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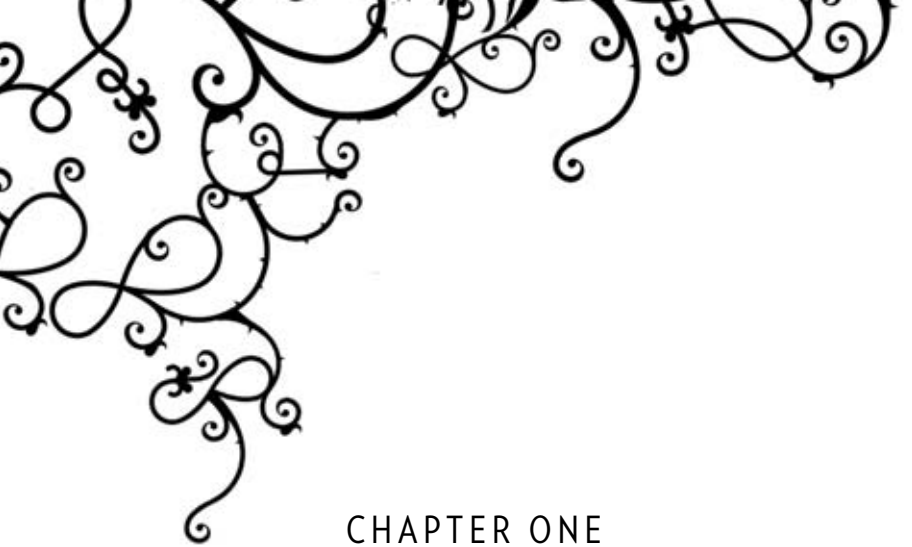
The Iron King

JULIE KAGAWA

BOOK ONE
THE IRON FEY

PART I



CHAPTER ONE

The Ghost in the Computer

Ten years ago, on my sixth birthday, my father disappeared.

No, he didn't leave. Leaving would imply suitcases and empty drawers, and late birthday cards with ten-dollar bills stuffed inside. Leaving would imply he was unhappy with Mom and me, or that he found a new love elsewhere. None of that was true. He also did not die, because we would've heard about it. There was no car crash, no body, no police mingling about the scene of a brutal murder. It all happened very quietly.

On my sixth birthday, my father took me to the park, one of my favorite places to go at that time. It was a lonely little park in the middle of nowhere, with a running trail and a misty green pond surrounded by pine trees. We were at the edge of the pond, feeding the ducks, when I heard the jingle of an ice cream truck in the parking lot over the hill. When I begged my dad to get me a Creamsicle, he laughed, handed me a few bills, and sent me after the truck.

That was the last time I saw him.

Later, when the police searched the area, they discovered

his shoes at the edge of the water, but nothing else. They sent divers into the pond, but it was barely ten feet down, and they found nothing but branches and mud at the bottom. My father had disappeared without a trace.

For months afterward, I had a recurring nightmare about standing at the top of that hill, looking down and seeing my father walk into the pond. As the water closed over his head, I could hear the ice cream truck singing in the background, a slow, eerie song with words I could almost understand. Every time I tried to listen to them, however, I'd wake up.

Not long after my father's disappearance, Mom moved us far away, to a tiny little hick town in the middle of the Louisiana bayou. Mom said she wanted to "start over," but I always knew, deep down, that she was running from something.

It would be another ten years before I discovered what.

My name is Meghan Chase.

In less than twenty-four hours, I'll be sixteen years old.

Sweet sixteen. It has a magical ring to it. Sixteen is supposed to be the age when girls become princesses and fall in love and go to dances and proms and such. Countless stories, songs, and poems have been written about this wonderful age, when a girl finds true love and the stars shine for her and the handsome prince carries her off into the sunset.

I didn't think it would be that way for me.

The morning before my birthday, I woke up, showered, and rummaged through my dresser for something to wear. Normally, I'd just grab whatever clean-ish thing is on the floor, but today was special. Today was the day Scott Waldron would finally notice me. I wanted to look perfect. Of course, my wardrobe is sadly lacking in the popular-attire department. While other girls spend hours in front of their closets crying,

"What should I wear?" my drawers basically hold three things: clothes from Goodwill, hand-me-downs, and overalls.

