

Chapter Eight

High School Horrors

Freshman Year

I struggle to concentrate as Ms. Raine describes our first lab experiment for her biology class. Though I try to take notes, I cannot stop staring at the back of Tyler's head. His thick, shoulder-length hair beckons to be touched. He sits so close to me that I can smell his shampoo. I close my eyes and imagine my face in the nape of his neck, breathing in the scent of his skin and the hint of cigarette smoke clinging to his T-shirt.

"The substance most important to sustaining life, Jodee, can you tell us what it is?" Ms. Raine asks, jolting me out of my romantic fog.

"What? Oh, yes . . . um, what was the question?"

"The stuff of life dear, what is it?" she repeats.

"Water, it's got to be water, right?"

"Good. And what's the chemical symbol?"

"That's easy," I reply. " H_2O ."

Though I smile and pretend to be interested, my mind drifts once more, this time to my favorite movie that I saw over summer break, *Grease* with John Travolta and Olivia Newton John. I fantasize that I am Sandy, the character portrayed by Olivia Newton John. The new girl at school, Sandy is initially rejected by the cool crowd, who think she's nothing but a goody two-shoes. Even more heartbreaking, she discovers that Danny, the kind, sweet boy who she fell in love with over the summer, is their leader. He turns his back on her when school starts because he doesn't want his friends to know that he cares about someone they've deemed unacceptable. Eventually, Sandy not only wins the affection and respect of Danny's clique, but some of the girls in her class give her a makeover that transforms her into the epitome of cool. In the end, she gets Danny back, and becomes the most popular girl in her graduating class.

As I drift deeper into my daydream, Ms. Raine begins to sound like the adults in those old Charlie Brown cartoons, as if she's talking through a kazoo. Though I try to focus on biology, it's no use. The pull of the fantasy is too strong. It also protects me from facing an unpleasant reality. A lot of the kids I went to junior high with have also matriculated to Samuels. I thought I could handle it. I was naïve. I underestimated the enemy. I didn't realize that overcoming the bias of a handful of freshmen would be this tough. It also never occurred to me how much influence they could have on my new classmates.

Biology period is the worst, with A.J., Greg, Emily, and several others from Northwest sitting just a few feet away. Each afternoon, they gang up on me, riding me about what I'm wearing or how I've done my hair. They snicker behind my back, sharing jokes with the rest of the class about how I refused to dissect the pig in Mr. Blatt's class, or how I went crying to the principal over a silly "snowball fight." I feel as if I'm trapped inside a stereo that's playing a broken record . . .

"Blanco, you suck."

"Don't be nice to *her*. She's gross. We hated her so much in junior high."

"Too bad you weren't a miscarriage."

If I don't find a way to stop them from publicly belittling me, their disdain will become contagious. I'll carry the stigma of being the class misfit again. At first, I make an effort

to reason with them. “Come on, you guys, we’re not in junior high anymore. Let’s start fresh.”

“Fat chance,” they proclaim, rolling their eyes conspiratorially.

I know cruelty is currency in high school. It can buy power and popularity. My former classmates sense my desperation and amuse themselves by taking advantage of it. They need me. They’re just as scared as I am about making friends at Samuels. They have to prove to the in-crowd here that they’ve got what it takes. I’m their best hope. All they have to do is make everyone see me as the outcast. Then they can say to the popular group, “We have a mutual interest. None of us likes Jodee.” It confirms their social status. If I weren’t so furious about it, I’d laugh.

“Hey, Tyler, I bet Jodee’s never necked with anyone,” A.J. remarks, smirking. “Why don’t you give ugly little Ms. Priss a mercy kiss?”

“I’d rather suck on garbage,” he replies, proud of his clever comeback. Clark, the class jokester and Tyler’s best friend, turns around and gives his buddy a high-five.

I don’t understand. Tyler and I ride the same school bus. He’s never been unkind to me before. He ignores me if his friends are around, but that’s because he’s protecting his reputation. It wouldn’t be cool for him to be seen talking with someone who’s not a member of his clique. But when we’re alone, he’s really nice. I suppose I better get used to this. All the freshmen are jockeying for position now. This is especially true for people like Tyler, who have never known anything but popularity. The idea of going through high school without it is their greatest fear. If I can just keep my old classmates from Northwest at bay, I still stand a chance with the new kids.

“That’s enough, Tyler,” Ms. Raine declares, fixing him with an angry stare. “The next high-five I see, you’ll sit in detention.”

I sink into my desk. Here we go again. So much for believing I could make a fresh start at Samuels. The hardest thing about being an outcast isn’t the love you don’t receive. It’s the love you long to give that nobody wants. After a while, it backs up into your system like stagnate water and turns toxic, poisoning your spirit. When this happens, you don’t have many choices available. You can become a bitter loner who goes through life being pissed off at the world; you can fester with rage until one day you murder your classmates. Or, you can find another outlet for your love, where it will be appreciated and maybe even returned.

Samuels has a nationally recognized special education program. Most of these students are victims of Down’s syndrome and other developmental disorders. They often stop to chat with me in between classes, to show me a picture they’ve drawn, or to sing a new song they’ve learned. They sense my loneliness the way a blind person can hear sounds the rest of us can barely detect. They possess a grace of spirit and clarity of feeling, for they are unencumbered by petty desires and shallow concerns.

