to be a good dad, was even rooting for him. When I’d insisted on talking in private with the court-appointed mediator, she hadn’t questioned it. She’d never tried to get me to explain why I wanted to move back to live with her.

Now, as we weaved in and out of the fast lane, she kept her end of whatever unspoken agreement she had with my dad and left me to my own thoughts. But I didn’t want to think. Instead, I let the steady hum of the asphalt under the tires lull me into a half-sleep.



“Here we are,” Mom said briskly, jolting me out of my trance as she made a sharp turn. The two hours had gone swiftly, and I was surprised to see that we were in a neat subdivision, almost home.

My mom still lived in the same big house in the suburbs we’d had before my parents separated. It made no sense. She had to drive miles to get to the airport. She lived alone. The house was a massive colonial looming ahead of us at the end of a cul-de-sac: great for a family with young kids, a bit much if you were a single not-quite-divorcée.

The perfection of it was jarring after living as we did in Alabama. Even though Dad and I technically lived in a decent neighborhood (thanks to the generous check Mom sent every month), our house

was pretty sad. Dad had blocked out most of the windows with aluminum foil, nailing their sashes shut, and had installed double deadbolts on every door. The yard was a dead zone with bare patches of dirt and stubby clumps of straw, all that was left of the bushes some previous owner had planted. From the mint green and plum wallpaper that looked like it came from an old Holiday Inn to the saggy garage door, the entire place looked like someone had abandoned it circa 1992. The covenants had expired on our neighborhood, so the neighbors just shook their heads and whispered among themselves about what a shame it was.

That wasn't the only thing they whispered about us. My dad had embraced an extreme religious-slash-survivalist lifestyle that was way outside the bounds of any normal church. He'd raised me like a hunted thing, always wary, pushing well-meaning neighbors away to keep me isolated from the "threat"—whatever threat it was that he imagined. We lived on the edges of social acceptability, my daily trips to school tolerated only because of the legalities and my mom's refusal to let him homeschool me. Between his erratic behavior and the story of my past, we were outcasts, tolerated at best in the small town in which he raised me. But now, all that was going to be over at last.

I felt a little twinge looking up at my new home as we pulled up the driveway. With its pretty white shutters, sparkling panes, and wide expanse of green grass, it should have been cheery, but the yawning windows looked just as sad to me. As she pulled into the spotless garage, I wondered again why Mom had lived here by herself all these years.

"You remember; your room is at the top of the stairway. I can help you carry your books up, if you'd like." The corners of her mouth contorted, as if she was either forcing a smile or trying to suppress one. I couldn't tell which.

I nodded, sitting in my seat, my hands folded in my lap, while she got out of the car and opened the door for me. I looked up at her face, uncertain. I hadn't thought about the fact that I didn't really know my mom. I hadn't really lived with her in more than ten years.

She blew out a long breath and reached in to squeeze my hands.

"Welcome home, Hope."



Later that night, over pizza, we reviewed her plans for the week. And I mean plans.

"I'll be taking you in tomorrow for your first day of class. But I need to leave first thing in the morning on Tuesday. My secretary prepared my itinerary for you"—she passed me a glossy blue folder from a neat pile in front of her—"in case you need to reach me. I won't be back for a few days, but I asked Mrs. Bibeau down the street to check in on you after school."

I just nodded, my mouth working the cheese and pepperoni.

"The school already knows you're coming. I filed all of your papers. I made you an extra copy"—now a red folder emerged—"to keep in your backpack in case there's any confusion. We'll just need to go to the front office when we get there." Here, she frowned. "Until you get your driver's license, I am afraid you'll have to take the bus. I know that's less than ideal, but it is the best I can do right now. After you make some friends, I'm sure they'll be more than happy to pick you up. Until then, you've got to be out of the house by 7:25. Here's your bus information."

Under her breath she muttered, "For the life of me, I can't understand why your father didn't let you get your learner's permit. You're so close to being old enough to drive yourself . . . I just

hope we can get you behind the wheel quickly. I'll have to sign you up for Driver's Ed."

I almost told her it wasn't necessary, but bit back my response. It probably wouldn't help her any to know that my father had been letting me drive behind the wheel of his old Honda for years. It was part of his plan for "emergency preparedness." Whatever that meant.

Without pausing, Mom turned to the pile. "I've assembled a list of emergency phone numbers for you and compiled all the information on the classes you'll be joining." *Thwack*. Another thick folder hit the table. "I wasn't sure what you'd like to eat, so just in case, I got this set of delivery menus for you for when I'm gone." She fanned them out in front of her. Her voice was starting to get a hysterical edge to it.

"Mom," I interrupted, touching her lightly on the arm. "It's okay. I've cooked for myself before. I'll be okay."

She sagged back into her chair. "Of course you will. I just feel so bad, leaving so soon after you've gotten here. If your father knew, he'd—"

"But he doesn't. And nobody's going to tell him." I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms, pleased that an opportunity to defy him had presented itself so soon.

Mom smiled weakly. "No, I suppose not. The judge took care of that, didn't she? Unless he's assembled an army of spies, he won't be able to see you for a good three months."

I winced. I wouldn't put it past my father to have concocted some elaborate scheme to track my whereabouts 24/7. He may have even implanted a chip in me. Memo to self—check for weird bumps when you take a shower tonight.

My mom interrupted my thoughts. "Here's a cell phone for you." She set it down next to my plate. It was sleek, gunmetal gray with a

cool graffiti case. “It’s preprogrammed with my cell, Mrs. Bibeau’s number, my secretary’s number, and some emergency numbers. I’ll try to call you each night to see how your day went, kiddo, but it may be late. I’m not sure how your classes at Holy Innocents compare to Dunwoody High’s, so you may have some catching up to do. Or you may find them too easy. If you find you have time on your hands, you could think through your extracurriculars. I picked up this information on the ones I thought might interest you from the school. Maybe we can talk about it tomorrow night after you get home and have a sense of your class load.”

I stopped playing with the stringy cheese that had dripped off of my slice and stared at her blankly as she set the list on top of the pile. “Extracurriculars?”

Mom’s lips compressed into a thin line and her eyes got sad. “You’re a perfectly healthy fifteen-year-old girl, Hope,” she said, softly. “Your dad did what he thought best, but . . .” She stopped then, choosing her words carefully. “You should be out in the world, honey. Not locked up all day.”

I picked up the page and started scanning the list. Cheerleading. Volleyball. Yearbook. Track. My heart started racing and I suddenly felt lightheaded. I wasn’t prepared for the sudden sense of panic that came over me. This was what I’d dreamed of, right?

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself, and carefully laid the page aside. As I sat there, unsure of what to say, Mom reached across the table and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “Just think about it, okay?”

Before I knew what I was doing, I blurted the words. “Mom, why did you leave Dad?”

Her face turned soft; her eyes, even more sad. “Come with me, honey.”

I followed her upstairs to a little alcove she called her den. “It

should be in here somewhere,” she said, stretching her tiny five-foot-two frame up to reach an upper shelf. Her perfectly manicured fingers wrapped around a faded volume and pulled it down. She sat on the little love seat in the corner and patted the space beside her, beckoning me to join her. I sat down, intrigued.

“I’ve been saving these for when this day came,” she said, setting the book down in my lap.

I opened the cover and found myself looking at a yellowed newspaper clipping. “Missing Girl Saved—But How?” screamed the headline. A grainy photo showed a police officer carrying a little girl, wrapped loosely in a blanket, in his arms. The girl gripped something in her fist, trailing it behind her.

“Is that me?” I asked, suddenly shy. I let my fingers graze over the clipping.

“Yes,” my mother said. “With your blankie. Somehow you managed to hold on to that thing, even in those circumstances. I saved every one of them,” she said, turning the album pages to show me newspaper story after newspaper story, carefully laid out on acid-free paper. “It was bad enough that you had been taken, Hope. But the mystery surrounding your rescue—well, that was like catnip for the press.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I had never heard about any mystery. In reality, I remembered nothing and had heard very little about my abduction. The physical consequences had been mild—except, of course, for my neck, which I didn’t want to think about right now. The emotional aftermath, though? Pretty heavy. Psychologists had poked and prodded me, trying to get my fractured brain to cough up the secrets of what had happened during the horrible forty-eight hours I’d been missing. But my mind refused to cooperate, earning me the labels of “traumatized” and “victim.”

I didn't like to think of myself that way, but truth be told, I wasn't eager to pry those forgotten hours out of the recesses of my memory. I liked it the way it was, with the facts about what had happened to me safely locked away where I didn't have to think about them. But now my mom had piqued my curiosity.

My mother frowned slightly, her eyes searching my face. "I know you don't remember, do you? You didn't remember even back then." She paused, seeming to gather her strength before continuing. "When the police found you, you were unharmed, thank God. But they never found the man who had snatched you. They think he was killed right there in the motel room where they found you."

"What do you mean, they think?"

"They found this in the bathroom," she said, slowly turning another page.

I stared at the dark photograph, unable to make out what it was.

"What is that?"

I thought I saw her suppress a little shudder before she braced herself yet again. "It is what's left of a human being who has been burned to death."

I stared dumbly at the page, barely registering what she said as she continued to speak, carefully choosing her words.

"They confirmed it was a person through DNA testing. They were never able to match it to anyone in their crime databases, so really they had no way of knowing who it was or whether it really was the person who took you. They couldn't even tell if the person was alive or dead at the time of the burning. Presumably dead, or you'd think there'd be signs of a fight. But we really couldn't tell. All we ever knew was that this . . . person . . . was dead, and you were alive. With no memory of anything at all. Untouched . . . except for this."

She reached out to stroke the Mark on the back of my neck, and I shrank away. I didn't like anyone even knowing about that spot. I sure didn't want her reminding me of it.