I wish we weren't so poor. I know pig farming isn't the most glamorous of jobs, but you'd think Mom could afford to buy me at least one pair of nice jeans. I glared at my scanty wardrobe in disgust. *Oh, well, I guess Scott will have to be wowed with my natural grace and charm, if I don't make an idiot of myself in front of him.*

I finally slipped into cargo pants, a neutral green T-shirt, and my only pair of ratty sneakers, before dragging a brush through my white-blond hair. My hair is straight and very fine, and was doing that stupid floating thing again, where it looked like I'd jammed my finger up an electrical outlet. Yanking it into a ponytail, I went downstairs.

Luke, my stepfather, sat at the table, drinking coffee and leafing through the town's tiny newspaper, which reads more like our high school gossip column than a real news source. "Five-legged calf born on Patterson's farm," the front page screamed; you get the idea. Ethan, my four-year-old half brother, sat on his father's lap, eating a Pop-Tart and getting crumbs all over Luke's overalls. He clutched Floppy, his favorite stuffed rabbit, in one arm and occasionally tried to feed it his breakfast; the rabbit's face was full of crumbs and fruit filling.

Ethan is a good kid. He has his father's curly brown hair, but like me, inherited Mom's big blue eyes. He's the type of kid old ladies stop to coo at, and total strangers smile and wave at him from across the street. Mom and Luke dote on their baby, but it doesn't seem to spoil him, thank goodness.

"Where's Mom?" I asked as I entered the kitchen. Opening the cabinet doors, I scoured the boxes of cereal for the one I liked, wondering if Mom remembered to pick it up. Of course she hadn't. Nothing but fiber squares and disgusting

marshmallow cereals for Ethan. Was it so hard to remember Cheerios?

Luke ignored me and sipped his coffee. Ethan chewed his Pop-Tart and sneezed on his father's arm. I slammed the cabinet doors with a satisfying bang.

"Where's Mom?" I asked, a bit louder this time. Luke jerked his head up and finally looked at me. His lazy brown eyes, like those of a cow, registered mild surprise.

"Oh, hello, Meg," he said calmly. "I didn't hear you come in. What did you say?"

I sighed and repeated my question for the third time.

"She had a meeting with some of the ladies at church," Luke murmured, turning back to his paper. "She won't be back for a few hours, so you'll have to take the bus."

I always took the bus. I just wanted to remind Mom that she was supposed to take me to get a learner's permit this weekend. With Luke, it was hopeless. I could tell him something fourteen different times, and he'd forget it the moment I left the room. It wasn't that Luke was mean or malicious, or even stupid. He adored Ethan, and Mom seemed truly happy with him. But, every time I spoke to my stepdad, he would look at me with genuine surprise, as if he'd forgotten I lived here, too.

I grabbed a bagel from the top of the fridge and chewed it sullenly, keeping an eye on the clock. Beau, our German shepherd, wandered in and put his big head on my knee. I scratched him behind the ears and he groaned. At least the *dog* appreciated me.

Luke stood, gently placing Ethan back in his seat. "All right, big guy," he said, kissing the top of Ethan's head. "Dad has to fix the bathroom sink, so you sit there and be good. When I'm done, we'll go feed the pigs, okay?"

"'Kay," Ethan chirped, swinging his chubby legs. "Floppy wants to see if Ms. Daisy had her babies yet."

Luke's smile was so disgustingly proud, I felt nauseous.

"Hey, Luke," I said as he turned to go, "bet you can't guess what tomorrow is."

"Mmm?" He didn't even turn around. "I don't know, Meg. If you have plans for tomorrow, talk to your mother." He snapped his fingers, and Beau immediately left me to follow him. Their footsteps faded up the stairs, and I was alone with my half brother.

Ethan kicked his feet, regarding me in that solemn way of his. "I know," he announced softly, putting his Pop-Tart on the table. "Tomorrow's your birthday, isn't it? Floppy told me, and I remembered."

"Yeah," I muttered, turning and lobbing the bagel into the trash can. It hit the wall with a thump and dropped inside, leaving a greasy smear on the paint. I smirked and decided to leave it.

"Floppy says to tell you happy early birthday."

"Tell Floppy thanks." I ruffled Ethan's hair as I left the kitchen, my mood completely soured. I knew it. Mom and Luke would completely forget my birthday tomorrow. I wouldn't get a card, or a cake, or even a "happy birthday" from anyone. Except my kid brother's stupid stuffed rabbit. How pathetic was that?