Every day, the special ed kids endure abuse from many of the other students. They are mercilessly teased and called names such as “retard,” “spastic,” and “head case.” These children are so innocent that they often don’t understand the maliciousness of the insults. They smile in response, and offer their assailants a piece of chewing gum in return, thrilled that one of the “big kids” spoke to them. Many of the teachers turn a deaf ear. It reminds me of Holy Ascension and Marianne, only this is much worse. Holy Ascension is operated by nuns and priests who practice compassion. At Samuels, apathy is the norm. Most of the teachers here arrive when they have to and leave as soon as they can, doing

the bare minimum. The special ed instructors seem to care more, but it doesn't make them any braver. They watch as their students are degraded day after day, but they rarely fight back. Nobody at Samuels likes to make waves. *Boy, am I ever in the wrong environment.*

Ms. Raine is still going on about H₂O. I feel a little guilty. She puts so much effort into trying to excite her students. But let's face it, water just isn't a provocative subject. The entire class is bored stiff. I wish she would switch topics. If my classmates grow too restless, they will pick on me to pass the time. *Come on, Ms. Raine. Pull something out of a hat.* No luck. In her own mind, she's on a roll. "There are a wide variety of pollutants in our water, as you can see from the photos on page one hundred of your textbooks . . ." I keep glancing at the clock on the wall. Only five more minutes before the day is over. Finally, the bell rings. As I gather my books, I hear Tyler and Clark playfully arguing about which one of them Jacklyn, the hottest girl in school, would rather go out with. Petite with dark brown eyes and beautiful auburn hair, Jacklyn tries to look and act older than she is. She wears mini-skirts, high-heeled shoes, and jeans so tight you wonder how she can breathe. Jacklyn's not only popular with the boys because of how she looks. She has a reputation for liking the backseats of cars.

"I'll bet you ten bucks that she won't be able to resist me," Tyler declares, pulling a comb out of his back pocket and running it through his hair.

"You're on," Clark replies, slapping Tyler on the back. I listen to their exchange, wishing it were me they were competing for.

As I make my way to the bus, I see Roger, one of my friends in the special ed program, stop Mark, the captain of the football team. Roger is severely challenged. His mental capacity is that of an eight year old. He also suffers from a disorder that has left him hairless—he doesn't even have eyelashes or eyebrows. His metabolism is impaired, too, causing him to be significantly overweight, and his muscles are soft and underdeveloped. Though he can speak in short, simple sentences, he has a lisp that makes him difficult to understand. Roger adores bright colors, and Mark's blue and gold football uniform fascinates him. All he wants to do is touch it. As Mark approaches, Roger reaches out his hand, and gingerly places his finger on the Samuels' Hawks' emblem. Mark is repulsed. "Get away from me, you stupid retard," he shouts. Roger doesn't know what to make of Mark's angry outburst. Confused, he turns away, frightened that he made one of the "big kids" mad.

I go to Roger. "Roger, don't feel bad," I tell him, trying to soothe his hurt feelings. Roger looks at me with his bright blue eyes and smiles from ear to ear.

I now realize what Dorothy means in the final scene from *The Wizard of Oz*, when she says that if you have to look beyond your own front door for your heart's desire, perhaps it was never there to begin with. Would I like to be part of the popular crowd? Yes, desperately. Do I long to go on a date with Tyler and be invited to all the cool parties? More than words can say. But maybe those things aren't so important. Maybe, like Dorothy, I should embrace the love right in front of me and not search for some elusive dream that never mattered in the first place.

"Roger, will you take me to your teacher, Ms. O'Shea?"

"Yeah, yeah," Roger replies, taking my hand. As we make our way to his homeroom, I think about what my dad has always told me about having a purpose in life—something

that makes you want to get up in the morning no matter what. I ask Ms. O'Shea if she would let me volunteer during my daily study hall.

"Please, Ms. O'Shea? I promise it won't affect my grades. I really want to work with the special ed kids," I tell her.

A petite, red-haired woman in her early forties, Ms. O'Shea eyes me with skepticism.

"Are you sure you're up for this? They're great kids, but they can wear you down," she responds.

"Yes, I'm positive. Give me a chance."

"That's just the problem. These children need consistency. I've had volunteers before.

They come for a few weeks, but then lose interest. I don't want that to happen again."

"It won't, Ms. O'Shea. Please?"

"All right, you can join us during your study hall. But just remember that it's a commitment and I'm counting on you to honor it."

As the semester progresses, I start to settle into a routine. I spend a lot of time with Noreen, my friend from speech class. My mom took us to Marshall Field's to get our faces professionally made up at the Lancôme counter. I couldn't believe the difference a little blush and eyeliner could make.

"We look amazing!" I proclaim, blotting my lips on a piece of tissue paper. "Can you believe it's really us?"

"I know, it's like we're different people," Noreen replies, unable to stop looking at our reflections in the mirror. "I can't wait for my mom to see."

"Me, too."

That night after mom and I drop off Noreen, I'm more pensive than usual. Concerned, mom asks if anything's wrong. "Jodee, you're awfully quiet. Did you get bothered again on the bus? I found spitballs in your hairbrush."

