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For God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell,

and delivered them into chains of darkness,

to be reserved unto judgment.

—2 Peter 2:4

Chapter One

Coldwater, Maine

Present day

I walked into biology and my jaw fell open. Mysteriously adhered to the chalkboard was a Barbie doll, with Ken at her side. They'd been forced to link arms and were naked except for artificial leaves placed in a few choice locations. Scribbled above their heads in thick pink chalk was the invitation:

WELCOME TO HUMAN REPRODUCTION (SEX)

At my side Vee Sky said, “This is exactly why the school outlaws camera phones. Pictures of this in the eZine would be all the evidence I'd need to get the board of education to ax biology. And then we'd have this hour to do something productive—like receive one-on-one tutoring from cute upper-class guys.”

“Why, Vee,” I said, “I could've sworn you've been looking forward to this unit all semester.”

Vee lowered her lashes and smiled wickedly. “This class isn't going to teach me anything I don't already know.”

“Vee? As in virgin?”

“Not so loud.” She winked just as the bell rang, sending us both to our seats, which were side by side at our shared table.

Coach McConaughy grabbed the whistle swinging from a chain around his neck and blew it. “Seats, team!” Coach considered teaching tenth-grade biology a side assignment to his job as varsity basketball coach and we all knew it.

“It may not have occurred to you kids that sex is more than a fifteen minute trip to the back-seat of a car. It's science. And what is science?”

“Boring,” some kid in the back of the room called out.

“The only class I'm failing,” said another.

Coach's eyes tracked down the front row, stopping at me. “Nora?”

“The study of something,” I said.

He walked over and jabbed his index finger on my desk. “What else?”

“Knowledge gained through experimentation and observation.” Lovely. I sounded like I was auditioning for the audiobook of our text.

“In your own words.”

I touched the tip of my tongue to my upper lip and tried for a synonym. “Science is an investigation.” It sounded like a question.

“Science *is* an investigation,” Coach said, sanding his hands together. “Science requires us to transform into spies.”

Put that way, science almost sounded fun. But I'd been in Coach's class long enough not to get my hopes up.

“Good sleuthing takes practice,” he continued.

“So does sex,” came another back-of-the-room comment. We all bit back laughter while Coach pointed a warning finger at the offender.

“That *won't* be part of tonight's homework.” Coach turned his attention back to me. “Nora, you've been sitting beside Vee since the beginning of the year.” I nodded, but had a bad feeling about where this was going. “Both of you are on the school eZine together.” Again I nodded. “I bet you know

quite a bit about each other."

Vee kicked my leg under our table. I knew what she was thinking. That he had no idea how much we knew about each other. And I don't just mean the secrets we entomb in our diaries. Vee is my un-twin. She's green-eyed, minky blond, and one pound over curvy. I'm a smoky-eyed brunette with volumes of curly hair that holds its own against even the best flat iron. And I'm all legs, like a barstool. But there is an invisible thread that ties us together; both of us swear that tie began long before birth. Both of us swear it will continue to hold for the rest of our lives.

Coach looked out at the class. "In fact, I'll bet each of you knows the person sitting beside you well enough. You picked the seats you did for a reason, right? Familiarity. Too bad good sleuths avoid familiarity. It dulls the investigative instinct. Which is why, today, we're creating a new seating chart."

I opened my mouth to protest. Vee scowled at Coach. She is famous for that scowl. It's a look that does everything but audibly hiss. Apparently immune to it, Coach brought his whistle to his lips and we got the idea.

"Every partner sitting on the left-hand side of the table—that's your left—move up one seat. Those on the front row—yes, including you, Vee—move to the back."

Vee shoved her notebook inside her backpack and ripped the zipper shut. I bit my lip and waved a small farewell. Then I turned slightly, checking out the room behind me. I knew the names of all my classmates . . . except one. The transfer. Coach never called on him, and he seemed to prefer it that way. He sat slouched one desk back, cool black eyes holding a steady gaze forward. Just like always. I didn't for one moment believe he just sat there, day after day, staring into space. He was thinking *something*, but instinct told me I probably didn't want to know what.

