

BREATHLESS

SCOTT PRUSSING

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Scott Prussing Publishing
1027 Felspar St.
Suite 2
San Diego, CA 92109

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PROLOGUE

Eighteen years ago

Twilight was gathering when Judy Nyland stumbled out of the trees onto the narrow hiking trail, her right hand clutching her neck. Thin ribbons of drying blood streaked the back of her hand like a badly done spider web tattoo. Her long blond hair was tangled, and her normally pretty face bore a dazed, confused look as she fought to maintain her balance. At the moment, she appeared much older than her twenty-five years.

Even in the shade, the air was still warm, but the woods seemed strangely silent. What was she doing out here? She winced when she turned her head to search the path—god, her neck hurt. Pulling her hand from her throat, she stared at her bloodstained palm. Was that really her hand, covered with blood? Gingerly, she touched her neck and felt a wet round hole slightly smaller than the tip of her finger. How the hell had that happened? She glanced down at her stomach, only recently beginning to swell with her second child. Thankfully, the front of her light blue T-shirt was unmarked.

“Judy!” her older sister Janet shouted, hurrying down the trail. “You had me so worried.” Her eyes widened at the sight of Judy’s bloody hand. “What happened?” Janet gently grabbed her sister’s wrist and began examining her palm.

“It’s not my hand.” Judy tilted her head and pushed her hair aside. “It’s this.”

Janet examined the wound. “Doesn’t look too bad,” she comforted. “The bleeding’s mostly stopped. We’d better get you to a doctor though, just in case. You might need a shot or something. What happened? Did you get poked by a branch?”

Judy frowned. “I don’t think so... I don’t remember.”

A faint image began taking shape in her brain. She struggled to bring it into focus. It was a man. Very pale and very thin. His eyes bored into hers, mesmerizing her. She knew she should run, that he meant her ill, but she was frozen, rooted to the ground. As he moved closer, his lips peeled back, revealing a single yellow fang.

Judy grabbed her sister’s arm with both hands. “Oh my god! I think I was bitten by a vampire. A one-fanged vampire.”

“Uhhh...sure. A vampire,” Janet said a bit more sarcastically than she meant to. “With only one fang. Makes perfect sense. And much more likely than being poked by a sharp branch, for sure.”

Judy touched her neck again, confused. What the hell *had* happened? Were her hormones running amok? Her husband had been teasing her about watching too many vampire shows. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to remember. It had been so clear just a moment ago....

1. UNHAPPY FAMILIES

Happy families are all alike, Leesa Nyland had read somewhere, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. That statement certainly applied to her family, Leesa thought—it was hard to imagine another family anywhere that had been ruined by a mom who claimed she had been bitten by a one-fanged vampire.

As the memories came flooding back to her, Leesa's fingers began to twirl in her long blond hair the way they often did when she became anxious or upset.

She was three when she first realized her mom was different from other moms. Strangely, the first thing she remembered noticing was the tomato juice. Her mom drank nothing but the thick red juice, downing a big glass with every meal. Eventually, she even began putting it on her cereal instead of milk. Later, she began avoiding direct sunlight, claiming the sun hurt her skin. For a while, Leesa enjoyed the game they made of it, pretending they were furry little moles darting from shadow to shadow, but by the time Leesa was six her mom had stopped going outside except on the cloudiest days, doing what errands she could at night and leaving the rest to Leesa's dad.

The eccentric behavior was bad enough, but her mom's increasingly anxious and depressed ramblings eventually drove her dad away. "Why couldn't I have been bitten by a real vampire?" her mom would complain endlessly. She was convinced the one-fanged version was a crippled, sterile creature, unable to impart true vampire powers. One day, her dad simply did not come home from work, and Leesa had not seen him since. She wondered if she was part of the reason for his leaving. She had been born missing a small piece of bone in her lower right leg, making the limb an inch shorter than the other and causing her foot to twist slightly inward, resulting in a noticeable limp. Maybe her dad didn't want a gimpy daughter any more than he wanted a deranged wife. A year after her father left, her mom uprooted the family, moving them from New Jersey to San Diego. Thank God for her big brother Bradley, or her childhood would have been intolerable.

She forced the memories from her mind. She wasn't surprised they had returned now, while she sat on a hard black vinyl chair in the noisy baggage claim area of Connecticut's Bradley International Airport—how like Bradley to get an airport named after him, she thought laughingly—waiting for her Aunt Janet to pick her up. This was her first time in Connecticut, the place where her mom had supposedly been bitten by the one-fanged vampire. No wonder the story had come flooding back to her here, triggering the memories. Her light-hearted musing about Bradley and the airport quickly turned into a pang of loss, and her hand moved reflexively toward her purse and the carefully folded piece of white paper she carried with her everywhere. Catching herself, she stayed her hand—she didn't need to take the paper out to know every word printed on it.