"What are you doing, going through my private things?"

"You left your hairbrush in the bathroom, so I decided to clean it. That's when I saw the spitballs. Honey, we've been through this before. If you're getting picked on again, daddy and I want to know."

"No, it's okay, mom. Really. As long as I keep to myself on the bus, it's not so bad. And things at Samuels are a lot better than they were at Northwest. Noreen is my friend, and I love working with the special ed kids. Speech team is also a lot of fun. I guess I'm just a little tired."

Mom isn't reassured, but I don't feel like talking tonight. After giving her a hug, I go upstairs and play my favorite Styx album on the stereo. As lead singer Dennis DeYoung's voice fills my room, I stretch out on the bed and close my eyes. The music flows through me, sparking my imagination. It's my version of Walter Mitty, but instead of being the central character in historic moments, I pop up as the leader of every clique at school; the star in a collage of my own mini-movies.

From jocks to junkies, I traverse Samuels' social gamut. There I am in my skimpy blue-and-gold cheerleader outfit, bouncing up and down with the rest of the girls on my squad (we are all a size six), rooting for the football team. My makeup is flawless and I smell of lilacs. Though I am jumping around like a kangaroo and doing cartwheels and hitch kicks, I do not have a drop of perspiration anywhere on my soft, creamy skin. I am head cheerleader, the grand dame of Samuels' cool crowd. We drive our daddies' sports cars and buy designer jeans with our mothers' American Express cards. We're hip, we're

now, we're wow! And we never, ever sweat. *Go, Hawks, go! Put on a show! Let them know you're the mightiest foe. Go, Hawks. Raaaah!* As the fans whistle and applaud, the quarterback blows me a kiss from the field. My heart swoons. I shake my pom poms in response.

Cut to the girl's john. The smell of marijuana hangs in the air. I take another hit off my joint, pulling the smoke deep into my lungs. I stifle a cough. Whew, that was close. A real "head" (short for pothead), never chokes when he tokes. That's a rule. If the other girls find out I'm a closet cougher, it could mean the end of my status as Samuels' Goddess of Ganja. Unless, of course, I was a "jead" (a jock or a female athlete who's also a "head"). According to paragraph 8, section 3A. of *The Official Code Book of Rules and Regulations for Samuels' Cliques*, "it is acceptable for a 'jead' to cough and/or hiccup during or after marijuana inhalation, provided that said 'jead' is in active training for her respective sport."

And the rock group Styx continues to sing, their lyrics pounding in my ears . . .

Fade to the school cafeteria. Move in on a close-up of me at a table with the "brains," straight A students high on the fumes of their own egos. Clad in preppie attire, my hair pinned back in a bun, I am engaged in an animated discussion with my fellow thinkers about quadratic equations. As brilliant deductions come tumbling out of my perfectly shaped lips, the school's top chemistry student, who's sitting across from me, sighs, fogging the lens of his glasses. We all giggle, for in our kingdom, fogging one's glasses is a sign of arousal, like when the Coneheads on *Saturday Night Live* rub cones. Tonight we're all going to the science lab to hear an extra-credit lecture on the mating rituals of the flightless birds of Australia. Tomorrow, I will be leading a sacred bonding ritual in which we stand outside the remedial reading room, pound our chests loudly and chant over and over again, "we're smart, you're not, we're excellent, you're snot."

Cut to the parking lot. A silent, lonely group of misfits are leaning against the bike rack. I am standing beside them. We are connected by our separateness. Our heads are down, we are trying our best to be invisible. Someone just spit at us as they walked past. No matter. This is our destiny. We are the outcasts, the nerds, the Eugenies from *Grease* the Carries of Stephen King novels, the kindred spirits of the Elephant Man. I ask Noreen if any spit got on her clothes. She says no, but I can see a small drop of saliva clinging to her button. I don't say anything. Better not to tell her.

As I lay in bed, my fantasies twisting and contorting into a montage of strange images flashing in my mind like silent movies, I realize that I am crying. Though I try to pretend none of it means anything to me, the truth is that like every other freshman at Samuels, I, too, care deeply about fitting in. I want to be a part of a group. Though the mature part of me knows that cliques are shallow and silly, and that I'm begging for trouble, the normal teen in me longs for acceptance. But which group? The brains are too conceited and cerebral. The "heads" and the "jeads" are into drugs. I've already been an outcast. They would be fine, except they're too busy hiding from everyone else to ever find each other. The cool crowd is all that's left. The cheerleaders and the future homecoming queens. Funny how my last choice is everyone else's first.

"Honey, can you turn that music down? Daddy and I can barely hear ourselves think."

"Sorry, mom. Right away."

I turn off the stereo and crawl into bed. As I snuggle into the sheets, burying my nose in my pillow, I wonder what's going to happen to me over the next four years. Mom says I

worry too much, and that I should take one day at a time. I hate it when she talks to me in platitudes. I know she means well, but it bugs me. I am so tense, and it's only high school. If I'm suffering from stress now, what will my life be like when I have a career and real responsibilities? My head is spinning. Damn it. I'm never going to be able to sleep. The clock now reads 2:00 A.M. I have to get up in four hours. Tomorrow is going to be a bear. It's hard enough to get through the day when I'm well rested, let alone when I'm worn out from lack of sleep. Finally, I doze off. The last thing I remember before conking out is Dara's face from Morgan Hills. Why on earth would she pop into my head?