"But how is that even possible?" I demanded, trying to ignore the hurt look that crossed her face as I pushed her hand away. "I mean, how could a person just go up in flames and not burn the whole room down at the same time? And me, even though I was so little, wouldn't I have remembered something?"

My mother smiled, but this time with an edge. "Therein lies the problem. You didn't. Traumatic repression, the psychologists surmised. Whatever happened was locked away in your little brain, and you were surprisingly none the worse for it. And nobody could figure it out, Hope. Not the best minds in the police department or the FBI. We finally just chalked it up to one of life's mysteries and tried to put it behind us. All of us but your father, that is."

Her hands twisted in her lap. It still pained her to talk about it. I felt a twinge of guilt for having brought up the whole subject, but not enough to make her stop.

"He could not let go of the idea that this was not a random act. It got worse when the police couldn't figure out that mark on your neck. At first they'd thought it was a brand—the sort of thing a gang would do to mark a little girl as property before putting her up for sale on the streets." I blanched, but my mom didn't slow down. "But they couldn't trace it back to any organized group and nobody would confess to having seen it before. And over time, as the rawness of it healed, it came to look less like a brand, more like a tattoo.

"They ran it through their databases for cults, looking for a connection there. They even brought in a few language experts to see if there was a word that could be deciphered, but, to tell you the truth, by that point I didn't care. They couldn't find an answer and I was tired of dwelling upon it. I was just glad you were safe.

“But not your father. To him, that mark was the key to the entire mystery. He became obsessed with the idea that you’d been singled out on purpose, that the mark was meant to show it. That maybe the person who took you was still out there, and that you were still in danger. At first, I thought it was his way of dealing with the guilt, and I was sure it would pass. But it didn’t.”

“Guilt?” I prompted her, my nerves now on edge.

She slumped in her seat. “He’d been the one with you at the playground the day you disappeared. He blamed himself.”

I stared dumbly at the photo album. He’d never told me that. He’d never told me any of this.

My mom reached over and closed the album, and then took my hand in hers.

“I didn’t want to leave you, Hope. And to tell the truth, I didn’t want to leave your father, either. I still loved him, and I guess in some ways, I still do. I just couldn’t live with his obsession any longer. It was stifling us. He was not the same person anymore, sweetie. His whole world had narrowed down to a paranoid focus on protecting you. He lost his job, and then he lost another, and another. He just couldn’t bear to be away from you for long enough to go to work. Even normal things like going out to dinner became ordeals. What I saw as harmless fun he saw as needless security threats. So I left, fully knowing that someone had to take care of you both, and that that someone was me. I had to be strong, keep my job, and make sure you had everything you needed. I just didn’t realize that he would use that against me and take you away. Or that what I was seeing was just the tip of the iceberg.”

I thought about all the crazy things my dad had put me through: How he’d overwhelmed the mothers in our neighborhood with his overzealous lists of do’s and don’ts until the invitations for play-dates had shriveled up. How he’d insisted on accompanying me

on every field trip and social event, going so far as to sit with me on the bus, until I was so embarrassed that I didn't even want to go. The forced marches through obscure biblical texts, drilling me in preparation for God-knows-what. His odd security procedures and mock safety drills. I'd always thought my mother had willingly left me with my father so she could focus on her high-powered job as a partner in a consulting firm. In a weird way, I'd blamed her for my father's behavior and for how circumscribed my world had been. I'd never understood why any of it had happened, until now.

Mom's eyes were watery now as she hesitated, and then she reached up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ear. This time I didn't flinch.

"I didn't tell you this before, Hope, because I didn't want you to do anything but love your dad. I guess I kept hoping things would get better and that one day you would be old enough to understand. I just want you to know that I never, ever thought that things would turn out the way they did. And I never thought it would take so long to get you back home with me."

She gave my hand a little squeeze before continuing.

"Maybe it's just as well that whatever happened is locked away in your memory. But there's no need for you to be locked away, too. Now that you're here, maybe you can spread your wings."

The cell phone in her pocket started chirping. She pulled it out and flipped it open, frowning.

"I have to take this, Hope, I'm sorry. But it should only be a minute."

With that, she stood. She answered the phone brusquely, and I marveled at her transformation as she stepped into the hall. Her voice seemed to drop an octave as she drilled the person on the other end of the line with a sharp staccato of questions. Even

though I couldn't hear what she was talking about, I could tell from the tone of her voice that she was not happy.

She slipped back into the den, her face crumpled in a frown, her long manicured nails tapping absently on the phone.

"There's been a legal challenge to the project I'm working on. My client is demanding I come out a day early." She plopped down next to me. I saw the effort she put into steeling herself. "Of course, I told him no."

I thought of all the times I'd blamed her, unfairly, for putting her job first. I needed to let her know that I understood.

"You should go, Mom."

She looked up, startled. "What?"

I launched into my reasoning before she could stop me. "It sounds really important. I mean, your client wouldn't call you on the weekend if it wasn't, right?"

She nodded her head, the grooves in her forehead growing deeper.

"You've already taken care of everything for me at school. And I really don't need you to take me in. I'm fifteen, Mom," I added, gently. "I would really prefer it if you let me go in by myself, just like any other kid."

Her eyes got a little misty again as she tucked the phone back into her pocket and folded her hands in her lap. "Like any other kid," she echoed back wistfully. "Maybe we should go over the instructions again," she said.

"Mom, I've got it. I promise."

She sighed, her shoulders sagging in acceptance. Then, she stood up, resting one hand gently on my head, stroking my hair just like she had when I was little, smiling ruefully.

"I guess I'd better let them know and go pack, then. If you need me, I'll be just down the hall."

She left me alone in the den, the clippings and pictures from my past in my lap, wondering just what else I didn't know about my past.



I woke up to an empty house and a note written on the back of an old grocery receipt. “Note” is actually an exaggeration; it was a list of what my mom calls “bullet points”:

- *Bus at 7:30, end of cul-de-sac*
- *Wear hat*
- *Lunch money*
- *Mrs. Bibeau after school*

Love, Mom.

Mom had taped it to the bathroom door along with a twenty dollar bill. I glanced at the alarm clock. It was only seven a.m., but already my mom was long gone to catch her flight to wherever. I didn't know how I was ever going to keep track of where she was. She flew to a different city every day.

This was what I wanted, I reminded myself as I brushed my teeth. Anonymity. Space. A parent who didn't hover around me all the time, afraid I'd disappear if he looked away for even an instant. I was tired of being the girl who'd been abducted, the girl who had never been able to remember a thing that had happened to her.

I rifled through the closet to find something that would help me blend in. Everything in there was too ridiculous for words—I guess I'd have to remind Mom that I was not going out for cheerleading,

nor was I planning to be an extra on some stupid teenage reality show. Besides, after years of wearing uniforms, I had no idea what went with what. I fought back a rising sense of panic and pulled out a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, hoping it would do the trick. I fiddled with my hair, worried that my Mark would show. I settled for wrapping a chunky scarf around my neck, thanking my stars that it was still cold and that the scarf wouldn't attract attention. I glanced at the clock again and frowned. Time to catch the bus.

I walked swiftly to the end of the cul-de-sac, mowing down a granola bar on the way. Nobody else was waiting. I kicked at the pothole in the pavement and shifted my backpack, fervently hoping that the pothole would open up and swallow me before I'd have to board the bus and suffer through this day. The sound of gears grinding uphill warned me I'd have no reprieve, and then the yellow lights came into view.

I boarded the bus like a prisoner walking to the gallows. The minute I stepped on I slunk into the first seat I could find, hoping to avoid all the "new girl" stares I was sure to attract.

"Fresh meat!" Raucous laughter mocked me from the back of the bus. Something hit me in the head—a wad of paper. I sunk even lower into my seat, fiddling with my scarf and praying they'd just ignore me.

"New girl! New girl!"

I looked up at the boy demanding my attention. His long bangs fell into his eyes, which were full of undisguised curiosity and mischief. He shook his hair and darted a look into the back of the bus. His friends shouted, egging him on. I hugged my backpack more tightly and waited with a sinking feeling for him to continue.

"Watch this!" He plopped down on my seat, deliberately crashing into me, and proceeded to belch the alphabet at me. My face burned with embarrassment. The entire bus seemed to be laughing

at my discomfort. I huddled next to the window, trying to make myself as small as possible. Emboldened, the boy snatched my hat and began playing keep-away with his friends. Instinctively, I felt for my scarf, making sure it was still wrapped safely around my neck, its ends tucked away where nobody could get them.

What if I'd made a mistake coming to this school? How would I ever fit in if I couldn't even handle this?

As soon as the bus lurched into its parking spot, I dashed out of my seat, climbing past the boy and into the aisle.

"New girl, wait up!" he called.

I pushed through the door, not bothering to respond to the moronic boy. Dunwoody High was bigger than I thought: two stories of gleaming glass and clean brick, surrounded by massive parking lots and playing fields. Buses were disgorging kids and a steady buzz was already building from the crowd. I squared my shoulders and walked through the set of double doors, willing my stomach to be calm.

A tide of students rushing through the hallways swept me into its current. People jostled about me, not paying me any notice as they bumped and pushed me aside. I looked around and realized with relief that I'd lost the horrible boy from the bus. It would be easy to get lost in the shuffle here, I thought, in a good way. I resisted the temptation to pull out any of the detailed lists and maps my mom had compiled for me—too conspicuous—and instead felt my way to the front office.

"What is it, sweetie? Do you need the nurse?" the bustling woman at the front counter demanded as I crossed the threshold. It was an oasis of quiet compared to the hallway, and I felt wrong interrupting it.

"Um, no, ma'am, I'm just checking in. I'm a new student starting today—Hope Carmichael?"