Suddenly unable to sit still, she pushed herself to her feet and limped toward the exit. The glass doors slid open, and she stepped out onto the sidewalk, squinting in the bright sunlight. The air was hot and damp, and in just a few minutes her dark green cotton shirt began clinging to her skin.

So this is Connecticut, she thought. This was so not what she had been picturing. Where were the brooding gray New England skies she'd been imagining? There was nothing remotely mysterious, gloomy or dangerous here. No way could she picture this as a place where someone could be attacked by a vampire, one fang or not. Nor did it seem like the kind of place where a beloved older brother could

suddenly disappear. But that was exactly what had happened.

Her eyes moistened as she thought of Bradley. Until he left for college, he had been her best friend. She knew how lucky she was. Plenty of her classmates had brothers who wanted nothing to do with their little sisters; or worse, who teased them incessantly. Not Bradley, though. When she was four, he began walking with her every day, until she was able to make it to a neighborhood park more than a mile away. At the park, Bradley would push her on the swings or spin her on the merry-go-round as a reward for her efforts. Walking with her brother and playing in the park were among her best childhood memories.

The heat was beginning to bother her, so she turned and limped back into the comfortable coolness inside, settling into the same seat she had vacated a few minutes before.

She remembered the day Bradley left for college like it was yesterday. She had hugged him on the sidewalk while the cab driver loaded his luggage into the trunk. Phone calls, texts and email would keep them in close touch, he promised. Leesa told him she understood, that above everything she wanted him to be happy, that it was time for him to make his own life, though she secretly wondered why he had chosen to go all the way to Weston College, in Connecticut of all places.

Bradley had been true to his word, calling or writing every day without fail. In the middle of his sophomore year he told her about a girl he had met, someone very special. Leesa was so happy for him, but not long after that things began to change. His calls and emails became shorter, and he began skipping a day now and then. She let it slide. She was fine with it—until the day she received that fateful email.

No longer able to stop herself, she reached into her purse and pulled out the printed copy of his final message, unfolding it with exquisite care and laying it open on her lap. As her eyes moved down the paper, she didn't know if she was reading or simply reciting the words from memory.

Dear Sis, This is the hardest letter I've ever had to write. There's something I need to do. I have to go away, and I don't know if I'll ever be coming back. Her eyes began to mist. Why couldn't he have been more specific? Why the secrecy? She could have handled his going away, if she thought he was going somewhere to make a new life with his girlfriend, far from the turmoil of his youth. The message hadn't ended there, though. Not by a long shot. *Please don't try to find me. Get on with your life in California. Forget about me.* As if! She still couldn't believe he had said that. Forget about him? No way. She had to find him. She just had to.

Sitting there alone in the airport, she read his final words. *Always remember, pumpkin, your big brother loves you.* A single tear wobbled down her cheek.

The sound of her name rescued her from the painful memory.

"Leesa, honey," her Aunt Janet called warmly, her heels clicking on the hard floor as she hurried toward her niece. "It's so good to see you."

Leesa carefully folded the paper and placed it back in her bag. She wiped the tear from her cheek and pasted a smile onto her face as she stood up to greet her aunt. "Hi, Aunt Janet," she said as she moved into her aunt's waiting arms.

For a moment, as Aunt Janet tightened the hug, Leesa felt three years old again, wrapped in the safety of her mother's embrace, before everything began to change. As she returned her aunt's hug and soaked up her loving warmth, Leesa's pasted-on smile slowly became real.

2. PLUMP AND LUMPY

It was love at first sight—all right, technically second sight, Leesa admitted to herself, since she had met her aunt once when Aunt Janet and Uncle Roger spent a week in San Diego almost five years before. Not much time, especially in the life of a thirteen-year-old girl who had been a bit too busy—and a bit too frightened of forming any real attachments—to allow herself to bond with two virtual strangers. But ever since, after seeing how little Mom’s disability check left after the basic necessities were taken care of, Aunt Janet had sent both Leesa and Bradley a hundred dollars every month “just between us, for those little things young people need now and then.”