The next morning, I awaken stiff and irritable with a feeling that something's wrong. While I go outside to wait for the school bus, this weird sense of foreboding intensifies. "I'm just being silly," I tell myself. This is what happens when I don't get enough shuteye.

Riding the bus continues to be an ordeal. I still wait on the corner with all the kids from my neighborhood. Since the incident with Sam hitting my knee with the softball, they've lightened up a little. They don't punish me physically anymore. Now, they're just mean. I don't talk to them much, but I still like Jason. He and I are friendly. I don't blame him for anything. He's been picked on so much himself that I can hardly expect him to stick up for someone else. I don't think he's as strong as me. I'm also civil to Reese. Despite everything Reese did to me, I know he's not a bad guy. Reese never hurt me out of malice—it was desperation. He'll do anything to be one of the gang, even if it means disparaging a friend. Rickie's little brother Robbie is okay, too. He's not a saint, but he has expressed remorse for some of the stunts he and the others have pulled on me. I don't trust him, but what harm can it do to be nice?

The bus ride to school is the same as always. The cool kids sitting in the back seats whisper to each other, then burst into laughter. I know they're talking about me. I can tell by the looks on their faces. How I hate that sound. It's gotten to the point that when my parents invite people over and I hear them laughing over a conversation at dinner, it makes me cringe.

Today I have an important meeting with Ms. O'Shea. It's nearly prom season, and fifteen of her students, including Roger, are seniors this semester. The prom committee has said that the special ed seniors could not attend the prom. They believe that Roger and his friends would be an uncomfortable distraction to the other students. They also have "insurance" concerns. It's funny what pushes someone over the edge. I've watched all year as Ms. O'Shea sucks it up, seldom saying a thing when her kids are teased or disparaged. It's not her style to be confrontational. But this prom business has made her furious. She's asked me to share my thoughts about it with the school principal in the hope that as a volunteer in the program, my opinion will influence his decision.

The administrative offices are imposing. Large glass doors lead into a thickly carpeted corridor. Along the walls are portraits of famous graduates. The receptionist greets us curtly.

"Principal Evans will be with you in a moment, Ms. O'Shea. Please have a seat."

I feel sorry for Ms. O'Shea. She doesn't like discord. It's not her nature. "Everything's going to be all right. You'll see," I tell her.

"It makes me so mad that this battle even needs to be fought. My kids should be allowed to attend the prom. What they're doing is akin to discrimination. I'm not letting the

school get away with this. I've put up with so much garbage from this administration, not to mention the student body. But this is going too far," she proclaims.

Just then, Principal Evans opens his door.

"I see you're all worked up about something, Constance. Let's see what we can do," he says, ushering us into his office.

"Dr. Evans, this is Jodee Blanco. She's a freshman here and volunteers her study hall hour to help out in the program," Ms. O'Shea explains.

"It's good to meet you, Jodee," Dr. Evans says.

"Thank you," I reply.

"Constance, I understand from the prom committee that you would like your kids to be able to attend this year's event," Dr. Evans says.

"Yes, they have a right to at least that little slice of joy. These kids have to work so much harder just to achieve the simplest things. They may be mentally challenged, but they're not deaf and blind. All everyone talks about is the prom. The decorating team is hauling streamers and equipment back and forth to the gym after school. My kids are aware of all this activity and they don't understand why they're not included."

"Constance, I understand what you're saying, but I'm afraid I have to agree with the prom committee on this one. It isn't feasible for your students to attend. The faculty will have enough trouble just monitoring the normal students, let alone students who need extra attention."

"Dr. Evans, I'll monitor the kids myself. I know the other special ed teachers will also volunteer."

"I'm sorry, Constance. My hands are tied."

"Dr. Evans, if my students can't attend Samuels' senior prom, why can't we host our own prom?"

"Please, Dr. Evans," I blurt out, saying a prayer that he'll give in. "It would mean so much to all of us. What do you think?"

"Fine. As long as you review all the details with my office prior to the event, I think this is a good solution. Now, if that's all, I've got another meeting," Dr. Evans replies.

Ms. O'Shea is beaming. When we get back to her room and she announces the news to her class, everyone claps, their faces lighting up with anticipation. After promising to return in a few hours to discuss the decorations, I leave for my next class. As I'm walking down the hall, I feel guilty. Though I'm pleased with Dr. Evans' decision and honored that Ms. O'Shea wants to me to help out, I'm concerned about how all this will affect my status at school. The last time I did something with special needs students that went beyond volunteering an hour at study hall or lunch period was at Holy Ascension. The scars from that experience continue to haunt me. What if it happens again? It's a risk I'll have to take.

During speech team rehearsal, Mrs. Adams comments about the prom. "Jodee, I heard about the special ed prom. I think it's wonderful. The whole school is talking about it. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

"Thanks. I will."

Try as I might to concentrate on speech practice, I can't stop worrying about this prom. I love these kids, but dread the possible consequences. I can hear the popular crowd now.

