

LEGACY

Chapter One

Transfiguration

I was sixteen years old when I discovered exactly who—and what—I was. Before then, I suppose I wasn't much of anything, just a girl who'd somehow managed to spend most of my life in southern Florida without becoming blonde, athletic, or comfortable with boys.

I'd lived with my father, who did his level best to turn me into the biggest geek in Palm Beach. His main contribution to my discovering myself was to ditch me in a boarding school 1500 miles from everything I knew. *Thanks.*

I brought my hands to my face and tried to warm them with my breath as I waited for the hired car that was waiting to pick me up at Boston's Logan Airport.

I was being sent away because my dad didn't want me anymore.

That's what he always did when he felt uncomfortable about something. He just stopped thinking about it. He'd done that with my mother after she died. And maybe before. By the time I was old enough to ask questions, he'd already banished her from his memory.

I'd only ever seen one picture of her. It was a sticky, worn photo that I saved from the trash after my dad had tried to throw out. I reached for the photo in the front pocket of my purse. We had the same eyes. Strange eyes, everyone says, although I don't think they're so weird. I held the picture and waited for the familiar flood of feelings to wash

over me—it was like I could feel everything she felt that day—how she was crazy in love with my father. And torn about leaving her family to be with him. And afraid of fire...

Beep beep beeeep. The blare of a horn tore me from my thoughts. Whitfield Airport Limo had arrived. *Classy.* I slouched into the backseat of the decades old Crown Vic.

“You ever been to Whitfield before, Miss?”

“Huh?” I looked up to see the eyes of the driver in the rearview. They were a piercing blue beneath wild, shaggy white brows. He looked as if he’d spent the past fifty years facing down Nor’easters. “Whitfield,” he repeated. “Guess it’ll take a little getting used to, after New York City.”

“I’m not from New York,” I said glumly in response to the driver’s question. “My father got a job there.”

The skin around the old man’s eyes crinkled into a kind smile. “So you’re heading out on your own, is it?”

I turned away. I wasn’t heading out on my own. I was being discarded. There was a difference.

“But you could look at it that way, couldn’t you?”

My head snapped up in irritation. “Excuse me?”

“Whitfield may not seem like a very exciting place at first, but you’d be surprised at how much we’ve got going on here.” He winked.

Right, I thought. Whitfield, Mass., the fun capital of the western hemisphere.

“Have you heard of Wonderland?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of it.” Wonderland was only the biggest retail chain in the world. My dad’s loathsome girlfriend was their VP of Public Relations. I heard *nothing but* Wonderland at home.

“We’re going to be getting a new one in town,” he said as if I were a child and he was holding out a puppy.

“That’s a thrill,” I said. As if every podunk town in America didn’t have a Wonderland. Or a K-Mart, Wal-Mart, or, more likely, all three.

He laughed. “I thought everybody loved Wonderland,” he said. “Least, that’s what their commercials tell us.”

“I’m not much of a shopper,” I said.

“And then, we’ve got the fog,” he went on cheerfully, undeterred by my obvious hostility toward his hometown.

“Fog?” I couldn’t believe he was telling me that watching fog counted as an activity, second only to shopping at discount department stores in terms of excitement.

“Our fog’s been in every edition of Ripley’s *Believe It Or Not* since 1929, when Mr. Ripley started writing it.”

He was looking at me expectantly in the rearview, so I took the bait. “What’s so special about it?” I asked with a sigh.

“Depends on what you call special.” He chuckled. “But it’s unusual, that’s for sure. Only comes to one spot, in a place we call the Meadow, right in the middle of Old Town. It shows up eight times a year, like clockwork, and always in time for the first day of school. You’re going to Ainsworth School, aren’t you?”

I took the packet the school had sent me out of my jacket pocket. “Yes, Ainsworth,” I said, reading the return address.

“Forget the name?” He was grinning broadly.

“I guess,” I said, confused now. So he wasn’t joking. They really did watch the fog come in.

“The public schools are already open. But Ainsworth has a tradition. It waits for the fog.”

Perfect. I was entrusting my education to an institution that based its academic schedule, as well as its entertainment, on weather phenomena.

“We’re coming into Whitfield’s Old Town now,” the driver said.

Old was right. Whitfield was a village straight out of Nathaniel Hawthorne, with rows of meticulously maintained stone buildings and three-story frame houses with candles in the windows. The town square was lined with quaint-looking shops selling books and tools and kitchen wares, a combination candy store and café called Choco-Latte, two rustic-but-tasteful eateries, and a storefront with APOTHECARY written across the window.