He set his bio text down on the table and slid into Vee's old chair.

I smiled. "Hi. I'm Nora."

His black eyes sliced into me and the corners of his mouth tilted up. My heart fumbled a beat and in that pause, a feeling of gloomy darkness seemed to slide like a shadow over me. It vanished in an instant, but I was still staring at him. His smile wasn't friendly. It was a smile that spelled trouble. With a promise.

I focused on the chalkboard. Barbie and Ken stared back with strangely cheerful smiles.

Coach said, “Human reproduction can be a sticky subject—”

“Ewww!” groaned a chorus of students.

“It requires mature handling. And like all science, the best approach is to learn by sleuthing. For the rest of class, practice this technique by finding out as much as you can about your new partner. Tomorrow, bring a write-up of your discoveries, and believe me, I'm going to check for authenticity. This is biology, not English, so don't even think about fictionalizing your answers. I want to see real interaction and teamwork.” There was an implied *Or else*.

I sat perfectly still. The ball was in his court—I'd smiled, and look how well that turned out. I wrinkled my nose, trying to figure out what he smelled like. Not cigarettes. Something richer, fouler.

Cigars.

I found the clock on the wall and tapped my pencil in time to the second hand. I planted my elbow on the desk and propped my chin on my fist. I blew out a sigh.

Great. At this rate I would fail.

I had my eyes pinned forward, but I heard the soft glide of his pencil. He was writing, and I wanted to know what. Ten minutes of sitting together didn't qualify him to make any assumptions about me. Flitting a look sideways, I saw his paper was several lines deep and growing.

“What are you writing?” I asked.

“And she speaks English,” he said while scrawling it down, each stroke of his hand both smooth and lazy at once.

I leaned as close to him as I dared, trying to read what else he'd written, but he folded the paper in half, concealing the list.

“What did you write?” I demanded.

He reached for my unused paper, sliding it across the table toward him. He crumpled it into a ball. Before I could protest, he tossed it at the trashcan beside Coach's desk. The shot dropped in.

I stared at the trashcan a moment, locked between disbelief and anger. Then I flipped open my notebook to a clean page. “What is your name?” I asked, pencil poised to write.

I glanced up in time to catch another dark grin. This one seemed to dare me to pry anything out of him.

“Your name?” I repeated, hoping it was my imagination that my voice faltered.

“Call me Patch. I mean it. *Call me*.”

He winked when he said it and I was pretty sure he was making fun of me.

“What do you do in your leisure time?” I asked.

“I don't have free time.”

“I'm assuming this assignment is graded, so do me a favor?”

He leaned back in his seat, folding his arms behind his head. “What kind of favor?”

I was pretty sure it was an innuendo, and I grappled for a way to change the subject.

“Free time,” he repeated thoughtfully. “I take pictures.”

I printed *photography* on my paper.

“I wasn't finished,” he said. “I've got quite a collection going of an eZine columnist who believes there's truth in eating organic, who writes poetry in secret and who shudders at the thought of having to choose between Stanford, Yale and . . . what's that big one with the H?”

I stared at him a moment, shaken by how *dead on* he was. I didn't get the feeling it was a lucky guess. He *knew*. And I wanted to know how—right now.

“But you won't end up going to any of them.”

“I won't?” I asked without thinking.

He hooked his fingers under the seat of my chair, dragging me closer to him. Not sure if I should scoot away and show fear, or do nothing and feign boredom, I chose the latter.

He said, “Even though you'd thrive at all three schools, you scorn them for being a cliché of achievement. Passing judgment is your third biggest weakness.”

“And my second?” I said with quiet rage. Who was this guy? Was this some kind of disturbing joke?

“You don't know how to trust. I take that back. You trust—just all the wrong people.”

“And my *first?*” I demanded.

“You keep life on a short leash.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You're scared of what you can't control.”