"Hey, look, everybody, it's spaz queen and the retards."

“Jodee, your mind is a million miles away,” Mrs. Adams remarks. “You had better pay attention to what you’re doing. The tournament is two months away, and you need to be prepared.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Adams. Can we start again?”

The next day, Nadia, the head cheerleader, and her best friend Shelly approach me by my locker. Some of the football players on the varsity team have asked them to the senior prom. If you’re a freshman and get invited by an upperclassman, that’s considered the zenith of cool. My stomach is in my mouth. These girls are so popular. Do I still have a chance to be accepted by these popular kids who haven’t discovered I was an outcast at Northwest? Steeling my resolve, I ready myself for the worst.

“We heard that you’re connected to that special ed prom,” Shelly comments, pulling a strawberry lip-gloss out of her pocket and applying liberal amounts of the goopy stuff on her mouth.

“Yeah, it’s the week before the regular senior prom,” I reply, wondering if she’s aware how ridiculous her face looks.

“That’s pretty cool,” she responds.

Did I hear her right?

“You think it’s cool?” I ask, utterly stunned. “Mark and those guys hate the special ed students. They’re always teasing them. I thought you all felt the same way.”

“Mark doesn’t mean anything by it. They just freak him out because they’re so weird,” Nadia chimes in.

“I’d like to volunteer as a prom monitor. Do you think Ms. O’Shea will let me?” Shelly asks.

“Definitely. I’ll let her know,” I answer, completely surprised.

“Cool. See you in class,” Shelly says.

Thank you, God.

As the big night nears, I begin to actually enjoy school. Public speaking is my favorite subject. Some of the kids think I’m a brown-noser, but that’s because I’m on the speech team and our teacher, Mrs. Adams, is also the coach. Besides, Noreen is in the same class, and she’s a supportive friend. English is kind of a drag, though. The instructor, Mr. Jobes, cares more about being liked by his students than about being respected by them. He rarely disciplines anyone. His daughter Lisa, one of Samuels’ star athletes, is in our class. A high-ranking member of the in-crowd, she delights in showing off her superiority. Nothing gives her more pleasure than to test the power of her popularity by instigating verbal attacks against someone, and seeing how many others she can persuade to join in. Fortunately, she’s left me alone so far. In her mind, I’m so far beneath her radar that I’m not worth her time. But for some reason, she has it in for Noreen. They’re in the same gym class. Noreen tells me that Lisa picks on her like crazy, and gets the other girls to do it, too. They call Noreen “fatty” and “blubber butt.” Noreen pretends it doesn’t bother her, but I know the truth. Every time I see Lisa taunt someone in our English class, I imagine what it must be like for Noreen.

Biology is the real killer. A.J. and her gang won’t let up. They’ve managed to inspire Tyler, Clark, and Jacklyn and her friends to join in their taunting. The special ed prom gives them all fresh ammunition.

“So, Blanco, you’re the expert on the mentals. We sure hope they can take a joke,” A.J. warns, her words tinged with menace.

“A.J., please, that’s enough.”

“What are you going to do, beat me up? I dare you.” As if on cue, several of her buddies form a circle around me. Tyler, Clark, and Jacklyn watch the drama unfold, clearly amused by it all. There is nothing I can do. I can’t fight all these people. I know I should try. But I’m afraid. Before I can respond, Ms. Raine walks in.

“Next time you won’t be so lucky,” A.J. whispers in my ear.

At Samuels, if you don’t have a boyfriend or girlfriend, it’s assumed that there’s something wrong with you. On top of that, you’re restricted in terms of who you can go out with. If you date someone from another clique, it can diminish or even destroy your position with the other members of your own group. For example, a cheerleader won’t go out with a “head” or even a “jead”; a “brain” rarely dates a jock. Then you have the “in-betweens,” such as the students who are into drama and art. Most of them forge their way into one of the mainstream cliques and end up dating their own. The computer nerds keep to themselves.

Samuels is also a jock school, which means you either participate in an organized sport, support one, or worship those who do. It’s like living in Hollywood. Whether you’re involved in the entertainment business or not, you better recognize it’s the only game in town. Samuels is the same way. Hail to the almighty athlete or pay the price. And it’s no picnic for the athletes, either. Their coaches push them far beyond what’s healthy. Paul and I talk about it all the time. His parents are so glad he’s graduating this year. Last semester, his wrestling coach put him on a diet and exercise regime that nearly landed him in the hospital from exhaustion. Though Paul won’t admit it, I think his coach also gave him amphetamines to help him get through the season. His mom is suspicious, too. I’m relieved for Paul, but I’ll also miss him. He’s been my protector for so long. What’s going to happen when he’s hundreds of miles away at college?

“Mom, hurry up. We’re going to be late,” I yell from downstairs, glancing nervously at my watch. Tonight is the special ed prom. Mom has agreed to be a prom monitor, too.

“Okay, Jodee, I’m coming,” she responds, grabbing her purse.

We arrive to a flurry of activity. The gym is decorated in a dazzling array of colors. Bright blue and gold streamers hang from every beam. Fresh cut flowers arranged in large white vases sit atop each table. A D.J. booth has been set up behind the bleachers, where Shelly and her dad are playing “Hot Stuff” by Donna Summer. I wave to Shelly. She waves back, smiling.