Back in my room, I grabbed books, homework, gym clothes, and the iPod I'd spent a year saving for, despite Luke's disdain of those "useless, brain-numbing gadgets." In true hick fashion, my stepfather dislikes and distrusts anything that could make life easier. Cell phones? No way, we've got a perfectly good landline. Video games? They're the devil's tools, turning kids into delinquents and serial killers. I've begged

Mom over and over to buy me a laptop for school, but Luke insists that if his ancient, clunky PC is good enough for him, it's good enough for the family. Never mind that dial-up takes flipping *forever.* I mean, who uses dial-up anymore?

I checked my watch and swore. The bus would arrive shortly, and I had a good ten-minute walk to the main road. Looking out the window, I saw the sky was gray and heavy with rain, so I grabbed a jacket, as well. And, not for the first time, I wished we lived closer to town.

I swear, when I get a license and a car, I am never coming back to this place.

"Meggie?" Ethan hovered in the doorway, clutching his rabbit under his chin. His blue eyes regarded me somberly. "Can I go with you today?"

"What?" Shrugging into my jacket, I gazed around for my backpack. "No, Ethan. I'm going to school now. Big-kids school, no rug rats allowed."

I turned away, only to feel two small arms wrap around my leg. Putting my hand against the wall to avoid falling, I glared down at my half brother. Ethan clung to me doggedly, his face tilted up to mine, his jaw set. "Please?" he begged. "I'll be good, I promise. Take me with you? Just for today?"

With a sigh, I bent down and picked him up.

"What's up, squirt?" I asked, brushing his hair out of his eyes. Mom would need to cut it soon; it was starting to look like a bird's nest. "You're awfully clingy this morning. What's going on?"

"Scared," Ethan muttered, burying his face in my neck.

"You're scared?"

He shook his head. "Floppy's scared."

"What's Floppy scared of?"

"The man in the closet."

I felt a small chill slide up my back. Sometimes, Ethan was so quiet and serious, it was hard to remember he was only four. He still had childish fears of monsters under his bed and bogeymen in his closet. In Ethan's world, stuffed animals spoke to him, invisible men waved to him from the bushes, and scary creatures tapped long nails against his bedroom window. He rarely went to Mom or Luke with stories of monsters and bogeymen; from the time he was old enough to walk, he always came to me.

I sighed, knowing he wanted me to go upstairs and check, to reassure him that nothing lurked in his closet or under his bed. I kept a flashlight on his dresser for that very reason.

Outside, lightning flickered, and thunder rumbled in the distance. I winced. My walk to the bus was not going to be pleasant.

Dammit, I don't have time for this.

Ethan pulled back and looked at me, eyes pleading. I sighed again. "Fine," I muttered, putting him down. "Let's go check for monsters."

He followed me silently up the stairs, watching anxiously as I grabbed the flashlight and got down on my knees, shining it under the bed. "No monsters there," I announced, standing up. I walked to the closet door and flung it open as Ethan peeked out from behind my legs. "No monsters here, either. Think you'll be all right now?"

He nodded and gave me a faint smile. I started to close the door when I noticed a strange gray hat in the corner. It was domed on top, with a circular rim and a red band around the base: a bowler hat.

Weird. Why would that be there?

As I straightened and started to turn around, something moved out of the corner of my eye. I caught a glimpse of a

figure hiding behind Ethan's bedroom door, its pale eyes watching me through the crack. I jerked my head around, but of course there was nothing there.

Jeez, now Ethan's got me *seeing imaginary monsters. I need to stop watching those late-night horror flicks.*

A thunderous boom directly overhead made me jump, and fat drops plinked against the windowpanes. Rushing past Ethan, I burst out of the house and sprinted down the driveway.

I WAS SOAKED WHEN I REACHED the bus stop. The late spring rain wasn't frigid, but it was cold enough to be uncomfortable. I crossed my arms and huddled under a mossy cypress, waiting for the bus to arrive.

Wonder where Robbie is? I mused, gazing down the road. *He's usually here by now. Maybe he didn't feel like getting drenched and stayed home.* I snorted and rolled my eyes. *Skipping class again, huh? Slacker. Wish I could do that.*

If only I had a car. I knew kids whose parents gave *them* cars for their sixteenth birthday. Me, I'd be lucky if I got a cake. Most of my classmates already had licenses and could drive themselves to clubs and parties and anywhere they wanted. I was always left behind, the backward hick girl nobody wanted to invite.