I braced myself for the knowing look of recognition and curiosity that always came after I announced my name, but the woman gave no sign of having heard of me. Instead she started shuffling through piles of papers. Maybe this wasn't a mistake after all.

"Carmichael . . . Carmichael . . . ah, yes, here it is, Carmichael!" She triumphantly produced a clipped set of pages from the bottom of the pile. "Your mother was in here last week. Quite a handful. Very on top of the details, shall we say." She rolled her eyes at the memory.

"That sounds like her," I said, smiling to myself.

"You probably have your entire schedule already, don't you?" she said, shaking her head disapprovingly. "Your mother wouldn't leave until she had that. All your papers were in order; she made sure of that well in advance. So just run along to your homeroom." She ran her finger down the page in front of her. "Home economics, Mrs. Raburn. Second floor."

As I was swinging my backpack over my shoulder, though, she called out, "No, wait. Note here says there's been a change. Wait over there on the bench, honey, and let me see what this is all about." She bustled away into a back room while I stood, waiting.

She came bustling back, clucking like a mother hen. "I don't know what happened, dear, but you'll just have to make the best of it. Room 107—past the gym."

"What is it?" I said, peering at the slip of paper she handed me.

"Shop, dear. Now run along, and be sure to give Mr. Reynolds that hall pass, or you will get a tardy."

Of course I got lost when I tried to find my locker. The bell had rung, sending everyone scurrying into their classrooms like cockroaches fleeing the sudden light, leaving me to wander until I accidentally found the gym and then, past it, room 107.

I stood outside the door. The smell of grease and tar wafted out

to me, making me want to gag. I rewrapped my scarf, like a ritual, and pushed through the doors.

I walked right in, interrupting the lecturing teacher, who had drawn up the entire shop class in a semicircle around him. My entrance provoked a multitude of stares, hoots, and snickers. I looked around at the students. They all wore dingy denim or canvas aprons, heavily stained with greasy handprints. I was the only girl. I clutched the hall pass in my hand a little tighter, crumpling the paper.

"Can I help you?" Mr. Reynolds turned to me, annoyed that I'd interrupted his class. His eyes bugged out behind the safety glasses he wore, making him look like an overgrown insect.

"Um," I started, uncomfortably frozen in his stare. "Um. I'm a new student assigned to your class. Which is crazy, because I'm not supposed to be in here," I said, unable to stop the nervous chatter from escaping my lips. "I mean, I was supposed to be in home ec. Or AP chemistry now. Not shop."

Mr. Reynolds glowered at me from behind his safety glasses. I realized I'd inadvertently insulted him.

"Not that there's anything wrong with shop," I added lamely, thrusting my hall pass up at him.

He pushed his safety glasses up onto his forehead and read the pass. "Carmichael, eh? Nobody informed me you were joining my class. I take it you have no experience with the mechanical arts?" He pinned me down with a glare as I shook my head.

"You're just in time," he continued. "I was just about to demonstrate the proper use of a blowtorch. You can be my model."

The entire class erupted into catcalls. Over the din I heard someone shout, "New girl!" With a sinking feeling, I peered into the crowd. There, in the back of the class, I spotted the obnoxious boy from my bus.

“Come over here,” Mr. Reynolds commanded, enjoying my discomfort. “What’s the first rule of shop, class?”

“Safety first!” The class roared in unison, adding chest beating and more hooting to the din. Mr. Reynolds grinned and held out a big helmet, beckoning for me to come forward.

I shifted my backpack to one side and stepped to the middle of the semicircle. I stared at the big helmet. It looked like it belonged on a space suit from the 1950s.

“Go on, Miss Carmichael. Demonstrate proper safety technique to the class.” Mr. Reynolds thrust the helmet at me again.

“But, I just—” I looked helplessly at the door.

“C’mon, how hard can it be?” Mr. Reynolds taunted me, tossing the helmet up in the air and catching it deftly with one hand.

I reached for it and he dramatically let it go, leaving me with the helmet’s entire dead weight. It went crashing to the floor. The entire class roared with laughter as I cradled my fingers.

“Oh, is the helmet a little heavy for you?” Mr. Reynolds said solicitously. “I forgot these older models aren’t quite as lightweight. Go ahead, pick it up and put it on.”

I started to protest, but snapped my mouth shut. There was no way I was going to let him intimidate me. I dropped my backpack and bent over to retrieve the helmet. I heaved it up with both hands before trying to force it down over my head. When it got to my ears, I got stuck. I twisted and turned the thing around on my head but only succeeded in mangling my own ears.

“Ow!” I cried as someone banged it down, hard. I could barely see out of the tiny, dark window.

“Next time you might want to open up the helmet,” Mr. Reynolds said drily as he flipped up the top, exposing my head to the foul air of the shop room. “You might want to pay attention to the rest of the safety tips.”

My humiliation complete, he dismissed me. I hurried to the edge of the room, trying to be as inconspicuous as I could be with a giant tin can on top of my head.



From that inauspicious beginning, my day went downhill. The school itself was like a maze, and I was late for every class, instantly earning the ire of every teacher. It turned out that all my classes were wrong—nothing matched the schedule my mom had so carefully prepared for me. By the time the day ended, I was exhausted from having to explain myself to the endless parade of teachers who also had apparently never heard of me. In one class, there wasn't even a desk for me; I'd had to sit on the radiator up against the wall, and I nearly burned myself.

Everywhere I went, I could feel the blatant stares of my curious classmates. I smiled politely at their questions, giving the most minimal answers while I died inside from mortification and wished a hole would open in the floor and swallow me up. I'd almost relished my escape to the bus, hoping to forget my woes in a good book, when someone plopped down uncomfortably close to me.

"New girl! What'cha reading?" Before I could even look up, grubby hands snatched away my book.

It was the same obnoxious boy. He grinned maliciously at me and tossed the book over his shoulder toward the back of the bus. "How was your first day at school?" he asked with mock sincerity. Before I could come up with a snappy comeback, he rumbled my hair like I was a kindergartner and leapt out of my seat to join his laughing friends.

I shrank into my seat and felt my hair, comforting myself with

the security of the scarf wrapped around my neck and steeling myself for the ride home.

I'd barely walked through the door after escaping the bus when there was a knock at the door. I peeked out and saw a short, trim woman with perfectly coifed blonde hair wearing a tracksuit and an apron. She held a covered tray and was rocking impatiently, a fake smile spread across her face.

Mrs. Bibeau, I realized, remembering my mother's note. The neighbor down the street whom Mom had asked to check in on me.

I swung the door open, doing my best to paste a matching smile on my face.

"You must be Hope," Mrs. Bibeau declared, stepping through the door uninvited. "Your mother felt so horrible about having to go on that business trip. I told her not to worry, that I'd be happy to come on over and check on you," she continued, her voice honeyed with a drawl I didn't quite recognize. "I had six children of my own, you know, and we had to move five times as they grew up, so I know what it's like. I thought you might like a little snack after such a big day, so I brought you my famous deviled eggs and pineapple sandwiches." She whipped the tea towel off the tray to reveal a stack big enough for an army. "Why don't we go sit down in the front room?"

Without waiting for me to answer, she steered me into the formal living room and sat us down on the sofa. I could tell my mom didn't use this room very much. The rest of the house was so neat and organized that it looked like it came out of a magazine, like no one really lived in it. But this room held my mom's entire "overflow." I saw Mrs. Bibeau take a mental note of the abandoned stack of Zappos and Amazon boxes, the pile of clothes set aside for charity, and the scattered piano books that surrounded Mom's old upright.

“Mom mentioned you’d be over,” I said politely.

“Oh, it’s no trouble. I just couldn’t stand the thought of your mother worrying.” She made a small *tsk* sound as she brought her attention back to me. “Why she keeps up that crazy schedule of hers, I’ll never know. I remember when you were just a baby and she’d come home at all hours of the night. I thought she was going to drop dead one day, I truly did. Go on now,” she said without stopping for a breath, “have a sandwich.”

I realized with a jolt that Mrs. Bibeau had known us before my kidnapping. Before my parents split up. Suddenly on my guard, I picked up one of the dainty sandwiches and nibbled at it.

Mrs. Bibeau looked at me with curiosity. “We haven’t seen your father in such a long time. Tell me, how is he doing these days?”

I took my time chewing, trying to think of the right thing to say and trying to get over the odd taste of pineapple with cream cheese.

“Okay, I guess. I haven’t talked with him since I left.”

“Really?” Her eyes shone with interest as she seized upon this bit of news. “He always seemed so . . . close to you. So protective. I’m surprised he didn’t call you the moment you walked through the door.”

He can’t, I thought to myself, knowing the details of the court order were best kept to myself.

When I didn’t respond, she tried again. “Billy and I were so sad when your parents split up and you moved away. Such a horrible business. But I suppose you don’t remember any of that, do you?” She leaned in, unable to hide her eagerness.

“No, ma’am,” I said stiffly. “Why don’t I get us some sweet tea?”

I jumped from the sofa and stalked off to the kitchen. I was livid. How dare she pump me for information? There was no way I was

going to give her anything to work with. Didn't she know I wanted to keep my past where it was—safely in the past? I slammed the glasses down on the counter, making a mess as I poured. My hands shaking, I set down the pitcher and took a deep breath.

No matter what, my mother would want me to be polite, I reminded myself. After all, she'd asked Mrs. Bibeau to stop by. The neighbor was doing this as a favor.

When I turned the corner back into the front room, I spied Mrs. Bibeau peeking into boxes and tallying up Mom's recent redecorating changes to discuss at her next bridge club. I swallowed my anger and cleared my throat, giving her time to settle back on the sofa before I came in.

I waited a grudging ten minutes while she continued to press me for more information, peppering her conversation with gossip about our neighbors. Time seemed to drag until finally she took my hints about studying and left me to my own devices, satisfied that she could give a good report to my mother and that she had gotten enough dirt to dish to make the visit worth her while.