When Ms. O’Shea sees mom and me, she comes running up to us. “Hello! You must be Joy, Jodee’s mom,” she says.

“Yes. And you must be Ms. O’Shea. Jodee enjoys volunteering in your class so much.”

“Well, we love having her. Please, there’s food and punch. Help yourself. The kids should be here any moment,” Ms. O’Shea says.

What I see next I will remember the rest of my life. Roger walks in, handsome and proud, in a brand-new tuxedo. Standing next to him is his date for the evening, Sandy, a sweet

girl who sits next to him at lunch. She looks precious in her flowing pink gown and matching shoes, her hair full of curls. Holding hands, they make their way to a table. One by one, the rest of the students from the program arrive. A section has been arranged for the parents, all of whom are armed with their cameras and video equipment, eager to record this remarkable evening. Many of us fight back tears as we watch these kids enjoy an experience that too many other teens take for granted. Seeing their happiness fills me with a rare tranquility.

At one point, Roger grabs my hand, pulling me onto the dance floor. The song playing is Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive."

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The next afternoon at school, everything comes tumbling down around me.

My social studies teacher, Mr. Horn, is physically challenged. His body is gnarled and deformed and he is wheelchair-bound. Though his appearance is shocking to his students at first, he quickly wins them over with his odd sense of humor. He's a good teacher, but sometimes I think he tries too hard to curry favor.

Mark, Nadia, Shelly, and several others from their clique are in my class. I've managed to hold my own with them by exercising self-discipline. Mr. Horn enjoys challenging his students to lively debates about current events. Even when I'm itching to participate because it's a topic of particular interest to me, I keep my mouth shut. So far, it's working. Nobody is calling me "teacher's pet" behind my back during class. I probably won't get as good of a grade as I could have if I jumped into the debate more often, but not being the butt of everyone's jokes is well worth the tradeoff.

Today, instead of a lecture, Mr. Horn has us watch a documentary about feminism. When the film is over, he wants me to return the projector to the audio-visual center. I'm not sure where the center is, so I ask him.

"It's next door to the rubber room," he responds.

"The *what*?" I ask, thinking I must have heard him wrong.

"You know, where the mentals are," he answers, pleased that his little quip gets a chuckle out of his students.

I can't believe what I'm hearing, especially from someone who lives with a severe handicap.

"You're supposed to set an example for your students, Mr. Horn," I respond, knowing that with every word that I am destroying what little progress I've had making friends in high school. "You understand better than anyone in this room what it means to be maligned. How can you be so intolerant?"

"Hey, Blanco, why don't you just shut up?" Mark says. "Mr. Horn is right. They're nothing but a bunch of rubberheads."

I look over at Shelly. Why isn't she saying anything? "Shelly, you're volunteer, too. Why don't you speak up?"

By now, the entire class is glaring at me. How dare I embarrass one of their favorite teachers! "No wonder you're such a loser," Mr. Horn says to me, laughing. "It was only a joke. Class, what do you think? Maybe Ms. Blanco should consider going to another school. You obviously don't want to fit in at Samuels."

I slowly get up out of my chair, gather my books, and walk out the door, shutting it quietly behind me. Shaking with rage, I move with slow, deliberate steps to the telephone down the hall. I deposit a dime, then dial my parents' office number.

"Con Ship Maritime," a cheerful voice answers on the other end of the line.

"Mom, it's me. You need to pick me up from school right away."

"Oh, no! What happened? Things were going so well."

By the next day, the story of the incident in Mr. Horn's social studies class is all over the school. Principal Evans calls me into his office.

"Jodee, what happened yesterday?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I reply.

"I need to know the truth," he responds.

Reluctantly, I relate the details. Principal Evans apologizes on behalf of the school, promising to talk with Mr. Horn. As I'm leaving the administrative offices, I bump into Mark and Nadia.

"What did you do, go running to the principal to complain about poor Mr. Horn?" Mark asks accusingly.

"For your information, I didn't say anything about Mr. Horn. But everyone at Samuels has such a big mouth that Dr. Evans already knew about what he said in class," I reply.

"You're such a goody two-shoes. Why can't you just keep your mouth shut?" Nadia hisses, moving closer to me and forcing me to back away from her.

"At least I'm not a hypocrite like your friend Shelly," I respond. "You're all alike. None of you gives a damn about anyone but yourself. You don't care about Mr. Horn. All you care about is staying on his good side so he'll give you a good grade."

It doesn't take long for the consequences of my actions to catch up with me. Not only are my classmates furious with me, but some of the faculty—who only last week raved about the special ed prom—are outraged, too.

"You should never talk back to a teacher like that," Mrs. Adams scolds me. "I'm shocked by your disrespect."

"Mr. Horn is a dedicated and talented man. What you did was wrong," Mr. Jobes says, his words heavy with indignation.

Ms. Raine and Ms. O'Shea are the only teachers who come to my defense. The remainder of the semester is lonely. The scales are tipping against me. My new classmates look upon me with wariness and disdain now. They don't understand why anyone would make such a fuss over one teacher's silly little comment. That's the kiss of death if you want to be part of the cool crowd. They don't trust anyone they don't understand or can't control. During the summer, though I spend time with my aunts and cousins and try to keep my mind off school, it's no use. All I can think about is how close I came to making real friends this year . . . and then how I blew it.