Except Robbie, I amended with a small mental shrug. *At least Robbie will remember. Wonder what kooky thing he has planned for my birthday tomorrow?* I could almost guarantee it would be something strange or crazy. Last year, he snuck me out of the house for a midnight picnic in the woods. It was weird; I remembered the glen and the little pond with the fireflies drifting over it, but though I explored the woods behind my house countless times since then, I never found it again.

Something rustled in the bushes behind me. A possum or a deer, or even a fox, seeking shelter from the rain. The wildlife out here was stupidly bold and had little fear of humans. If it wasn't for Beau, Mom's vegetable garden would be a buffet for rabbits and deer, and the local raccoon family would help themselves to everything in our cupboards.

A branch snapped in the trees, closer this time. I shifted uncomfortably, determined not to turn around for some stupid squirrel or raccoon. I'm not like "inflate-a-boob" Angie, Ms. Perfect Cheerleader, who'd flip out if she saw a caged gerbil or a speck of dirt on her Hollister jeans. I've pitched hay and killed rats and driven pigs through knee-deep mud. Wild animals don't scare me.

Still, I stared down the road, hoping to see the bus turn the corner. Maybe it was the rain and my own sick imagination, but the woods felt like the set for *The Blair Witch Project*.

There are no wolves or serial killers out here, I told myself. *Stop being paranoid.*

The forest was suddenly very quiet. I leaned against the tree and shivered, trying to will the bus into appearing. A chill crawled up my back. I wasn't alone. Cautiously, I craned my neck up, peering through the leaves. An enormous black bird perched on a branch, feathers spiked out against the rain, sitting as motionless as a statue. As I watched, it turned its head and met my gaze, with eyes as green as colored glass.

And then, something reached around the tree and grabbed me.

I screamed and leaped away, my heart hammering in my ears. Whirling around, I tensed to run, my mind filled with rapists and murderers and Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre.*

Laughter exploded behind me.

Robbie Goodfell, my closest neighbor—meaning he lived nearly two miles away—slouched against the tree trunk, gasping with mirth. Lanky and tall, in tattered jeans and an old T-shirt, he paused to look at my pale face, before cracking up again. His spiky red hair lay plastered to his forehead and his clothes clung to his skin, emphasizing his lean, bony frame, as though his limbs didn't fit quite right. Being drenched and covered in twigs, leaves, and mud didn't seem to bother him. Few things did.

"Dammit, Robbie!" I raged, stomping up and aiming a kick at him. He dodged and staggered into the road, his face red from laughter. "That wasn't funny, you idiot. You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"S-sorry, princess," Robbie gasped, clutching his heart as he sucked in air. "It was just too perfect." He gave a final chortle and straightened, holding his ribs. "Man, that was impressive. You must've jumped three feet in the air. What, did you think I was, Leatherface or something?"

"Of course not, stupid." I turned away with a huff to hide my burning face. "And I told you to stop calling me that! I'm not ten anymore."

"Sure thing, princess."

I rolled my eyes. "Has anyone told you you have the maturity level of a four-year-old?"

He laughed cheerfully. "Look who's talking. I'm not the one who stayed up all night with the lights on after watching *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre.* I tried to warn you." He made a grotesque face and staggered toward me, arms outstretched. "Ooooh, look out, it's Leatherface."

I scowled and kicked water at him. He kicked some back, laughing. By the time the bus showed up a few minutes later, we were both covered in mud, dripping wet, and the bus driver told us to sit in the back.

"What are you doing after school?" Robbie asked as we huddled in the far backseat. Around us, students talked, joked, laughed, and generally paid us no attention. "Wanna grab a coffee later? Or we could sneak into the theater and see a movie."

"Not today, Rob," I replied, trying to wring water from my shirt. Now that it was over, I dearly regretted our little mud battle. I was going to look like the Creature from the Black Lagoon in front of Scott. "You'll have to do your sneaking without me this time. I'm tutoring someone after class."

Robbie's green eyes narrowed. "Tutoring someone? Who?"

My stomach fluttered, and I tried not to grin. "Scott Waldron."

"What?" Robbie's lip curled in a grimace of disgust. "The jockstrap? Why, does he need you to teach him how to read?"

I scowled at him. "Just because he's captain of the football team doesn't mean you can be a jerk. Or are you jealous?"