“The town was founded in 1658 by colonists who’d had it with the Puritans,” he announced as if he were a tour guide. “Run off from Salem to the wild tidal waters here, off Whitfield Bay. If you squint, maybe you can see Shaw Island off to your right.”

“Er . . .” I interrupted. “Is the school nearby?”

“Coming right up to it,” he said. “By the way, that’s the Meadow.” He nodded toward the left.

I gasped out loud. Ripley had been right—it was one of the strangest things I'd ever seen, an acre or more of vacant land that was blanketed by dense fog at least two feet deep, right in the middle of the village square.

“Why is it only in that one place?” I asked.

“If you figure that out, you'll be the first,” he said, grinning. “Like I said, Whitfield's more interesting than you might think.”

The car stopped in front of a grim-looking building with a discreet sign above the doorway reading *Ainsworth Preparatory School, founded 1658*.

“I guess this is the place,” I said as I got out of the car. The driver got my bag from the trunk. I tried to give him a tip, but he refused.

“Not from our own,” he said.

“Um, thanks,” I replied.

He tipped his hat. “Good luck to you, Miss Ainsworth,” he said as he got back in behind the wheel.

“I'm not—” I began, but he was already driving away.

Oh, well. It didn't make any difference. Hell was hell. Whatever they called you there didn't matter much. I picked up my bag and headed toward the doorway.

The wind was high, and smelled like the sea. September was only half over, but this far north, the air was already chilly. I pulled my jacket more tightly around me. It was the heaviest piece of clothing I'd ever owned, but on that blustery New England afternoon it was about as warm as a sheet of wax paper.

I stood there for a moment, blinking away tears as I took in the depressing façade of that dreary brick building. At that moment I felt more cold, lost, and alone than I ever had in my life.

“Welcome home,” I whispered before letting myself in.

Chapter Two

Initiation

Inside, I stood at the bottom of an enormous stairway whose white marble steps were so worn with use that they appeared to bow in the middle.

“Garr,” I grunted as my suitcase thumped over the mountainous flight, echoing hollowly through the empty halls. The building was a lot bigger than it looked from the outside. “Anyone here?”

“Indeed,” a woman’s voice called. I looked around. There was no one on the stairway except me. Then she popped up from behind the railing at the top of the stairs with a tinkling laugh. She looked like a fairy, with a chiseled, pointy nose. “Welcome,” she said, darting toward me with the quick, quirky motions of a hummingbird. She was young and friendly looking, even though she wore her hair in a old ladyish bun. “I am Penelope Bean, assistant to the headmistress. You may refer to me as Miss P, if you like.” She smiled. “And you are Serenity?”

“I go by Katy,” I said quickly.

“Katy?” Miss P mused.

“Yes. Katy Jessevar.”

“Jesse—” She looked puzzled. “But you’re an Ainsworth, aren’t you?”

“Excuse me?” My father had said something about my ancestors founding the school, but I thought he said they were my mother’s relations, not his . . .

“Well, no matter,” Miss P went on. “Come into the office.” She led me toward an old-fashioned door made of oak and wavy glass with the word *Office* printed in an arc on

it. “By the way, perhaps you’ve noticed that the school year starts much later here at Ainsworth than at most other institutions.”

“Er . . . That’s okay with me,” I added stupidly.

“We begin each year on September 21st to commemorate the opening of the school—which was founded by your ancestor, Serenity Ainsworth. The townspeople here in Whitfield tend to keep old customs. To balance things out, however, our classes also continue later than other schools—until June 21.”

I nodded.

“Well, then,” she said brightly. “Let’s take care of your paperwork, and then I’ll show you around.”

Every room at Ainsworth was a little different from every other, whether it was the configuration of the walls, or the view from the large, wavy-paned windows, or the polished wooden floors.

“Here is our chapel,” Miss P said, pointing out a plain but restful room with wooden pews and fresh flowers on a stand. “And over here is the library.” This was the first room I’d been in that was inhabited. A lot of students were in here, lounging on the overstuffed chairs or reading at the study tables.

“Students,” Miss P announced, “I’d like you to meet our new enrollee, Miss Katy Ains . . .” She drifted off. “I’m so sorry.”

“Jessevar,” I reminded her.

“Yes, of course.” She blushed. “Katy Jessevar, everyone.”

It was the moment I’d been dreading, when I’d be introduced as the new kid and everyone would look me over. A few people smiled. Two or three held up their hands in greeting. A few girls huddled around the September issue of Vogue looked up momentarily to examine me inch by inch, assessing how much I’d paid for my jeans, rolling their eyes at my Converse sneakers.