This was the woman her mother could have been, Leesa thought as she studied her aunt out of the corner of her eye while a skycap piled her four worn black suitcases onto his cart. The woman her mother could have been and should have been, if not for that crazy day in the woods so long ago. Aunt Janet looked like her mom should have looked, sounded like her mom should have sounded, and felt like her mom should have felt.

Aunt Janet was forty-eight, pretty in a plain kind of way, and slightly plump and lumpy like an aunt ought to be. Though four years older than Leesa’s mom, Aunt Janet somehow looked younger, despite skin more weathered than the pale, almost flawless complexion of her sun-shunning younger sister. It was her sparkling eyes that did it, Leesa decided, and her warm smile, so different from her mom’s anxious frown and glassy stare. Her dark blond hair was cut medium short, styled casually with loose curls framing a round face whose most striking feature was a pair of bright blue eyes almost identical to the ones Leesa saw reflected in her mirror every day.

It was not Aunt Janet’s inviting appearance that drew Leesa so strongly, though. What pulled her in was her aunt’s obvious care and concern, so different from the aloofness Leesa was accustomed to. “How was your flight?” “You must be tired.” “Are you hungry? We can stop somewhere for a quick bite if you want.” Leesa could tell Aunt Janet was not just making small talk, but that she genuinely cared. And better yet, she actually *listened* to Leesa’s replies.

After a forty-five minute drive south from the airport, Aunt Janet guided her blue Ford Taurus off the interstate.

“We’re almost there,” she said as she turned left at the top of the exit ramp and crossed back over the freeway. “Most of Meriden is behind us. Our house is this way, though, just up the road a bit.”

The “road” turned out to be a rolling two-lane highway flanked by tall oak and ash trees with an occasional house or store tucked among them. Aunt Janet followed it for about a mile before turning onto a street marked Dursley Lane.

“If you keep going straight, it’s less than ten miles to Weston,” Aunt Janet explained. “We’ll never be far away when you want to come by for a home-cooked meal.”

The mention of food made Leesa’s stomach rumble. “I’ll be taking you up on that, Aunt Janet, for sure.”

They turned into a long driveway in front of a pale yellow Colonial house set way back from the street. Four maples shaded the front lawn, and a row of pointy spruce trees lined the side of the house, looking almost like a row of giant dark green candles. Small gardens filled with bright red and white

impatiens circled each of the maples, and an even more colorful garden fronted the house.

“Home, sweet home,” Aunt Janet said.

“It’s beautiful.”

Leesa climbed out of the car and breathed deeply of the spruce-scented air. The smell reminded her of the pine freshener her mom used to spray in their house. This was way better, though.

“Your Uncle Roger should be home any time now,” Aunt Janet said. “In the meantime, you can meet Max.”

Leesa looked at her aunt. Who the heck was Max? She didn’t have any cousins, as far as she knew. Why hadn’t anyone told her that her aunt and uncle had a kid?

She followed her aunt up the brick steps to the front door. As soon as Aunt Janet pushed her key into the lock, Leesa heard a series of loud clicks clattering toward the door. Aunt Janet pushed the door open and was greeted by the joyful face of a panting golden retriever. She slipped in through the doorway and scratched the dog behind its ears while Leesa stepped inside behind her.

“Meet Max,” Aunt Janet said, holding the dog’s head toward Leesa.

Leesa petted the top of Max’s head. His fur was soft and smooth.

“He really likes his chest scratched, like this.” Aunt Janet bent over and demonstrated. Max’s fluffy tail began wagging like crazy. “Go ahead. Give him a couple of minutes of this and he’ll be your friend forever.”

Leesa dropped to one knee on the hardwood floor and draped her right arm around the top of Max’s thick neck. With her left hand, she began scratching his furry chest. Max arched his head up and his tail continued wagging furiously. Leesa rubbed his chest even more vigorously. She’d never had a dog growing up, but she had always wanted one. Or at least a cat. The only pet she’d ever had was a goldfish she won at a school fair when she was eight, and the poor fish had died in less than a week.

She continued rubbing Max’s soft fur, thrilled with the way her trip was starting out. Aunt Janet was great, and now Max. Leesa just knew she was going to like her Uncle Roger as well.

3. POT ROAST AND PIE

When Uncle Roger smiled, the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant distance of his ears. Especially when he had such cause to smile as the delicious dinner he was currently devouring with unrestrained gusto. Except for his smile, Leesa thought Uncle Roger quite ordinary looking—square-jawed, nose a bit too broad, brown eyes and close-cropped black hair flecked with gray. He was a large man whose size would have been intimidating but for his smile. She had never seen a smile quite so wide, but guessed the smile stretching her own lips might be nearly as broad. Dinner was that good. And still to come was the fresh-baked apple pie from Uncle Roger's bakery. The cinnamon-laced aroma had been tantalizing her since her uncle had set it in the oven to stay warm.