"Oh, of course, that's it," Robbie said with a sneer. "I've always wanted the IQ of a rock. No, wait. That would be an insult to the rock." He snorted. "I can't believe you're going for the jockstrap. You can do so much better, princess."

"Don't call me that." I turned away to hide my burning face. "And it's just a tutoring session. He's not going to ask me to the prom. Jeez."

"Right." Robbie sounded unconvinced. "He's not, but you're *hoping* he will. Admit it. You're drooling over him just like every empty-headed cheerleader on campus."

"So what if I am?" I snapped, spinning around. "It's none of your business, Rob. What do you care, anyway?"

He got very quiet, muttering something unintelligible under his breath. I turned my back on him and stared out the window. I didn't care what Robbie said. This afternoon, for

one glorious hour, Scott Waldron would be mine alone, and no one would distract me from that.

SCHOOL DRAGGED. THE TEACHERS all spoke gibberish, and the clocks seemed to be moving backward. The afternoon crept by in a daze. Finally, finally, the last bell rang, freeing me from the endless torture of X equals Y problems.

Today is the day, I told myself as I maneuvered the crowded hallways, keeping to the edge of the teeming mass. Wet sneakers squeaked over tile, and a miasma of sweat, smoke, and body odor hung thick in the air. Nervousness fluttered inside me. *You can do this. Don't think about it. Just go in and get it over with.*

Dodging students, I wove my way down the hall and peeked into the computer room.

There he was, sitting at one of the desks with both feet up on another chair. Scott Waldron, captain of the football team. Gorgeous Scott. King-of-the-school Scott. He wore a red-and-white letterman jacket that showed off his broad chest, and his thick dark blond hair brushed the top of his collar.

My heart pounded. *A whole hour in the same room with Scott Waldron, with no one to get in the way.* Normally, I couldn't even get close to Scott; he was either surrounded by Angie and her cheerleader groupies, or his football buddies. There were other students in the computer lab with us, but they were nerds and academic types, beneath Scott Waldron's notice. The jocks and cheerleaders wouldn't be caught dead in here if they could help it. I took a deep breath and stepped into the room.

He didn't glance at me when I walked up beside him. He lounged in the chair with his feet up and his head back, tossing an invisible ball across the room. I cleared my throat. Nothing. I cleared it a little louder. Still nothing.

Gathering my courage, I stepped in front of him and

waved. His coffee-brown eyes finally jerked up to mine. For a moment, he looked startled. Then an eyebrow rose in a lazy arc, as if he couldn't figure out why I wanted to talk to him.

Uh-oh. Say something, Meg. Something intelligent.

"Um…" I stammered. "Hi. I'm Meghan. I sit behind you. In computer class." He was still giving me that blank stare, and I felt my cheeks getting hot. "Uh…I really don't watch a lot of sports, but I think you're an awesome quarterback, not that I've seen many—well, just you, actually. But you really seem to know what you're doing. I go to all your games, you know. I'm usually in the very back, so you probably don't see me." *Oh, God. Shut up, Meg. Shut up now.* I clamped my mouth closed to stop the incessant babbling, wanting to crawl into a hole and die. What was I thinking, agreeing to this? Better to be invisible than to look like a complete and total moron, especially in front of Scott.

He blinked lazily, reached up, and pulled the earphones from his ears. "Sorry, babe," he drawled in that wonderful, deep voice of his. "I couldn't hear you." He gave me a once-over and smirked. "Are you supposed to be the tutor?"

"Um, yes." I straightened and smoothed out my remaining shreds of dignity. "I'm Meghan. Mr. Sanders asked me to help you out with your programming project."

He continued to smirk at me. "Aren't you that hick girl who lives out in the swamp? Do you even know what a computer is?"

My face flamed, and my stomach contracted into a tight little ball. Okay, so I didn't have a great computer at home. That was why I spent most of my after-school time here, in the lab, doing homework or just surfing online. In fact, I was hoping to make it into ITT Tech in a couple of years. Pro-

gramming and Web design came easily to me. I knew how to work a computer, dammit.

But, in the face of Scott's criticism, I could only stammer: "Y-yes, I do. I mean, I know a lot." He gave me a dubious look, and I felt the sting of wounded pride. I had to prove to him that I wasn't the backward hillbilly he thought I was. "Here, I'll show you," I offered, and reached toward the keyboard on the table.

Then something weird happened.