I watched her march back up the cul-de-sac, her apron strings flying in the wind. As soon as I was sure she wasn't coming back, I tried my mom's cell phone, ready to bemoan my miserable day. But the phone rolled over directly to her voice mail, so I hung up. I pressed redial, pressing it over and over until I finally gave up, throwing the phone onto the sofa.

The entire day had been a study in frustration. I looked at the book I'd taken out of my backpack—a book I'd already studied two years ago at Holy Innocents—and shook my head, tossing the book aside.

"This is not what was supposed to happen," I pouted to myself out loud. "Not at all."

I was getting ready to recount my various injustices again when a little voice in my head rebuked me. *But nobody looked at you like a freak, did they?*

I shoved my books into my book bag, sullenly acknowledging to myself that I had, indeed, been treated as normally as any new kid in school would be. It dawned on me that while I'd always stood apart at Holy Innocents, my presence had been accepted. I wasn't ignored, nor was I constantly ridiculed and teased. After ten years, I was as much a part of the environment as the dusty chalkboards and smelly gym. At least until the incident that finally drove me to move in with Mom. How long would it take to become invisible in this school?

I sighed. Maybe things would seem better after I'd eaten dinner. I went to the extra freezer tucked away inside our pantry, thinking I'd heat something up. When I lifted the door, row after row of Trader Joe's eggplant parmigiana stared back at me. I dug around inside, but no matter how deeply I dug, I found nothing except eggplant. I let the freezer door fall closed and turned to the pantry shelves. Similar repetitive rows of just a few items stood at military attention on the shelves.

Sheesh. I knew my mom liked structure in her life, but this was a bit much.

I left the pantry behind and walked back through the kitchen. For a second, I thought about calling my mom one last time.

She's not here to fix things for you. The little voice in my head admonished me as I reached for the delivery menus Mom had left behind. *You're going to have to take care of it yourself. Just like you wanted.*



The next morning, after running the gauntlet of the bus ride, instead of going to shop class I went straight to the front office. I waved Mom's vaunted red folder in my hand and demanded to speak with the principal.

"I can't stay in these classes," I asserted, causing the nice lady behind the counter to blanch. "I took some of these when I was a freshman. I can't be stuck in them for a whole semester. My entire schedule is wrong. My mother is going to be very unhappy when she finds out, especially after all the trouble she went through to register me properly."

"We don't need to bother the principal with that, honey." The lady scurried around the counter and snatched the folder from my hands. "Why don't you take a seat here while I see what I can do?"

I parked myself on a bench inside the office and waited, proud of myself for having taken a stand. Behind me was a glass wall veiled by half-opened blinds. I could hear the voices inside. Or voice, I should say. Only one person was talking, and by the stern tone, it sounded like a serious conversation. A quick glance at the nameplate by the door informed me this was the principal's office. I strained harder, trying to hear what had gotten someone in trouble.

The door swung open and a pimply boy in saggy pants shuffled out, trailing his backpack behind him.

"This is your last warning, Ethan," the voice trailed out after him. "I don't want to see you back in here for the rest of the semester."

"I bet Ethan doesn't want to be back, either, by the looks of it," a low voice, smooth as honey, whispered to me conspiratorially.

I jumped in my seat. I'd been so intent on eavesdropping that I hadn't noticed the boy sitting down by me. But now that I had noticed him, I couldn't stop staring.

The boy sprawled out across the bench, somehow managing to fill the small space with his entire body. His outfit was odd, more California surfer boy than Georgia public school: baggy khakis bleached almost white, and a tank topped by a white linen shirt that was definitely out of season. When he shifted his position, his pants stretched across his taut thighs. Underneath all that fabric, he was lean and muscular. He didn't have the shaggy haircut I associated with most boys my age—'Bama Bangs, as my father always called them. His hair was clipped close, almost military in style. It was a contradiction to his laid-back attire. And he was tan. No, tan doesn't do it justice. He was so golden he seemed to glow.

He broke through my daydream with his chuckle, blue eyes sparkling with humor. "I think it was the smoke bombs in the boys' bathroom this time. Van Aken hates that."

"Van Aken?" I asked, aware that I was gawking and feeling strangely stupid as I tried to follow the conversation.

"The principal," he said, cocking his head to one side as he looked me up and down. "You don't look like you belong in the principal's office," he said. I felt myself flush. Flustered, my hand flew to the back of my head, smoothing my long hair over my neck, making sure my scarf was still in place.

The lady from the front desk slipped by us, cracking the door to the principal's office open to whisper something to him as she shoved in some files.

"Michael? Michael Boyd?" The principal's gruff voice cut off any response I might have made.

"That's my cue," the boy said, and with a wink, he uncoiled from the bench and slipped inside the office.

I didn't have to strain to hear their conversation; the principal's voice boomed but Michael wasn't intimidated, talking back to the

principal as if he were an adult. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the woman behind the counter hanging on to their every word.

“What’s this business about you being absent again?”

“I had a written excuse. Surely this is not a problem.”

“Are you just doing this to make me look like a fool, Boyd? Because I won’t be made to look like a fool,” the principal threatened in a thick Georgia drawl.

“Sir, this has nothing to do with you.” Michael’s voice was calm and conciliatory. “I just had other things to do on those days.”

In the pause that followed, I could almost imagine Van Aken scowling. “It’s that damned emancipation. If you had adults who could advise you, we wouldn’t have to deal with all this foolishness.”

“Yet I am emancipated, and I am legally able to make these decisions for myself. I promise you, I have and will continue to make good use of the guidance counselors here to avoid making any foolish mistakes.”

Emancipated? What does that mean? I thought to myself.

“Well, as you say, you are legally able to make these choices for yourself.” I heard a shuffle of papers as the principal apparently signed off on some form. “Just don’t make a habit of it. This is a school, not a country club. I can’t have you messing up my No Child Left Behind performance with a string of unexcused absences, even if you can write your own damn note.”

“Thank you, Mr. Van Aken,” Michael said smoothly.

The door swung open and the counter attendant scrambled to look busy. Michael came out and passed his form to her, pinning her with a wide smile. “I think this should do it, Mrs. Thompson,” he grinned.

“Michael,” she said, nearly blushing with pleasure as she took the paper from his outstretched hand. “You give us all fits with this

emancipation business, don't you?" He laughed and shrugged. "Do me a favor, hon, and bring this new girl to her classes. We had a little mix-up yesterday, but I think we've got it all straightened out." She passed another form across the counter to him.

He scanned it quickly. "Hope?" he asked, flashing me a brilliant smile. "Let me show you to your class."



I still hadn't gotten into home ec, but art was a step up from shop class. All of my other classes seemed to have been magically rearranged, and oddly enough, Michael was in most of them.

"It's because we're both new," he'd replied when I asked him about it halfway through the day. "Nowhere else to go."

"That doesn't sound right," I frowned, nibbling the eraser on my pencil as I settled into the AP environmental science class we now shared.

"How about this, then: we're just smarter than everyone else, so it's natural we'd end up in the same classes." His eyes danced as he took in my puzzlement. "C'mon, Hope, I can't be your stalker. We only just met."

His choice of the term "stalker" stopped me in my tracks. Stalker is only one step away from kidnapper. Was it just a coincidence he'd used that word? What did he know about me? I was surprised—and secretly ashamed—by how easily I'd wrapped myself in the mantle of my father's paranoia, but it didn't stop me from asking my next question.

"Just how new to this school are you?" I demanded, telling myself not to be drawn in by his easy jokes.

"Just off the turnip truck three weeks ago," he smiled, putting a

finger to his lips to quiet me as the teacher stepped to the front of the room.

My day was a whirlwind of new classes, but with Michael as tour guide it wasn't as overwhelming. He seemed to radiate a sense of authority, and the endless torture of being singled out as the new girl miraculously stopped. One look from him and people swallowed their questions, bit off that smart comment before it even left their lips. Everyone gave us a wide berth, and by the time we emerged from our last class, I felt like I was secure in my own little bubble.

Who could have that kind of effect on teenagers? I thought to myself. I peppered him with questions, trying to figure him out.

"Where are you from?"

"Here and there," he said vaguely, not even bothering to hide the grin that stole across his face.

"But where most recently, before Dunwoody?"

"What is this, a crime scene? Relax, Hope—there's nothing fishy about me that you have to uncover."

"If that's true, then where are you from?" I pressed him.

He turned to the locker bay and started twirling a combination absentmindedly while I fumbled with mine, waiting for his answer. "I grew up on a commune in Iowa," he finally said. "I didn't really have parents; the whole community raised me. You know—that whole 'takes a village' thing."

"A commune?" I asked, unsure of what that meant.

"Some called it a commune. Some called it a cult. It doesn't really matter."

"Oh," I said dumbly, trying to take this in. "So what happened to your parents? I mean, your commune?"

"It was shut down by a police raid last year. And because I was

over sixteen, the district attorney gave me the option of staying with the community as they went through social services and the courts, or of being declared an emancipated youth.”

“An ‘emancipated youth?’” The term was starting to make more sense to me as I began to understand his situation.

“For all intents and purposes, I am treated as if I were eighteen. It means I operate on my own. No adults telling me what to do.”

“But how—?”

“I had distant relatives here in Georgia, and apparently there was a bit of money stashed away that my real parents had never told me about. It was against the rules, you see, to have any private property or money on the commune.”

“So your real parents—?” I left the question hanging in the air, afraid of what he might say.

“It was all a big mix-up. They weren’t really brainwashing people or anything. So they have moved on to California. And now I’m here. I live by myself and drive myself to school and every now and then a relative checks in on me.” He flashed me that brilliant smile again and shrugged. “I know it’s an odd story. Probably one of the strangest you’ve heard.”