Aided by a Crock-Pot that had been tenderizing a pot roast all day, Aunt Janet had whipped up the fabulous meal in less than thirty minutes. Buttery sweet potatoes and tender green beans sautéed with shallots and pine nuts accompanied the pot roast, which was quite simply the most tender piece of meat Leesa had ever tasted. The succulent beef seemed almost to melt in her mouth, and the gravy was to die for. It was the best dinner she had ever eaten, and she hadn't even tasted Uncle Roger's pie yet.

"Are you excited about college?" Uncle Roger asked.

"Yeah, I can't wait to get started. But I'm kinda nervous, too."

"What classes will you be taking?" Aunt Janet asked.

"Psychology, physics, English lit and math," Leesa replied, avoiding any mention of the controversial fifth class she had signed up for. She saw no point in roiling the waters by bringing that up. She also decided not to risk spoiling dinner by asking about Bradley, despite her impatience to start learning everything she could about her brother's time here in Connecticut. There would be time enough for that later.

She finished her pot roast in silence, enjoying every bite, then soaked up the last bit of gravy on her plate with a piece of homemade bread.

"Dinner was totally amazing, Aunt Janet. I may be dropping by for a home-cooked meal way more than you bargained for."

"Not a chance, dear. You're welcome to eat here every night if you want."

Leesa grinned. "That 'freshman fifteen' would turn into a 'terrible thirty' pretty quick if I ate like this every night." Her smile grew wider as she watched Uncle Roger drop a huge scoop of vanilla ice cream beside a slice of pie seemingly the size of a small shoebox. "But it might be worth it," she added when Uncle Roger set the pie in front of her.

The ice cream was already beginning to melt into the pie when she pushed her fork through the flaky crust, cutting off a healthy bite. The aroma alone was probably worth five pounds, she thought as she closed her mouth around the forkful. The buttery crust needed no chewing, and the tangy apple slices required little more. She closed her eyes in exquisite pleasure, savoring the delicious combination of flavors, textures and temperatures.

"Mmmmm... You must sell a million of these, Uncle Roger. It's amazing."

Uncle Roger's smile beamed again. "Not quite. But apple *is* our best seller, especially this time of year." He set a piece in front of his wife and began cutting a healthy slice for himself. "Enjoy. There's plenty more where that came from."

“Ha! Don’t even think that. I’d probably explode.” Leesa rubbed her stomach. “But I’d explode happy,” she admitted with a smile.

Later, after the table had been cleared and the dishes crammed into the dishwasher, Leesa sat with her aunt and uncle in their cozy living room, rocking slowly on a surprisingly comfortable oak rocking chair. Max sat beside the chair, cleverly positioning himself so Leesa could pet the top of his head while she rocked. Uncle Roger reclined on a plump easy chair, a cup of steaming coffee on the small wooden table next to him, while Aunt Janet enjoyed a glass of red wine on the three-cushioned floral couch. “Peaceful, Easy Feeling” from the Eagles greatest hits CD played softly in the background, and a bright fire popped and crackled in the stone fireplace. With the heat from the fire radiating across her face and Max’s soft fur under her fingertips, Leesa could not remember ever feeling quite so at home and relaxed. She didn’t want to spoil the feeling, but she couldn’t wait any longer to ask about Bradley.

“Did Bradley visit you guys much?”

“Every couple of weeks, I’d guess,” Aunt Janet replied. “Usually for dinner.”

“We saw a fair amount of him the first couple of months, less often as he settled in on campus and began making friends,” Uncle Roger added. “Still pretty regularly after that, for his first year at least. Not so much the second.”

Leesa stopped rocking, balancing instead on the front of the chair.

“Did he ever say why? Why he stopped coming so much, I mean?”

“Not to me,” Aunt Janet said. She turned toward her husband. “Roger?”

“Nope. I had the feeling his girlfriend was keeping him pretty busy. Not so unusual for a college boy, you know.”

Leesa remembered how Bradley’s calls and messages began tapering off after the girlfriend appeared. She wished she had asked him more about her when she had the chance.

“Did you ever meet her?”

Aunt Janet shook her head. “No, never. I invited him to bring her for dinner several times, but they never made it. I don’t know why.”