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I'm aware that being different is a social death warrant when you're fourteen. I didn't choose to be different any more than someone *chooses* to be gay or tall. You don't get to pick who you are in this life, but you can decide what you become. The popular kids like A.J. and Nadia, who are often so cruel, aren't bad people. They're just afraid of being alone. I think they sometimes secretly envy those of us who are different, not because they want to be outcasts too, but because they wish they didn't feel forced to sacrifice

their strength of character in order to be accepted by the group. Some of the meanest kids in school are probably compassionate and sensitive on the inside, but they know that in order to be accepted, they have to be willing to be cruel once in a while. It's like flexing your muscles when you're a bodybuilder. You do it to reassure yourself that it's all been worth it.

Though I comprehend the dynamic of what's going on, it doesn't make it any easier to endure. In fact, it makes it harder. It's sophomore year. I'm more down on myself than ever because now I *know* the reasons I'm getting rejected, but I'm still unable to fix things—and that must mean I'm an even bigger failure than I thought. I hate who I am. I don't want to be this person anymore. My parents keep telling me that one day my fierce individuality will pay off, that I'll be someone important, that my innate leadership skills will enable me to do great and wondrous things. What a crock. Who cares about all that stuff, if right now, when I look in the mirror, I loathe who I see? Parents and teachers focus too much on the future. I need to be a normal teenager now, or all my tomorrows mean nothing.

As I sit in English class. The teacher is reading Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery." In the story, a crazy town holds an annual drawing. Each citizen has to put his or her name on a piece of paper and drop it into a large box. A woman's name is drawn. She's then led to the town square, where the entire community stones her to death. The image is too familiar. I cringe, desperate for the class to end. When the bell finally rings, I am nearly sick with relief. As I walk down the hall to gym, Jacklyn and several of her friends stop me by the lockers.

"Want to get high?" Jacklyn asks, a smirk on her face.

"What?" I reply.

"You know, smoke a joint," she answers, stifling a giggle.

"No, thanks," I say, wishing she would just go away.

"Oh, come on, Blanco, don't be such a priss," A.J. chimes in, glancing over at Jacklyn mischievously.

"Okay, fine, let's do it," I demand. "Who's got a match?"

Suddenly, they all burst into laughter. "Right, like any of us would want your disgusting dog lips to touch anything of ours."

"Screw you," I respond.

"What did you say?" A.J. whispers.

"I said, screw you."

"You better watch where you walk, bitch," Jacklyn says icily. "You're dead meat."

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Why did I take their bait? I gave them exactly what they wanted.

Shaken, I go to speech practice. Since the incident with Mr. Horn in the spring, Mrs. Adams' enthusiasm for working with me seems to have dulled. She is just going through the motions of coaching me for this weekend's tournament.

"Jodee, I think you're ready for Saturday. Just do your best," she remarks after only thirty minutes of rehearsal.

"But Mrs. Adams," I reply. "Antigone's monologue is really hard. I'm not confident. Please can we go over it one more time?"

"No, I have an appointment," she announces, putting on her coat. "You'll be fine."

Saturday morning, I awaken with a sense of dread. When Mr. Palmerton coached me for the drama tournament two years ago, I was carefully prepared. I knew exactly what to expect. Mrs. Adams isn't even attending today's competition.

"Come on, angel, time to leave," mom announces cheerfully.

"Mom, I don't want to do this. I have a really bad feeling about it."

"Jodee, you're officially entered. You can't not show up."

"Why not?"

"It's quitting and I won't let you do it. Besides, I'm looking forward to rooting you on!"

Knowing it's pointless to argue, I get in the car. "Mom, this isn't a big deal like the state tournament. It's just a few schools. I'd really rather go on my own. If I win today, you can watch me in the district competitions next month."

"Honey, are you sure?"

"Yeah, mom, I am."

Today's meet is at Anderson, another high school a few miles from Samuels. I walk up to the sign-in desk outside the school's main gym to check in. The paperwork completed, I hand it to the attendant and am given the list of participants competing against me in the category of dramatic interpretation. I shiver when I read it. Dara from Morgan Hills Academy is one of the names.

Memories come flooding back. Dara burning the back of my hand with a lit cigarette . . . she, Kat, Steve, and their friends throwing me in the mud and kicking me as they chanted their hate for me . . . my favorite shoe floating in the toilet . . . my new white sweater, wet and stained, lying on the floor in a puddle of Coke. I begin to shake, terrified of facing Dara. I run into the ladies' room to gather my wits. Taking a deep breath, I walk out to the gym and take my seat next to the other competitors. Dara sees me. She smiles innocently, as if I'm an old friend. I turn my head, wishing I could crawl into bed and stay there.

The minutes pass like hours as I watch the other participants present their monologues. There are twenty of us. Five will be chosen to compete in the district tournament. Finally, my name is called. Dara is still smiling at me, as if nothing ever happened between us. I bet she honestly doesn't remember what she and the others did to me back then. The bullies never remember, but the outcasts never forget. To kids like Dara, it's all just a natural part of growing up. And why shouldn't they feel that way, when that's exactly what they're told by their parents—and even their teachers? The whole thing makes me sick.