I laughed to myself. If only he knew.

“I’ve heard stranger things,” I said, knowing exactly how it must have felt to have such an odd upbringing. I was impressed by what he had shared with me. I’d had enough experience in the juvenile legal system to know that to be able to convince a judge to treat you like an adult was no mean feat. It seemed to explain how comfortable he was around everyone, the weird sense of authority that he just seemed to take for granted and to which everyone else succumbed. He’d been through a lot and was on his own. He *had* to come across as in charge.

Michael suddenly stiffened. A group of boys came careening around the corner, crashing into the lockers next to mine. Michael deftly maneuvered me out of the way, somehow managing to get me past the crowd without ever touching me.

“C’mon, let’s get you on the way home.”

Swinging my backpack, I looked over my shoulder at the knot of fighting boys. On the edge of the crowd, I saw my tormentor from the bus. He was not paying attention to the fight. Instead he was looking straight at me, pointing me out to one of his friends. The friend was tall and dark and seemed to be staring after Michael and me with a smirk. He didn’t stop looking even when I started to blush. Instinctively, my hand flew up to my neck, smoothing my hair. I checked behind me, hoping that maybe the smirk was meant for someone else, but nobody else was there. Before Michael could usher me out of the school, I looked back over my shoulder. Both of them were gone.



We wound through the hallways, Michael unerringly charting a path through the chaos and crowds, until we emerged into the low light of the afternoon. I blinked at the light and breathed in the crisp air, for the first time really cherishing the freedom that my new school seemed to promise.

I turned to Michael and drew in my breath. The sinking winter sun was hanging low on the horizon, its glow catching Michael’s hair and making it look like it was kissed by flames.

He caught me staring and grinned.

I flushed, my gaze dropping to my shoes as I fumbled for something to say. “Um, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Why, are you staying after school?”

I looked up, confused by his question. He was looking at me with amusement, almost laughing at my awkwardness. I flushed more deeply before answering him.

“Uh, no. But my bus is over there,” I said, gesturing weakly behind me.

“You prefer spitballs and vomit in a yellow tube of tin to a ride home with me?” he asked, mockingly stabbing himself through the heart. “Carmichael, you really know how to hurt a guy.”

“No!” I said, too eagerly. “I mean, I didn’t know—”

“Right this way,” he said. Winking, he turned on his heel, tossing his car keys in the air and catching them deftly with one hand as he strode away, leaving me to scramble after him.

As we wound our way through the parking lot, he slowed his stride, allowing me to catch up.

“You’re in the teacher’s lot,” I commented, surprised.

“If my life of crime is too much for you, Hope, you can always take the bus,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Oh, no. No judgment here,” I said quickly, thanking the heavens for a ride home.

“Here we go,” he said, pulling up short and then gesturing broadly to the side before making a sweeping bow. “Mademoiselle, your chariot awaits.”

He’d stopped in front of a car so sleek and slung so low to the ground it reminded me of a bullet. That is, it would have reminded me of a bullet if it actually looked as if it had any speed. This thing was decrepit. The panels were a dull gray, except for a few patches where the steel body had been replaced with pieces taken from other cars. The driver’s side mirror was held on by duct tape and a pair of fuzzy dice hung from the rearview mirror.

“Uh, thanks?” I said, unable to suppress the questioning tone.

He swept his long, lean body upright, shielding me from the sun as he shrugged and held out his arms in a gesture of feigned hurt. “Again, Carmichael, I am not picking up the right tone of appreciation here.”

“Oh, I appreciate it. I’m just wondering if this death trap has seat belts.”

He ran his hand along the hood as he walked around to the passenger side. “Old cars didn’t have seat belts. They’re exempted.”

“Really?” I asked, raising my eyebrows.

“C’mon, live a little, Hope. It’s only a few miles.”

I froze, every muscle in my shoulders and back tensing. “How do you know it’s only a few miles?” I asked him sharply. “How do you know where I live?”

He laughed as he swung the passenger door open for me. “Everyone who goes here lives within a few miles. So what do you say? Are you coming?”

Slowly, I felt the tension draining out of my body. How could I be as paranoid as my dad? Of course I lived nearby. It was obvious. Everybody did.

I looked up at Michael standing there waiting for me and felt a pull of longing. He was the kind of guy for whom everything was easy, everything was fun. Hadn’t I always wanted some of that?

“Sure, why not?” I said, giving him what I hoped was my best nonchalant smile as I walked over to his side. I ducked under his arm, uncomfortably aware of how close I was to him, before climbing into the low bucket seat. “But the instant this thing drops a muffler or anything, I’m out of here.”

“Oh ye of little faith,” he laughed, closing the door on my protests.

As we pulled out of the parking lot, I remained hyperaware of how close I was to Michael in the tiny front seat. I could even smell

him—an earthy smell that reminded me of sweet hay and leather. I looked at my hands, which were twitching nervously in my lap, and willed them to be still.

“Left or right?” he asked me as we approached an intersection.

“Left,” I said. Almost simultaneously he flicked the signal, as if he had anticipated my response.

“So what’s your story, Carmichael?”

“Huh?” I darted a glance at him. He was looking at me, amusement on his face.

“It’s not a trick question. You know how I came to the lovely burg of Dunwoody. What brings you here?”

He pulled up to a T stop and signaled for a right turn, not waiting for my confirmation.

“You need to go left,” I said, a note of suspicion in my voice.

“Relax, Hope. It’s a circle drive. I can’t make a wrong turn. And don’t duck the question. Why’d you transfer to Dunwoody High?”

I squirmed in my seat. “It’s a long story.”

“We’ve got some time. Go ahead.”

I sighed. He was persistent, so I might as well get it over with.

“My parents have been separated for a long time. They never really divorced, but they might as well have. My dad always had custody of me because my mom travels a lot for her job. But I decided I wanted to move back with her, so here I am.”

“Just like that? Here you are? Your dad didn’t have anything to say about it?”

I looked at Michael. His eyes seemed full of genuine interest. I found myself wanting to trust him.

“He sort of screwed up. So no, he couldn’t really do anything about it. He isn’t even allowed to talk to me for a while.”

Michael let out a slow whistle. “That had to be some sort of screwup. What did he do, if you don’t mind me asking?”

I looked at my hands, twisting in my lap. How to explain my father without having to go through my whole past?

“Ever since I was really little, he’s been very overprotective of me. He sort of controlled my every move. I guess I managed to deal with it until recently.” I stopped then, unsure if I should continue.

“What happened?” Michael gently prompted me. His voice was soothing and smooth.

“There was a new kid in school. Everyone was fascinated by him—you know, that new kid thing—and for some reason he took an interest in me. I lied to my dad and snuck out of the house so I could meet him at the movies.”

I closed my eyes, remembering how excited I’d been. Danny was the first new kid at Holy Innocents since I’d arrived, the only one at school who didn’t know my story. He was my chance for a real friend, if I didn’t screw it up. I’d been so hopeful, thinking my father would believe my story about staying after school for homework. I was desperate for him to believe it, even though it was so transparent.

“I thought I’d tricked him, but he showed up at the movie theater and made a scene.”

“What kind of scene?” Michael prompted.

I could still remember the feeling of Danny’s fingertips bumping into mine as we burrowed into the bucket of greasy popcorn. The angry stir of the crowd as the crazy man started spouting Bible verses at the top of his voice from the back of the theater. My horror when the crazy man started calling me by name, stalking down the aisle to claim me from my seat and pull me to his waiting car.

My embarrassment at that moment had paled in comparison to how I felt when I had to deal with the ridicule I’d later faced in school. I’d gone from tolerated misfit to ridiculed pariah in the time it took Danny to spread the story around. I couldn’t blame

him. He recognized the opportunity to shoot to super-popularity on the back of someone else's misfortune. It happened all the time in high school. It had just never happened to me.

"It doesn't matter," I said, trying to shrug off the feeling of hopelessness that engulfed me whenever I thought about that time. "He's just super religious and strict and kind of went too far. So that's why I wanted to come back to Atlanta. I just needed some space from my dad."

I blinked my eyes open, and realized with a start that we were parked in front of my house. I turned to Michael, startled.

"How did you—?"

He laughed and flipped up the name tag on my backpack, which I'd neatly placed on the seat between us. "Address on your tag. Easy as pie." He looked down at me, sheepishly. "I didn't want to interrupt you while you were talking. It seemed like whatever you were remembering was pretty important."

I flushed, scolding myself for how suspicious I'd become. I vowed not to let my father's craziness infect me.

"Thanks for the ride, Michael," I said, flashing him a grateful smile.

"My pleasure, Hope," he said, his own grin deepening. He reached across my lap and opened the door for me. Up close, his eyes seemed to dance, shifting into different shades of blue as the sun caught them. I felt my heart give a little *thump*. "See you tomorrow."



When Michael had pulled away from my driveway, Mrs. Bibeau came scurrying out of her house, nearly bursting with questions and waving at me to slow down.

“Lots of homework!” I yelled before closing the door on her. I let my back fall against the door as I clutched my bag to my chest, a silly smile stealing across my face.

Several times that afternoon as I worked on my homework I caught myself humming to myself and smiling. *So silly*, I thought to myself. *Are you really so giddy, just because someone was nice to you?*

But all the trauma of my first day at Dunwoody High seemed far behind me. As I brushed my hair out before bed, I had to admit to myself that I was, indeed, giddy with happiness. Today had turned out exactly like I’d envisioned it when I’d planned my move to Atlanta. No, it was even better. This was what I had hoped for, but I hadn’t dared to acknowledge it, even to myself. Anonymity was one thing. But to have a friend, a real friend—someone who didn’t know my past, someone whose picture of me wasn’t skewed by looking at me through the prism of my abduction—that was another.