“Did he tell you much about her, Leesa?” Uncle Roger asked. “I know how fond of you he was. He talked about you all the time.”

Leesa felt warm and sad at the same time, thinking of Bradley sitting in this very room talking proudly about her. “No,” she said after a moment. “Only that he’d met someone special, but never anything specific. I wish I’d asked. I don’t even know her name.”

“Edwina,” Aunt Janet said. “He told us that much.”

Leesa leaned back and began to rock. Edwina. At least she had a name now. She had no idea if Edwina had anything to do with Bradley’s going away, but she had nothing else to go on, and the timing made it possible, if not likely. “Did he say anything else about her?”

Uncle Roger rubbed his chin. “She was a Weston student, I know that. I remember Bradley mentioning them being in a class together. And he called her a local, so I guess she grew up somewhere around here.”

“I remember him saying she was exotic,” Aunt Janet added. “I had asked him if she was pretty, and I distinctly remember him replying with that word. Exotic. I don’t know what he meant by it, though.”

“He was clearly quite taken with her,” Uncle Roger said. “But the longer he was with her, the less

he spoke of her, which seemed kind of odd.”

“Have you heard anything at all from him, Leesa?” Aunt Janet asked.

“Nothing,” Leesa said. “Not since an email saying he was going away.” *I don't know if I'll ever be coming back.* She didn't see any use in sharing that part with her aunt and uncle. There was nothing they could do about it anyway.

She stood up and paced in front of the fire, frustrated by how little they all knew about what had been going on with Bradley, but it hadn't seemed that important at the time. Not until he suddenly vanished, and by then it was too late. *Please don't try to find me... Forget about me.* Why would he say that? What did it all mean? She stared into the fire, but there were no answers in the crackling flames.

4. A PILE OF ASHES

It was a pleasure to burn. Rave smiled as he watched the tiny blue flames dance from his fingertips—the outward manifestation of the magical inner fire coursing through his body. The heat shone dimly through the bronze skin of his face, making his long, dark copper-colored hair seem to shimmer in the shadows of the woods. The reason for the flames crouched behind a gnarled oak some fifty yards away—a vampire, stealthily watching humans at play in a grassy park below.

This vampire was apparently young and foolish, having chosen a spot that hid it from the humans but left its back exposed. The vampire should have known better. The humans posed no threat—any danger would come from elsewhere.

Chancing upon so careless a vampire was unusual. Still, Rave remained cautious, for even a foolish vampire was a foe to be reckoned with. Vampires were strong, impossibly strong, stronger even than volkaanes. Only a fool would underestimate a vampire, careless or not, and Rave was no fool.

As the heat within him grew, he tasted a sharpness in his fire he hadn't felt in many years. Magical energies in the air and in the earth were combining—if they grew strong enough, they would produce a phenomenon called *Destiratu*. And *Destiratu* meant trouble. Somehow, in a way he didn't fully understand and none of his elders could fully explain, *Destiratu* roused the killing ire in volkaane and vampire alike. Hunger and bloodlust raged, becoming uncontrollable for many.

Rave had lived through only one such period, more than a hundred years ago now, but he remembered it clearly. He had feasted on four vampires that year, but he had lost several friends to the creatures as well. Humans suffered the most from the increased vampire bloodlust, but they remained blessedly unaware. Few knew or believed in the existence of vampires. Almost none knew of volkaanes. Such blissful ignorance might not be possible in this modern age, and that could be a problem for all three races.

Now was not the time for such thoughts, though. A tall blond girl had entered the park and was heading across the field. Moving quickly despite a noticeable limp, she was already more than halfway to the woods. The determined pace of her stride and the direction of her path made him certain she planned to take the hiking trail in front of her—a trail that would lead her much too close to the lurking vampire.

Leesa was enjoying her walk. After spending most of yesterday cooped up in a plane, it felt good to stretch her muscles and exercise her leg. The large county park was relatively empty. Off to her left, a group of young men kicked a ball in front of a white soccer goal, and another small gathering of people sat at rustic picnic tables near the edge of the field. Thin white smoke wafted up from one of the grills, and the succulent smell of slow-roasting meat made Leesa's mouth begin to water.

Beyond the open field, she spotted several trails leading up into the woods, just as her aunt had promised. She angled across the grass toward one of the paths and headed into the trees. The trail was wide enough for three people to walk abreast, and the dirt surface was packed hard, making walking easy. It sloped upward, but not steeply enough to affect her pace.