The hair at the nape of my neck stood on end, and the temperature in the room seemed to chill. Ordinarily, I would have gone straight to Coach's desk and requested a new seating chart. But I refused to let Patch think he could intimidate or scare me. I felt an irrational need to defend myself and decided right then and there I wouldn't back down until he did.

“Do you sleep naked?” he asked.

My mouth threatened to drop, but I held it in check. “You're hardly the person I'd tell.”

“Ever been to a shrink?”

“No,” I lied. The truth was, I was in counseling with the school psychologist, Mr. Hendrickson. It wasn't by choice, and it wasn't something I liked to talk about.

“Done anything illegal?”

“No.” Occasionally breaking the speed limit wouldn't count. Not with him. “Why don't you ask me something normal? Like—my favorite style of music?”

“I'm not going to ask what I can guess.”

“You do *not* know the type of music I listen to.”

“Baroque. With you, it's all about order, control. I bet you play . . . the cello?” He said it like he'd pulled the guess out of thin air.

“Wrong.” Another lie, but this one sent a chill rippling along my skin that left my fingers tingling. Who was he *really?* If he knew I played the cello, what else did he know?

“What's that?” Patch tapped his pen against the inside of my wrist. Instinctively, I pulled away.

“A birthmark.”

“Looks like a scar. Are you suicidal, Nora?” His eyes connected with mine, and I could *feel* him laughing. “Parents married or divorced?”

“I live with my mom.”

“Where's dad?”

“My dad passed away last year.”

“How did he die?”

I flinched. “He was—murdered. This is kind of personal territory, if you don't mind.”

There was a count of silence and the edge in Patch's eyes seemed to soften a touch. “That must be hard.” He sounded like he meant it.

The bell rang and Patch was on his feet, making his way toward the door.

“Wait,” I called out. He didn't turn. “Excuse me—!” He was through the door. “Patch! I didn't get anything on you.”

Turning back, he walked toward me. Taking my hand, he scribbled something on it before I thought to pull away.

I looked down at the seven numbers in red ink on my palm and made a fist around them. I wanted to tell him no way was his phone ringing tonight. I wanted to tell him it was his fault for taking all the time questioning me. I wanted a lot of things, but the truth is, I just stood there looking like I didn't know how to open my mouth.

At last I said, “I'm busy tonight.”

“So am I.” He grinned and was gone.

I stood nailed to the spot, digesting what had just happened. Did he eat up all the time questioning me on purpose? So I'd *fail?* Did he think one flashy grin would redeem him? Yes, I thought. Yes, he did.

“I won't call!” I called after him. “Not—ever!”

“Have you finished your column for tomorrow's deadline?” It was Vee. She came beside me, jotting notes on the notepad she carried everywhere. “I'm thinking of writing mine on the injustices of seating charts. I got paired with a girl who said she just finished lice treatment this morning.”

“My new partner,” I said, pointing into the hallway at the back of Patch. He had an annoyingly confident walk, the kind you find paired with faded T-shirts and a cowboy hat. Patch wore neither. He was a dark-Levi's-dark-Henley-dark-boots kind of guy.

“The senior transfer? Guess he didn't study hard enough the first time around. Or the second.”

She gave me a knowing look. “Third time's a charm.”

“He gives me the creeps. He knew *my* music. Without any hints whatsoever, he said, 'Baroque. Often opera.'” I did a poor job of mimicking his low voice.

“Lucky guess?”

“He knew . . . other things.”

“Like what?”

I let go of a sigh. He knew more than I wanted to comfortably contemplate. “Like how to get under my skin,” I said at last. “I'm going to tell Coach he has to switch us back.”

“Go for it. I could use a hook for my next eZine article. *Tenth-grader Fights Back.* Better yet, *Seating Chart Takes Slap in the Face.* Mmm. I like it.”

At the end of the day, I was the one who took a slap in the face. Coach shot down my plea to rethink the seating chart. It appeared I was stuck with Patch.

For now.