And he might even be able to relate, if I shared more of my past with him. After all, he’d said he’d grown up in a cult. I thought almost guiltily of my computer before giving in to the temptation and plopping down in front of it. I launched the search engine and began hunting for any news coverage of a raided cult in Iowa. Nothing. I changed the search terms and switched engines, but still only managed to come up with a bunch of raids in Texas and Utah.

How odd. My curiosity deepened. I wondered if he was telling me the whole truth. Would the fact that there were children involved mean the media had been blocked from covering the story? I frowned, frustrated, as I hammered away at the keys, launching search after search and coming up with nothing.

What had really happened in that raid? I couldn’t very well come right out and ask him, could I? Annoyed, I pushed away

from my desk and went back to my bathroom, grudgingly picking up the brush. As I ran the brush through my hair, I had to admit that the mystery around Michael's story only deepened my fascination with him.

But just what did Michael see when he looked at me? Was it even possible that he could be as intrigued with me as I was with him? Cautiously, almost afraid of what my appraisal would reveal, I set my brush aside and took a hard look at myself in the mirror.

I gathered the excess fabric of my old-fashioned nightgown in a ball in my fist, pulling it behind me to reveal the body that had been swallowed up by billowing folds. I had the long, lean line of a runner. I turned sideways and saw the slight rise of my breasts, the way my waist cut in over delicate hips. I knew my thighs were strong and muscular from my hours of pounding the treadmill. Thunder thighs, I thought, grimacing. I let my fist open and the gown swirled about me again, hiding my body away.

I turned forward and examined my face, leaning in to get close to the mirror. My eyes were a deep chocolate brown and almond shaped; they would have given me an almost exotic look if it hadn't been for the liberal sprinkling of freckles over my high cheekbones. My skin was pale and looked even more so when framed by my long, straight brown hair, which shielded me like a curtain from the unwelcome looks of strangers.

I ran my fingers through my hair and swept it over my shoulders. Sighing, I gathered it up in one hand and turned around, taking a mirror in my other hand.

My Mark.

If I hadn't hated it, if it hadn't symbolized everything that was wrong in my life, I would have thought it beautiful. It seemed to blossom from the base of my skull, the delicate teal markings

spreading out like tendrils. I let my hair fall and traced my finger along the Mark, wondering again what it meant.

“It marks me as a misfit, that’s all,” I sighed to myself, drawing my hair back around me.

I shook my head. There was nothing in the mirror that could explain why someone like Michael Boyd had taken an interest in me today.

“Better not to get your hopes up. He’s probably just being nice to you because he felt sorry for you,” I said like a mantra. But still, in the last moments before sleep stole over me, my thoughts returned to Michael, and I fell asleep with a grin on my face.



three

I soon settled into the comforting anonymity of the large suburban high school. Even after the “new girl” smell had worn off me, Michael stayed close. I guess that since our lockers were right next to each other and since we had almost every class together and were both new, it was only natural that we should become friends. But the delight and surprise I felt every morning when the bus disgorged me and I found him standing on the sidewalk waiting for me remained strong.

I knew he didn’t like me romantically. Why would he? I was plain at best, skinny and not even remotely stylish. So when I started noticing the popular girls circling him, I figured my days were numbered. The worst were the cheerleaders. They were hardly subtle, but I was impressed by their ingenuity. It had all started with Jessica Smythe, the varsity basketball cheer captain.

“Whoopsie!” she’d giggled when she “fell” off the stepladder as she was hanging banners cheering on the basketball team, ingeniously landing right in Michael’s arms.

“Oh, Michael,” she drawled, fanning herself dramatically, then throwing her arms around his shoulders, “you make me feel so tiny when you’ve got me in your arms like this.”

“Maybe you should eat more,” Michael said.

He peeled her arms off of his neck and unceremoniously dumped her back on the floor. She stumbled backwards, taken off guard. “Take a tip from Hope here—she can really pack it in,” Michael said, tilting his head toward me.

A titter ran through the crowd that had quickly assembled to watch the scene. I blushed, horrified that he’d commented on my eating habits. Jessica’s mouth hung open in astonishment as Michael resumed walking.

“C’m on, Hope,” he called behind him.

I ran to catch up, looking over my shoulder at Jessica whom he’d left alone on the floor in the middle of the crowd. She screwed up her face like a spoiled child and stuck her tongue out at me.

Her failure was like a gauntlet thrown to the entire cheerleading squad. Our universe of classes didn’t overlap much, so they had to squeeze their efforts into the periods between classes and before and after school, as well as lunch. But that didn’t stop them from making the most of their meager opportunities. Sometimes I was witness to their efforts; sometimes I just heard about them secondhand. It started with the predictable “meet cute” bumps in the hallway, but rapidly escalated when their efforts proved to no avail. One time, they bullied the Dunwoody Wildcat mascot into giving up his post.

“Miii-chael,” one overly made-up blonde wheedled over our lunch table, holding the oversized, tiger-like head of the mascot’s costume on one jutted hip and pouting while the entire squad backed her up, bouncing bowed and beribboned ponytails up and down in unison. “We need your help! We can’t play this Friday without our mascot—it’s a tradition!”

Michael took the costume from the cheerleader, who looked down at me with a derisive look of triumph. Michael tossed the head in the air as if it were no heavier than a softball and looked down the table.

“Hey, you,” he called to one spectacularly unathletic freshman. The geeky boy looked up from his lunch tray, surprised. “Do you want to be the Wildcat this Friday?”

The geeky boy nodded excitedly, pushing up his glasses.

“Great! Here you go,” Michael said. He tossed the head to the boy, who promptly fell off of his seat with the effort of catching it.

“Problem solved,” Michael said, taking his chair. “Ladies.” They shrieked with horror and swarmed around the boy, trying to reclaim the costume. I stole a glance at Michael. He seemed oblivious to the commotion he’d just caused.

On Valentine’s Day, the entire squad decorated his locker with pink, red, and lacy white hearts, spraying the entire thing with so much perfume that we had to wheeze our way through the locker bay. But it didn’t stop there. The cheerleading squad had sold singing “Cupid-Grams” for charity: a few dollars got you candy, a valentine, and a singing telegram, all delivered to your true love in class. So every hour, a scantily clad cheerleader dressed as Cupid or Venus serenaded an amused Michael, delivering professions of love from one of her teammates. By the end of the day, the Cupids had gotten increasingly hostile as Michael refused to let them sit in his lap or give him a kiss. In our last class, after finding Michael unresponsive, the frustrated messenger had simply dug around in her fake bag of arrows and slapped the other valentines down on everyone’s desk, forgoing any singing. As she pulled the last letter out, her eyes narrowed.

“Who would send you a valentine?” she said acidly as she looked at me, holding the envelope between her fingers as if it were a piece

of used tissue or a dead mouse. “Here.” She let it flutter down to my desk and turned on her heel to stomp out of the room, forgetting to give me my candy or a song.

I looked at the red envelope. *Hope Carmichael, period 6, Mrs. Mormon*, was written in flawless cursive script across the front. I traced the silver ink and realized I didn’t know what Michael’s handwriting looked like.

My heart was thumping. I shot Michael a look, but I couldn’t catch his eye. The class was resuming its conjugations so quickly that I shoved the envelope into my back pocket, saving it for later.

It was burning a hole in my pocket during the entire walk to our lockers and out to Michael’s Charger. We were unusually quiet during the ride home. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I saw Michael darting me curious glances, his eyes deep as the sky as he watched me.

When he stopped in my driveway, he reached across my lap to open the door. I held my breath, every inch of skin tingling with the awareness of how close he was. He paused with one hand on the handle, fixing me with a deep gaze. His eyes seemed to sparkle, shifting between different shades of blue as if they were waves dancing in the sun.

“Aren’t you going to open your valentine?”

I drew a shaky breath and forced a laugh. “Oh, I’m sure it’s nothing. Probably a mistake.”

He arched one eyebrow and grinned, a deep dimple puckering his chin. “Um-hmm. A mistake. Whatever, Carmichael.”

Only then did he lift the latch, allowing me to flee from his car.

I placed the red envelope on my nightstand, where it tempted me throughout the night as I went through the forced march of environmental science, math, literature, and social studies homework. Only after I’d packed up my books and gotten into my pajamas did I allow myself to pick it up.

I sat cross-legged on my bed and drew a deep breath as I stared at it lying in my lap. Finally, I took it in my hand and ran one trembling finger along the script before flipping the envelope over to break the seal. I slid out the card—an old-fashioned lacy heart embossed with roses in shades of cream and pink—and read the verse that had been hand-lettered on the front:

*I will keep you as the apple of the eye,
hide you under the shadow of my wings.*

I flipped over the card. There was no signature, nothing at all. I felt my brows knitting together as I puzzled over the simple lines. They were familiar, but from where? And what did they mean?

I reached under my bed, pulling out my old Bible, and flipped quickly to Psalms. I trailed a finger across the page until I found the verses I sought:

*Keep me as the apple of the eye,
hide me under the shadow of thy wings,*

*From the wicked that oppress me,
from my deadly enemies, who compass me about,*

*They are enclosed in their own fat:
with their mouth they speak proudly.*

*They have now compassed us in our steps:
they have set their eyes bowing down to the earth;*

*Like as a lion that is greedy of his prey,
and as it were a young lion lurking in secret places.*

I stared at the page, bewildered. My secret admirer had sent me

Bible verses. But he'd altered it, turning it from a plea to a promise of protection. Protection from what? The only thing I seemed to need protection from was overzealous cheerleaders.

Was it a warning? My mind raced. If so, whoever had written it had expected me to recognize the verse and go to the Bible to discover the rest. But who at my school would even know I would be familiar enough with the Bible to pluck this verse out, to recognize it and find the words that came after it?