The woods were beautiful—much more lush than what she was used to in San Diego. Young saplings and leafy underbrush flanked the path, while just a bit farther from the trail tall oak and ash trees spread a green canopy that blocked out all but the tiniest pieces of gray sky. The air felt at least five

degrees cooler in the shade. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves, and unseen birds whistled busily from the higher branches. Leesa wished she knew what they were saying to one another.

She hadn't gone far when she was suddenly struck by the feeling she was not alone. Something briefly rustled the bushes off to her left, but she couldn't see anything through all the growth. Probably a squirrel or a rabbit, she thought. Whatever it was, it was likely more frightened of her than she was of it.

She had gone less than a dozen steps when the rustling sounded again. She whipped her head around and thought she saw a dark shadow flow swiftly through the trees, but it was gone before she could be sure. Her heartbeat quickened. Even the birds had fallen silent, as if they shared her fear. She tried to calm herself, but could not shake the feeling of being watched. Someone—or something—was out there.

Her mom's story came flooding back to her, making her heart race. She had to force herself to breathe. What was going on? This was so not like her, to be scared by a mere noise in the woods. It was broad daylight, for god sakes. She wondered if her fear came simply because she was in Connecticut, home to childhood tales of one-fanged vampires. Maybe New England *was* as spooky a place as she had imagined.

Rave crept from his hiding place, his gaze fixed upon the vampire. The creature flashed to a spot closer to the trail, making almost no sound. Rave followed, moving just as quickly, and even more silently. From his new vantage point, he could no longer see the girl, but his keen ears heard her footsteps drawing closer. There was little time left. He was going to have to act more quickly than he would have liked. Haste could be dangerous, but he had no choice. With luck, the vampire's attention would be totally focused on the girl.

The vampire darted through the trees once more, perhaps overeager, for it made a bit more noise than before. The sound of the girl's footsteps stopped. Had she heard the vampire's approach? Or had she simply sensed that something was amiss? The woods had grown silent. He needed to act now.

Drawing a deep breath, Rave launched himself forward. The vampire barely had time to turn before Rave was upon it, locking his muscular limbs around its chill body and pressing his open mouth over its nose and lips. The raging heat of his magical fire sucked the life force from the creature, funneling it into Rave's lungs. The vampire writhed in agony as the scorching heat burned to the core of its body, robbing the beast of its immense strength before it could twist free of Rave's grasp. In less than a minute, it was over. Rave let the vampire's limp corpse drop to the ground.

Rave remained crouched over the body, hidden in the lowest, thickest layer of underbrush. Enhanced by his vanquished foe's energy, the blue flames danced more brightly now, forming a flickering blue halo around his fingers. He closed his fists to hide the glow.

Except for a slightly unnatural twist to its torso, the vampire looked unharmed, almost as though sleeping. But even now, the heat from Rave's fire continued to consume the beast from the inside out. He watched the vampire's pallid face slowly grow lighter, becoming almost translucent, until with a sudden, barely audible crackling sound, the creature shimmered and crumpled to a pile of gray and white ash.

Leesa heard a soft thud, like two bodies crashing together, followed by a very brief thrashing in the undergrowth. She wondered if two animals were fighting. If so, why did neither make a sound? She had heard a coyote take a cat once back in San Diego, and the screeching had been horrific. Whatever this was, it had come from the same direction she'd last heard the rustling. She listened closely, ready to turn

and run, but heard nothing else. Gradually, she felt her muscles relax and her breathing slow. The birds were singing again, and she chided herself for her fears. She was going to have to be a lot braver than this if she was going to find her brother.

Gathering her courage, she left the trail and moved warily into the bushes, gently pushing aside the leafy branches that grew more thick and tangled the farther she got from the path. Every few steps, she stopped to listen, but heard nothing amiss. Less than fifty feet from the trail, she found a place where the undergrowth was crushed and broken. An oblong pile of gray and white ash filled the center of the damaged area. Someone had sure picked a strange spot to build a fire. Were these ashes somehow linked to the sounds that had frightened her? Edging closer, she knelt beside the pile and carefully stretched her hand toward it. Her fingers were within inches of the ashes when she gasped and yanked her hand back—the ashes were still warm! Her heartbeat spiked again as she shot to her feet and looked quickly around, listening intently and straining to see through the underbrush. She detected no sign of danger, but could not shake her fear. Something was going on here she didn't understand. Being brave was one thing, but being foolish was quite another. She gave a final quick glance at the ashes, then scrambled out of the trees and hurried back down the path. All thoughts of completing her hike were gone. Right now, she wanted only to get out of these woods.