I hadn't even touched the keys when the computer screen blipped on. When I paused, my fingers hovering over the board, words began to scroll across the blue screen.

Meghan Chase. We see you. We're coming for you.

I froze. The words continued, those three sentences, over and over. *Meghan Chase. We see you. We're coming for you. Meghan Chase we see you we're coming for you. MeghanChase weseeyouwe'recomingforyou*…over and over until it completely filled the screen.

Scott leaned back in his seat, glaring at me, then at the computer. "What is this?" he asked, scowling. "What the hell are you doing, freak?" Pushing him aside, I shook the mouse, punched Escape, and pressed Ctrl/Alt/Del to stop the endless string of words. Nothing worked.

Suddenly, without warning, the words stopped, and the screen went blank for a moment. Then, in giant letters, another message flashed into view.

SCOTT WALDRON PEEKS AT GUYS IN THE SHOWER ROOM, ROFL.

I gasped. The message began to scroll across all the computer screens, wending its way around the room, with me powerless to stop it. The other students at the desks paused, shocked for a moment, then began to point and laugh.

I could feel Scott's gaze like a knife in my back. Fearfully, I turned to find him glaring at me, chest heaving. His face was crimson, probably from rage or embarrassment, and he jabbed a finger in my direction.

"You think that's funny, swamp girl? Do you? Just wait. I'll show you funny. You just dug your own grave, bitch."

He stormed out of the room with the echo of laughter trailing behind him. A few of the students gave me grins, applause, and thumbs-up; one of them even winked at me.

My knees were shaking. I dropped into a chair and stared blankly at the computer screen, which suddenly flicked off, taking the offensive message with it, but the damage was already done. My stomach roiled, and there was a stinging sensation behind my eyes.

I buried my face in my hands. *I'm dead. I'm so dead. That's it, game over, Meghan. I wonder if Mom will let me move to a boarding school in Canada?*

A faint snicker cut through my bleak thoughts, and I raised my head.

Crouched atop the monitor, silhouetted black against the open window, was a tiny, misshapen *thing.* Spindly and emaciated, it had long, thin arms and huge batlike ears. Slitted green eyes regarded me across the table, gleaming with intelligence. It grinned, showing off a mouthful of pointed teeth that glowed with neon-blue light, before it vanished, like an image on the computer screen.

I sat there a moment, staring at the spot where the creature had been, my mind spinning in a dozen directions at once. *Okay. Great. Not only does Scott hate me, I'm starting to hallucinate, as well. Meghan Chase, victim of a nervous breakdown the day before she turned sixteen. Just send me off to the loony bin, 'cause I sure won't survive another day at school.*

Dragging myself upright, I shuffled, zombielike, into the hall.

Robbie waited for me by the lockers, a soda bottle in each hand. "Hey, princess," he greeted as I shambled past. "You're out early. How'd the tutoring session go?"

"Don't call me that," I muttered, banging my forehead into my locker. "And the tutoring session went fabulous. Please kill me now."

"That good, huh?" He tossed me a diet soda, which I barely caught, and twisted open his root beer in a hiss of foam. I could hear the grin in his voice. "Well, I suppose I could say 'I told you so—'"

I glared daggers at him, daring him to continue.

The smile vanished from his face. "—but…I won't." He pursed his lips, trying not to grin. "'Cause…that would just be wrong."

"What are you doing here, anyway?" I demanded. "The buses have all left by now. Were you *lurking* by the computer lab, like some creepy stalker guy?"

Rob coughed loudly and took a long sip of his root beer. "Hey, I was wondering," he continued brightly, "what are you doing for your birthday tomorrow?"

Hiding in my room, with the covers over my head, I thought, but shrugged and yanked open my rusty locker. "I dunno. Whatever. I don't have anything planned." I grabbed my books, stuffed them in my bag, and slammed the locker door. "Why?"

Robbie gave me that smile that always makes me nervous, a grin that stretched his entire face so that his eyes narrowed to green slits. "I've got a bottle of champagne I managed to swipe from the wine cabinet," he said in a low voice, waggling his eyebrows. "How 'bout I come by your place tomorrow? We can celebrate your birthday in style."

I'd never had champagne. I did try a sip of Luke's beer once, and thought I was going to throw up. Mom sometimes brought home wine in a box, and that wasn't terrible, but I wasn't much of an alcohol drinker.