Nobody, the little voice in my head reasoned. *Whoever wrote your card probably saw the quote out of context and simply copied it out, no greater meaning intended.*

But that still left the question of who had sent the card. Could it have been Michael?

I blushed, almost ashamed to admit to myself how much I had wanted it to be from him. But why would he send me a valentine, especially one so weird? No, it couldn't have been from Michael.

Then I felt all the blood drain from my face as a more likely culprit occurred to me: my dad. How had he managed to infiltrate the cheerleaders' Cupid sale and send me a card? Anger and embarrassment rushed through me at the thought of him insinuating himself into my new life, despite all my attempts.

How stupid I was, I thought, crumpling the delicate card in my fist. I threw it across the room, disgusted at my own gullibility. Of course it had been Dad. Who else had the bad habit of tossing Bible verses around to embarrass me? Swallowing my disappointment, I turned off my light and curled up in a little ball in my bed, savoring my misery.

I did the math in my head. A little over two months until my birthday. Then I'd be sixteen. *Sixteen and never been kissed*, I thought bitterly. Kissed? I'd never so much as held hands with anybody. I punched my pillow. Well, at least Michael didn't seem to

like those cheerleaders, I consoled myself. Having to hang out with them would be unbearable. With that last thought to cheer me, I drifted off to sleep.



The next day, Michael kept sending me meaningful looks, which I deliberately ignored. How could I explain my dad and the crazy note he'd sent? Better just to stay away from the whole topic. I managed to avoid a direct conversation during passing time and classes, but once we were at lunch, I couldn't hold him off.

"So, Hope, who was your card from?" he demanded as he steered me toward our usual table, choosing seats well removed from the rest of the crowd.

I did my best to look uninterested and shrugged. "I dunno. It wasn't signed," I said, pushing my mashed potatoes around on my tray.

"Secret admirer, eh?" Michael grinned. "C'mon, what did it say?"

He seemed way too interested in my love life. I looked at him again with suspicion. Could I have been wrong? Could it have been him after all?

I rolled the idea around in my mind as I looked at him across the table. I couldn't deny that he continued to intrigue me. He was dressed again, as always, in one of his odd, monochromatic outfits—the only thing ever changing being the exact shade of white he chose. It was a sort of hippie aesthetic that made sense, I guess, for someone who had grown up in a cult, and I had to admit it looked good on him. The white set off his glowing skin perfectly, and the way the clothes moved about him hinted at his strong, toned body and made him seem even more mysterious.

Don't kid yourself, the voice in my head spoke up.

"What are you eating?" I asked, trying to change the subject. I'd noticed he never ate the cafeteria food. Instead he packed an odd lunch of white, lumpy health food stuff that was possibly the most unappetizing thing I'd ever seen.

"Would you like to try it?" he asked politely, after watching me stare at it with revulsion for what must have been the tenth lunch period in a row. "It's just like tofu. It's really good for you."

"No thanks," I shuddered, pushing the equally disgusting lima beans the lunchroom had served around on my tray. Thank goodness he'd let the whole valentine thing drop so easily. "Did you see Dan Frasier fall asleep today in Science? It was so gross. He actually started to drool." I kept babbling on about Dan's unfortunate lapse of consciousness until I realized I was talking to myself.

"Michael?"

He wasn't paying attention. I followed his gaze. His eyes had drifted to one of the televisions mounted all around the cafeteria. Someone had changed the channel to one of the twenty-four-hour news programs. A constant scroll about refugees and violence in the Middle East crept across the bottom of the screen. Michael set his jaw, crumpling his brown lunch sack in his big, golden hands.

"Michael?" I asked again, waiting for his attention to return.

His reverie broke, and he turned to me with a sheepish grin, though his eyes still looked troubled.

"Sorry, Hope, what was that?"

"Are you interested in current events?" I asked, as politely as I could, trying to hide my annoyance.

His eyes danced with amusement. "You could say that, I guess."

Before I could ask him more, he started wiggling his eyebrows at me, making one of his patented goofy faces. "I was really

just looking for the basketball scores. How 'bout an ice cream sandwich—my treat?”

“I thought you didn’t eat ‘junk,’” I teased him.

“Call it research. I was thinking of writing my biology paper on the eating habits of the American teenage girl. I am in awe of your calorie consumption. I just plan to watch. Maybe capture it on my iPhone.”

I grabbed the crumpled bag out of his hands and threw it in his face, laughing.



I couldn’t figure out why he had picked me, but for the first time ever in my life, I had a friend. And he was a friend with whom everything seemed effortless, a friend with whom I didn’t have to pretend to be dumb, a friend with whom I could talk about important things instead of the latest program on TV. Between that and being practically faceless in my new school, I was in a state of bliss.

But something was going wrong. By the start of my third week in school, Michael seemed distant. He was preoccupied. In every class, he seemed to be sneaking peeks at papers he had tucked inside his books, rapidly shoving them inside his backpack as soon as class was over. Over the course of the week he became increasingly short tempered. By the time Friday rolled around, he was like a caged lion. His entire body was tense, his face looked drawn and tight around the eyes, and even the slightest question from me would cause him to snap.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as the final bell rang and we spilled out toward the locker bays, wondering what I’d done to upset him. I

didn't have much experience with friends, so I was sure it was my fault. "Can you tell me what I've done?"

"It's not about you, Hope. Just leave it alone," he sighed, his frustration palpable as he twirled the combination to his locker.

"Problems, Michael?" A dry voice interrupted our conversation.

We both turned. It was the dark-looking boy who had stared at me during the first week of school. He was surrounded by the same pack of friends who'd been fighting that day. Even the obnoxious boy from the bus was there. Only now, he wasn't the only one paying attention to me. Everyone's eyes were fully focused on us like a pack of wolves surrounding stray sheep.

"Nothing I can't handle, Lucas," Michael said smoothly. I noticed he had placed a protective arm across me. I was suddenly aware of just how tiny I was next to him. His skin felt strangely warm.

"Hmmm. I must have been mistaken, then. You just seem like maybe you need a little *getaway*, you know, to take care of some business." He dripped the words from his mouth, as if he was trying to insinuate something. "What about you, Hope? Cat got your tongue?"

I stared at the boy. Suddenly, my mouth felt like it was full of sawdust. I gulped nervously, my hand unconsciously drifting to my neck to cover my Mark before I answered.

"How do you know my name?"

He laughed with a cold and detached sort of amusement. "It's a public school, Hope. Everybody knows everything. We know all about you."

A feeling of dread washed over me. Did they? My body felt hot and sweaty, but I resisted the urge to reach up and wipe my brow, not wanting them to see how nervous they were making me.

Michael scoffed, his blue eyes flashing with anger. "Leave us alone, Lucas. There's nothing to know and nothing to do."

“We’ll see about that,” Lucas purred. His dark eyes shimmered with barely contained excitement. “You know me. I always seem to find some sort of trouble to make.”

“Make it somewhere else,” Michael retorted, grabbing my wrist roughly as he slammed his locker shut. “Come on, Hope, let’s go.”

He charged through the crowd of boys, pulling me in his wake. They barely seemed to give way; I was painfully aware of the press of their bodies as we cut through.

I didn’t realize I was holding my breath until we were already out on the sidewalk.

“How do you know him?” I asked in a shaky voice, struggling to keep up with Michael.

“I don’t,” he said curtly, staring straight ahead and continuing to drag me along relentlessly.

“But he made it sound like—”

“Hope, I told you before, just leave it alone!” His voice had an edge to it that was a clear warning. I swallowed my questions and followed meekly as he led me toward the buses.

“Michael, we’re going the wrong way; your car—”

He drew up short. I stumbled right into him, spilling my book bag out onto the sidewalk. He threw down my arm, bent over, and furiously began to shove things back into the bag.

“You’re taking the bus today,” he said without looking at me.

I rubbed the spot where he had gripped my wrist; it already ached. “But, Michael, why are you—”

“Hope, I can’t babysit you every minute!” he practically yelled at me as he stood up. Out of the corner of my eye, groups of students came to a standstill to watch. “I have stuff to do. Here, take your bag.” He shoved it roughly at me. “Now get on your bus,” he said, pushing me toward the narrow door.

And before I could say anything, he stalked off toward the student parking lot.

I stood frozen, painfully aware of the whispers and stares. Slowly, I turned toward the bus and climbed the first few steps. As I did, I heard someone calling after me in a mocking tone.

“Have a nice weekend, Hope!”

I looked over my shoulder just in time to see the bus doors close on Lucas, a look of smug satisfaction on his face.



Back in my room, I threw myself on my bed, alternating between burying my face in and then punching the heap of pillows piled at the headboard.

I ran through my memories of the last few weeks and could find nothing, *nothing* that I had done that could have even remotely set off a reasonable human being.

I sat bolt upright in my bed.

How dare he treat you like that? said the voice inside my head.

Seriously, who did he think he was, all Mr. Nice and then *wham!* Dropping me like a bad smell just because he was in a pissy mood?

I kicked my sneakers off and let them fly across the room. They landed with a satisfying *thump!* against my closet door.

And how could he have lied to me that he didn't know Lucas? Clearly, the two had a history. But how could they have when Michael was new to the school, too? Why couldn't he just tell me the truth?

“Aarrgh!” I yelled in frustration, falling back on my bed.

I heard a soft knock at my door.

“Hope, may I come in?”

I groaned and rolled over. I had forgotten that my mom was already home. Consultant hours were unpredictable. Sometimes, like today, she'd show up in the middle of the day. I'd managed to get by her without too much conversation when I got off the bus, but apparently her Mom Radar was on alert.

"Sure, Mom," I answered, straightening out the bedcovers and fluffing the pillows.

She slid in through the door, a look of mild alarm spreading across her face as she scanned for damage. "Is everything okay? It sounded like you fell."