5. RAIN, RAIN DON'T GO AWAY

The day broke gray and dull. The sun was only a rumor, hidden behind a thick, glowering blanket of low clouds.

“The weather certainly has turned,” Aunt Janet said, tugging her jacket closed as she and Leesa watched Uncle Roger load Leesa’s luggage into the back of his white Ford Expedition.

Leesa gazed up at the leaden sky. “I love it.”

The air even smelled different, she thought, sharper in some way, imbued with a faint chemical odor. “It’s been nothing but sun the last six months back home. I’ve been looking forward to some real New England weather.” She wondered if she was beginning to take after her mom, with this craving for clouds and foul weather. Maybe she had some of her mom’s “vampire” blood in her after all.

“Let’s see if you’re still singing that same tune come January or February,” Uncle Roger said with a laugh.

Leesa laughed with him. “You’re right, I’ll probably be begging for some sun by then.”

They climbed into the car, Uncle Roger and Aunt Janet up front, Leesa in back. Max was already on the backseat, waiting. As soon as Leesa settled in, he rested his muzzle on her thigh. Smiling, Leesa stroked the top of his head. She hadn’t mentioned yesterday’s incident in the woods to her aunt and uncle, and now, sitting here in the car with the two of them and Max, the whole thing seemed a bit foolish. She was glad she hadn’t said anything.

Her uncle backed out of the long driveway, and a moment later they were cruising east on Highway 66, toward Middletown and Weston College. A misty drizzle began to float down from the sodden sky, dotting the windows with tiny droplets. Nothing the locals would bother to call rain, she guessed, but she smiled nonetheless. It was still more rain than she had seen in months. With any luck, the sagging sky would send them even more.

Alas, the sky’s promise proved false, and within a few minutes the drizzle ended. At least the clouds remained threatening. Leesa lowered her window half way to smell the damp air. Max seemed to think it was a fine idea, because he leaned across her lap and stuck his nose out the opening.

“How are you feeling?” Aunt Janet asked. “Excited? Nervous?”

“A little of both,” Leesa admitted. “It feels like that yummy omelet you made for breakfast is doing flip-flops in my stomach.”

“Should have had pie,” Uncle Roger joked. “Pie is your friend, I always say.”

“You may be right, Uncle Roger,” Leesa said, thinking back to the scrumptious peach pie he had brought home last night.

“It’s normal to be a bit nervous,” Aunt Janet said. “But you’re going to do great. I know it.”

“I hope so, Aunt Janet.”

“You will. Look how well you did in high school. College is just like high school, except the kids are older.”

“Ugh! I hope it’s not like high school. Some of my classes last year were sooo boring. I’m looking forward to something a little more interesting.” Especially that one class, Leesa thought, but refrained from saying anything out loud.

As much as she enjoyed the atmosphere and scenery along Highway 66—called Washington Street here in Middletown—she was unprepared for her first sight of the Weston campus. She had seen

plenty of pictures on the college's website, but none of them came anywhere close to the real thing. Beautiful, imposing, inspiring and intimidating were some of the words that popped into her mind.

Behind a long, black wrought iron fence, a perfectly manicured hillside dotted with stout maples stretched like a green lake up to a brick building a few hundred feet away. A row of fluted white columns gave the building a stately, monumental look. Off to the left, a row of beautiful old houses lined a narrow road flanking the hillside. In the distance, Leesa could see a tall white church spire, its needle-like point etched sharply against the dark sky.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Aunt Janet asked.

"It's amazing," Leesa managed to reply. "Just amazing."

"Wait until the leaves turn. It's breathtaking."

Leesa tried to imagine the trees ablaze in fiery colors. She was certain the real thing would far exceed the pictures she had seen.

"I can't wait."

Uncle Roger swung the Expedition through a wide stone gateway onto the campus. He drove slowly along the shady lanes, past impressive old brick and stone buildings, some fronted with white columns, others faced with arched, Gothic-style windows. A few sat close to the road; others were farther away, behind lush green lawns and thick hedges. And everywhere, there were trees. And more trees.

Finally, Uncle Roger eased to a stop in front of a rectangular four-story building. Twisting vines of dark green ivy covered the weathered brick to the top of the first-floor windows. The words Ohmsford Hall were etched into a white triangular frieze above the front entrance. Leesa felt a small lump in her throat. Her dormitory. Her new home.

Uncle Roger switched off the engine and they all got out of the car.