What the hell? You're only sixteen once, right? "Sure," I told Robbie, and gave a resigned shrug. "Sounds good. Might as well go out with a bang."

He cocked his head at me. "You okay, princess?"

What could I tell him? That the captain of the football team, whom I'd been crushing on for two years, was out to get me, that I was seeing monsters at every turn, and that the school computers were either hacked or possessed? Yeah, right. I'd get no sympathy from the school's greatest prankster. Knowing Robbie, he'd think it was a brilliant joke and congratulate me. If I didn't know him better, I might even think he set it up.

I just gave him a tired smile and nodded. "I'm fine. I'll see you tomorrow, Robbie."

"See you then, princess."

Mom was late picking me up, again. The tutoring session was only supposed to be an hour, but I sat on the curb, in the drizzling rain, for another good half hour, contemplating my miserable life and watching cars pull in and out of the parking lot. Finally, her blue station wagon turned the corner and pulled to a stop in front of me. The front seat was filled with grocery bags and newspapers, so I slid into the back.

"Meg, you're sopping wet," cried my mother, watching me from the rearview mirror. "Don't sit on the upholstery—get a towel or something. Didn't you bring an umbrella?"

Nice to see you, too, Mom, I thought, scowling as I grabbed a newspaper off the floor to put on the seat. No "how was your day?" or "sorry I'm late." I should've abandoned the stupid tutoring session with Scott and taken the bus home.

We drove in silence. People used to tell me I looked like her, that is, before Ethan came along and swallowed up the spotlight. To this day, I don't know where they saw the resemblance. Mom is one of those ladies who looks natural in a three-piece suit and heels; me, I like baggy cargo pants and sneakers. Mom's hair hangs in thick golden ringlets; mine is limp and fine, almost silver if it catches the light just right. She looks regal and graceful and slender; I just look skinny.

Mom could've married anyone in the world—a movie star, a rich business tycoon—but she chose Luke the pig farmer and a shabby little farm out in the sticks. Which reminded me…

"Hey, Mom. Don't forget, you have to take me to get a permit this weekend."

"Oh, Meg." Mom sighed. "I don't know. I've got a lot of work this week, and your father wants me to help him fix the barn. Maybe next week."

"Mom, you promised!"

"Meghan, please. I've had a long day." Mom sighed again and looked back at me in the mirror. Her eyes were bloodshot and ringed with smeared mascara. I shifted uncomfortably. Had Mom been crying?

"What's up?" I asked cautiously.

She hesitated. "There was an…accident at home," she began, and her voice made my insides squirm. "Your father had to take Ethan to the hospital this afternoon." She paused again, blinking rapidly, and took a short breath. "Beau attacked him."

"What?" My outburst made her start. *Our* German shepherd? Attacking Ethan? "Is Ethan all right?" I demanded, feeling my stomach twist in fear.

"Yes." Mom gave me a tired smile. "Very shaken up, but nothing serious, thank God."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "What happened?" I asked, still unable to believe our dog actually attacked a family member. Beau adored Ethan; he got upset if anyone even scolded my half brother. I'd seen Ethan yanking on Beau's fur, ears, and tail, and the dog barely responded with a lick. I'd seen Beau take Ethan's sleeve and gently tug him back from the driveway. Our German shepherd might be a terror to squirrels and deer, but he'd never even shown teeth to anyone in the house. "Why did Beau go crazy like that?"

Mom shook her head. "I don't know. Luke saw Beau run up the stairs, then heard Ethan screaming. When he got to his room, he found the dog dragging Ethan across the floor. His face was badly scratched, and there were bite marks on his arm."

My blood ran cold. I saw Ethan being mauled, imagined his absolute terror when our previously trustworthy shepherd turned on him. It was so hard to believe, like something out of a horror movie. I knew Mom was just as stunned as I was; she'd trusted Beau completely.

Still, Mom was holding back, I could tell by the way she pressed her lips together. There was something she wasn't telling me, and I was afraid I knew what it was.

"What will happen to Beau?"

Her eyes filled with tears, and my heart sank. "We can't have a dangerous dog running around, Meg," she said, and I heard the plea for understanding. "If Ethan asks, tell him that we found Beau another home." She took a deep breath and gripped the steering wheel tightly, not looking at me. "It's for the safety of the family, Meghan. Don't blame your father. But, after Luke brought Ethan home, he took Beau to the pound."