"Just me throwing my shoes, Mom. Sorry about that."

She frowned slightly and tilted her head, her eyebrows forming a distinct question mark.

I sighed. I'd already learned that she was hard to hide things from. I chalked it up to her MBA and consultant training.

"Michael was just being a jerk today, that's all."

I watched her carefully choose her words as she sat down on the bed and plucked at some imaginary lint. "Michael, that new boy with whom you've become friends?"

"Yes, though the way he's been acting this week you'd think I'd set his pet bunnies on fire or something. He's been so moody, Mom! And he won't tell me what I did. It's so unfair."

"What makes you think it's something you did?" Mom asked me, looking me straight in the eye. "Did you do something wrong, Hope?"

"No!" I protested, clutching one of the pillows tight to my chest. "I've racked my brain, Mom. All I can think of—"

I stopped, not even wanting to say it out loud.

"Go on," Mom urged.

". . . is that he's tired of me. I mean, who am I, right? Just some hick girl from Alabama. He's probably gotten bored of me."

My body sagged, my head drooping to my chest as I thought about this possibility. It seemed to be the only thing that made sense.

Mom gently lifted my chin so she could look me in the eye. "Hope, did Michael try to avoid you? Did he move his seat in class, or try to eat with someone else at lunch?"

"No," I admitted grudgingly.

"Have you gotten too clingy, maybe thinking of him as more than a friend?"

"No!" I protested, my cheeks burning. "It's not like that, Mom! We're just friends."

I saw her lips twitch.

"It's not funny!" I shouted, burying my face in another pillow.

"Oh, Hope, honey, I'm not laughing at you, I promise. It just seems to me that you are awfully unfamiliar with teenage boys. They go through their moods and then some, just like the rest of us do. And if I understand the situation as you've described it, he might have an awful lot of pressure on him, having to fend for himself. From what you say, it doesn't seem to me like he is trying to end your friendship. Whatever it is, he'll get over it. Just give him his space. You'll see; when Monday rolls around, I bet everything will be back to normal."

I sat up again, looking at her skeptically.

"Really?"

"Really."

"But why'd he have to be so mean, Mom? It makes me so *angry*!"

"I don't know, Hopie," she said, using her old nickname for me while she smoothed out my hair. "But when I get angry I like to take it out on my rowing machine." She glanced across my room to the treadmill she'd bought, sitting forlorn and forgotten in the corner, strewn with rejected clothing. "You haven't even touched your treadmill. It's been weeks," she noted in a neutral tone.

I felt my chin rise defensively. "I've been busy."

She skewered me with one of her looks again. "Hope, I know you love to run. Is there something about this treadmill you don't like? It still has the tags dangling from it. I could return it if you aren't going to use it."

I fought against myself but couldn't keep from blurting my response. "It's just, just . . . the only reason I ran on a treadmill is Dad wouldn't let me run outside. Ever."

The air was still as she considered this new information, her face a carefully composed mask.

"What do you mean?"

I didn't want to add to my father's long list of apparent parenting failures, but there was no way I could get out of this one.

"He thought it was too dangerous for me to be alone. So I couldn't even walk myself to school, let alone go outside for a run."

For a split second I saw beneath her composed veneer, saw the shock and anger she felt toward my dad. But just as quickly, it was gone. I knew then that I could never tell her about the Cupid-Gram Dad had sent me—she would seriously lose it. So I stayed silent until she stood up, brushed off her slacks, and moved quietly to the door. She made one parting shot as she left me to brood in my room.

"Well, nothing's stopping you now."



I stretched out on the front steps, eyeing the little cul-de-sac with a bit of trepidation. Of course, my mother was right. It was unfortunate that Dad had kept me under lock and key. But that was all over now, and I hadn't even taken advantage of the fact.

"No time like the present," I muttered to myself, starting up my favorite running mix on my iPod as I left the steps.

A thousand little things underscored how different it was to be outside instead of tied to a machine. The feel of pavement, unforgiving beneath my feet. The sharp air that prickled, icy, as I breathed it in. The drop in temperature when I came under the shade of a stand of tall pines. The wind slicing through my fleece.

At first, with every step I imagined I was squashing Michael's face with my foot. But eventually I gave myself to the music, my footfalls synching with the rhythm. Slowly, my stress melted away as I focused on my breathing. By the time I turned the corner off the main loop, I was singing along with my iPod at full voice, doing little hand jive moves when the spirit took me, as if the road was my own private stage.

I had never felt so free.

I suppose I looked funny to any neighbors who happened to look out their window. But I didn't care. I was running, really running, without some stupid program on a machine to tell me how fast or how long to run.

I kept running past the familiar streets and into others I'd never been on. They all looked comfortingly the same. What was that phrase Mom had used once? Safe as houses. Everybody here is safe as houses.

But no sooner had I thought this than I began to get a funny feeling that I was not alone.

I slowed down to a trot to look over my shoulder, but I could see nothing.

Unsettled, I started running again, darting a backwards glance every few yards. The safe little neighborhood suddenly felt threatening, the dark windows in the empty houses glaring at me like angry eyes. I picked up the pace.

I had made it back to the main loop, and now the sun was hanging low in the February sky. *Only a little ways left to go*, I thought to

myself, trying to forget that the last bit went through an unfinished part of the neighborhood that had been left open as a preserve.

My unease deepened as I strode forward. The road was curvy here, swallowed at every bend by spindly pines that swayed in the stiff wind. My pace became more cautious. It was starting to hurt to breathe in the cold air, and my side was aching. I didn't want to stop. I wanted to get home and out of this cold, but my body was not cooperating. I dragged myself over to the curb and bent over, wheezing while I tried to work the knot out of my side.

Everything around me was silent. I couldn't even hear any approaching cars. Everyone else seemed tucked away inside their warm houses. I was alone, in the woods.

But I still felt that I wasn't quite alone. The feeling grew stronger and stronger, and even as I regained my breath, I could feel my heart thumping faster and faster.

Don't look up, the little voice in my head whispered.

And suddenly there was a rush of a thousand wings all about me. I grabbed my head, covering my ears against the shrieking and cawing that seemed everywhere. All I could see was a wall of black—I was spinning and turning, and everywhere black shapes darted in and out until I lost my balance and fell against the curb.

I huddled in a ball, pulling my hat tighter and squeezing my eyes shut against the confusion. Then, just as suddenly, everything went quiet once again. All I could hear was my ragged breath until a voice rang out.

"Hope, is that you?"

I opened one eye to peek. A flood of relief washed over me, quickly chased by irritation. "Michael!" I called out, my voice shaky. "What are you doing here?"

He was dressed in a white hooded sweatshirt and running tights.

I felt my heart rate slow as he made his way toward me, a look of concern clouding his face. My feeling of irritation grew—I didn't need anybody's help. Couldn't my own body cooperate instead of acting like it was glad to see him?

"Did you see that?" he asked, gesturing behind him toward the horizon.

"What?"

"That murder of crows. It just swarmed out of nowhere, like an enormous black cloud," he continued, his suspicious eyes scanning the sky.

"Murder? Crows?" I repeated, still not sure what had happened. "Oh."

He was directly over me. I looked up to see him reaching one gloved hand down to me. I paused before letting him pull me up, trying not to think too much about the way the tights highlighted every muscle in his legs.

"I must have scared them," I said, dusting off my legs and letting my fingers probe the sensitive spot where I'd landed on the curb. I winced. I was going to get a big bruise, for sure.

"You were *in* that?" he asked, his eyes narrowing. In the waning light, the blue of his irises seemed to fade into a steely gray.

I shrugged. "I guess. No big deal." I tried to be nonchalant about it. I didn't want him to know how freaked out I'd been. I stepped forward, gingerly. "Though it was kind of weird. I didn't hear anything at all and then, boom, they were everywhere."

He looked up at the sky, speculating.

"I'm walking you home," he said, his chin set.

"Suit yourself," I harrumphed, pretending not to care, but annoyed at him for his unexplained about-face.

We set out, him slowing his pace to match me as I hobbled

along. We walked in silence, my resentment hanging around us like the heavy air of a Georgia summer.

“What are you even doing here?” I asked, my voice accusing, when I couldn’t take the silence any longer. “This isn’t even close to your house. And I thought you had things to do.”

He didn’t rise to the bait; his eyes remained steadfastly focused on the road ahead. “I took care of them for now.” There was a long pause. “And I needed a run to clear my head. I didn’t plan to find you.”

His words stung. “Well, don’t put yourself out, then.” The retort flew out of my mouth before I had time to think.

He sighed as we trudged up the last hill, the silence resettling uncomfortably around us. At the top of my cul-de-sac, he pulled up short. The sun had fully set now, and under the light shed by the corner streetlamp his blond hair seemed to shine with a halo.

He took a step, reaching out as if to touch me, but then he dropped his hand, as if he thought better of it.

“It must be hard running with all that hair in your face,” he said softly.

I refused to answer him, but couldn’t stop my hands from sneaking up to wrap my hair safely round my neck.

He stood there awkwardly, waiting for me for what seemed like forever. Finally, he sighed.

“I guess I’ll see you around,” he said, turning away.

I stood in the little puddle of light, watching him run away until he was just a little speck of white, gliding away in the dark. As I turned toward my house, I noticed something under my shoe.

A feather. It shone dark as coal under the glow of the streetlight.

I picked it up, surprised I hadn’t noticed it stuck to my shoe before. I twirled it around in my fingers. It spanned the length of my hand and was stiffer than I imagined a feather should be. And

the odor it gave off was odd: like sulfur, or the smell of electricity building up before a storm.

You shouldn't touch it. It's not clean.

Shrugging at the nagging voice in my head, I threw the feather into the gutter and went in to nurse my wounds along with my hurt pride.