I begin my presentation. Dara watches me, her face awash with boredom. *Please God, let me make the finals.*

My monologue over, I take a bow. The applause is reserved. Dara steps up to the podium next. She launches into her monologue, a piece from Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*. When she finishes, the applause is thunderous. I can feel the rage building inside me. "At least I'll make the finals," I tell myself confidently.

But when I walk over to the board to check the list of finalists, Dara's name and four others are illuminated. Mine is not. I can hear glass shattering in my head. I cover my ears with my hands, hoping to muffle the sound. I run outside, looking for my mom's car. She should be here by now. I feel as if I'm going to explode. I have never experienced anger like this before. It's like Dara is getting rewarded for all her cruelty. All I can think of is killing her and every single person like her who has ever teased and taunted me in

school. It's not fair that the one person who nearly destroyed me with cruelty should win at the one thing I've always been good at.

Mom pulls up. I get in the car. My insides are contorted with fury.

"Angel, what is it?"

Calmly, almost too calmly, I relay the events of the morning. Mom grabs my hand and squeezes it. I remain silent the rest of the ride home. When I walk into the house, I go to the kitchen and open the drawer where we keep the butcher knives. I pull out the largest knife. I hold it up in front of the window, watching the light bounce off its gleaming blade.

Mom screams. "Jodee, what are you doing?" she asks, her voice thick with fear.

"I'm going to cut out Dara's heart, and the hearts of everyone else who's hurt me," I reply, trembling. "I want to kill them like they're killing me."

"Angel, please, give me the knife."

"No. They're going to pay."

"Jodee, that's enough. This won't solve anything."

"Fine, have it your way."

I tighten my grip on the knife and begin cutting my face. I am screaming. "Mommy, make it all stop."

Suddenly, I feel strong hands grab my arms. "What in the hell are you doing?" my grandfather yells. The knife drops to the floor. My mom picks it up, puts it in the sink, and closes the knife drawer.

"We better take this kid to the doctor," my grandfather says to my mom.

Slowly, they walk me to the car. We go to the emergency room. I am crying tears of rage. The salt from my tears burns the open cuts on my cheeks. I shudder at the hopelessness of it all. Throughout my entire life, my family, teachers, and doctors keep telling me that one day I'll laugh at all the pain I've suffered. "One day, you'll be on top of the world," they tell me, "and all the kids who were cruel to you will be nowhere. They'll be jealous of you one day. You'll succeed in ways they never will." "He who laughs last, laughs best," daddy has said to me time after time.

They're all lies. If anything they said to me was true, it would have been *me* on that list of finalists today, and not Dara. They lied to me. They all lied.

As murderous images dance across my mind, the E.R. doctor injects me with a tranquilizer. The next thing I know, I'm in my own bed, tucked neatly under the covers, our family dog Shu Shu curled up at my feet. Did I dream today? Or did the things I think I remember really happen? I get a chill when I touch my fingers to my face and feel bandages across my cheeks. Frightened and angry, I do what I always do for solace. I grab my notebook and pen and write a poem.



Reasons

You're prettier than me. You're all prettier than me.

Bang – Bang – You're Dead!

You're smarter than me. You're all smarter than me.

Bang – Bang – You're Dead!

You're better than me. You're all better than me.

Bang – Bang – You're Dead!
Now I'm the prettiest. Now I'm the smartest.
Now I'm the best
Now I'm the loneliest . . .

After the event with the knife, I descend into a severe depression. I stop eating. It's not that I'm trying to starve myself, it's just that food simply won't go down. It sticks in my throat and makes me gag. I am five foot six and my weight has dropped to less than one hundred pounds. To be honest, I am happy about this. Why? Because the problem with my breasts has been getting worse. One breast has grown four times larger than the other, and they have no muscle. They hang limply out of my chest, and the nipples are huge and inverted. I look like a circus freak. Mom and dad have taken me to endocrinologists and other specialists, but they all say the same thing. Corrective surgery can't be performed until I'm seventeen, which is still two more years away. The girls in my gym class will have noticed it way before then. Being emaciated makes my deformity much less obvious. It's turning out to be a perverse solution.

Mom and dad are beside themselves with worry. They keep taking me to doctors and nutritionists. One says I have anorexia, but I don't. I've never seen myself as fat. Food won't go down, period. Another doctor tells us that I have a tumor and that's why my behavior has become so erratic. But when we get a second opinion and additional x-rays are taken, the tumor theory is ruled out. My parents even seek a hypnotist to try to get me to eat. It doesn't work.

By the end of sophomore year, I have no desire to leave the house anymore. All summer, I lay in my favorite chair in the family room and watch soap operas and reruns of *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*. I don't even wish to bathe. I don't want to talk to anyone on the phone. I don't want to see anyone. Paul has come down from college several times to try to snap me out of my sadness. It's too late. It's not that I want to die—I'm not suicidal. If I were, I would have slit my wrists or overdosed on pills a long time ago. I just want to be quiet and left alone. That's all. No big deal. Maybe I'll be lucky. Maybe I'll fall asleep and not ever have to wake up again.