As if to celebrate Leesa's arrival, the gray sky squeezed out another round of drizzle, slightly heavier than before. Uncle Roger seemed to take no notice of the mild rain, unhurriedly lifting Leesa's suitcases from the back and setting them down on the sidewalk. Max didn't seem to mind the drizzle, either as he scampered up and down the narrow strip of grass between the street and sidewalk. Leesa smiled and raised her face to the sky, letting the tiny droplets dampen her cheeks. When she opened her eyes, she found her aunt and uncle watching her.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly. "You have no idea how good this feels."

"Don't worry, dear," Aunt Janet said. "Take all the time you want."

"You two don't need to get wet just because I want to feel the rain," Leesa said.

Uncle Roger grinned and held out one of his wide palms. "Wet? I'd hardly call this wet." He glanced up at the darkening sky. "Might be fixin' to be wet soon, though. We should probably get your stuff inside."

Aunt Janet opened the back door of the Expedition. "In you go, boy," she said to Max. "I doubt you're allowed inside the dorm."

Max jumped up onto the seat. Leesa limped over to the open door and leaned inside. She rubbed her hand along Max's soft back and kissed the top of his head. "Bye, Max. I'll see you soon, I promise."

Uncle Roger grabbed the two biggest suitcases, lifting them easily in his thick hands and heading up the wide cement walkway. Aunt Janet took the medium-sized bag and followed her husband. Leesa limped along behind them, pulling her wheeled carry-on bag.

They stopped in front of one of the dorm's two elevators. Leesa pushed the up button, which glowed yellow.

“We didn’t have an elevator in my dorm back in college,” Uncle Roger said. “Fourth floor, I was. Three years trudging up and down those stairs a dozen times a day. Finally got smart my senior year and moved down to the second floor.” He patted his rotund midsection. “Kept me trim, though.”

“I’m on the fourth floor, too,” Leesa said. “Room 402.”

A loud ding heralded the elevator’s arrival. Uncle Roger went in first, dropping the two big suitcases to the floor with a thud. Leesa and Aunt Janet followed him in. Leesa pressed the “4” button and the doors slid shut.

Room 402 was across the hallway and a few steps down from the elevator. Convenient, Leesa thought as she retrieved her key from her pocket. Fingers trembling with excitement, she fumbled awkwardly for a few seconds before getting it into the lock. She grinned sheepishly at her aunt and uncle before twisting the key and pushing the door open.

The room was pretty much what she had expected. A bit on the smallish side—though no smaller than her bedroom back home—and furnished in a simple, practical way. Cut into the far wall, a very cool Gothic-style, arched window with square lead frames let the meager gray daylight filter into the room. Leesa flipped the light switch beside the door and a square glass fixture in the middle of the ceiling came on, brightening the room. Her nose detected the faint scent of bleach from a recent cleaning.

To her right, a twin bed rested against the pale brown wall—Band-Aid brown, she would hear it disparagingly called by another girl a few days later. Beyond the bed were two mirrored sliding closet doors. The opposite side of the room contained a four-drawer oak dresser and a pair of blue vinyl chairs flanking a small round table. Mounted in the center of the wall above the table was a flat screen television.

Leesa limped across the tan industrial carpet and deposited her bag and purse on the bed. Aunt Janet and Uncle Roger followed her inside and set Leesa’s suitcases down in the center of the floor.

“Small, yet somehow not cozy,” Uncle Roger said, smiling.

“Oh, shush,” Aunt Janet said. “It just needs a few personal touches, that’s all.”

“I know it’s kinda small,” Leesa said, “but I wanted my own room.” She didn’t tell them she had spent a fair amount of time debating whether to choose a single room or one of the more elaborately furnished suites. She didn’t make friends very easily and a suite would have allowed her to get to know another girl or two quickly, which would have been nice. She hoped the dining room and the communal bathroom down the hall would provide enough opportunity to meet the other girls, even for someone as shy as she was. In the end, she decided her plans might benefit from the privacy of a single room.

“Do you want any help unpacking?” Aunt Janet asked.

“No, thanks, Aunt Janet, I’ll be fine. There’s no orientation stuff until later this afternoon, so I’ve got plenty of time to get settled.”

“Okay,” Aunt Janet said. “Give us a call if you need anything.”

Uncle Roger pulled a hundred-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to Leesa. “For any incidentals you might need.”

Leesa hugged her aunt and uncle and walked them to the elevator, where she hugged Aunt Janet one more time. Once the doors closed, she headed back into her room. She pulled the door shut behind her and let out a big sigh. She couldn’t believe she was finally here.

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