Then I saw him. Tall and lean, with honey-colored hair that flopped in a wave over deep-set, intense eyes. His arms were crossed over his chest, and he was staring at me. I felt my cheeks burning. Working up my courage, I smiled.

The boy just kept staring. He raised his chin a fraction, and I saw now that his smoky eyes weren’t friendly. Not even a little bit.

“Ainsworth,” he hissed. He said it softly, but I heard it. Afterward, the only sound in the room was the crackle of the fire.

“Would you like to stay in here for a while, Katy?” Miss P asked.

She might as well have asked if I’d wanted to sit on a lit firecracker. “No,” I said, probably too quickly. “I . . . I mean, I think I ought to see the rest of the place first.”

“Of course. What was I thinking? We haven’t even been to the dorms yet.” She smiled. “Katy will see you all again at dinner. I trust you’ll invite her to sit with you.”

Someone laughed. Not a good sign. Miss P put her hand on my back to show me out. As we left, I saw her glare at the boy in the corner. He glared right back.

Once we were outside the library, a hum of whispers followed us.

“She shouldn’t be allowed to come here,” someone snarled.

“Are you going to be the one to stop her?” another voice countered. “Or do you want to keep both your nuts?”

Some girls giggled at that, while others shushed him.

“She didn’t look so bad.”

“She looked like an Ainsworth,” someone else said. I recognized the voice. It was him.

I inhaled sharply. *Ainsworth*. That was what the driver of the car that had picked me up at the airport had called me. The same name. The name of the school.

I turned to Miss P. “Why . . .” I began, feeling my cheeks redden. “Why are they—”

Before I could get the rest of the words out, she touched my shoulder. “Don’t worry about things you can’t control,” she said softly.

Then she smiled at me so sweetly that I almost believed her.

The closer we got to the dorms, the more students I saw. Fortunately, Miss P didn’t introduce me to any of them. “Forgive me, but I’m running a little short on time, and I want to get you settled into your room.”

“My room?” I was expecting an orphanage-type ward with twenty cots lined up next to each other, like the drawings in the *Madeline* books.

“At Ainsworth, all the rooms are singles,” she said. We turned down a short hallway and into a vacant space, where she turned on the light. “Here it is, Katy,” she

said, opening a pair of wooden shutters over a window with a tiny stained glass panel at the top.

I was stunned. Outside was a breathtaking view of a lake with a weeping willow on the far bank. Nearby was a small rowboat shaded by big trees whose leaves were beginning to color. It was like a scene from a postcard.

“The change of seasons is lovely here,” Miss P said wistfully. “You’ll be able to see it all.”

The only items inside the room were a small dresser, a desk, and a bed covered by a down comforter. “I understand you have no bedding with you, so that will be provided,” she said. “You may decorate it however you like, so long as you damage no surfaces. However, the décor must be reasonably tasteful and inoffensive to the common sensibility.”

“I understand,” I said.

“The lavatory and showers are shared, and you’ll find them down the hall to the right. Mealtimes are at seven in the morning, twelve noon, and six in the evening, in the main dining room.”

I nodded.

“Speaking of meals, all new students are invited to lunch tomorrow at Hattie’s Kitchen. Have you heard of it?”

I shook my head.

“Then you’re in for a treat,” she said, smiling. “Hattie’s is a little restaurant in the Meadow.”

“The Meadow? Is that the place that’s covered in fog?”

“Exactly. Whitfield’s claim to fame.”

“I didn’t see a building on it.”

“Probably because of the fog. And it’s not even very dense yet. Once the fog really rolls in, no one will see Hattie’s at all.” She laughed. “But we all know where it is. It’s a charming place, and Hattie herself is as much a part of the school community as we are. We like to say that at Hatties you always get what you need.” Her eyes sparkled animatedly. “Well, if you don’t have any questions, I’ll leave you to unpack.” She nodded and started to walk away, but something was sticking in my mind.

“Um, Miss P?”

She turned toward me. “Yes, dear?”

“I was wondering ... about my name. Everyone here seems to think it’s *Ainsworth*.”

She smiled. “It’s a natural mistake, Katy. You see, the Ainsworth women traditionally keep their names. It’s their husbands who change theirs.”

“What?”

“It’s not so strange, really. The Japanese used to do it regularly, to maintain a family line. Still do, for all I know.”

“The women never change their names?”

“Not if their name is Ainsworth. But clearly that’s not the case with you, so we’ll just forget it, shall we?”

“Okay,” I mumbled.

“And by the way, your legal name, Serenity . . .”

“Ugh.”

“ . . . is one that is very well respected here.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Serenity Ainsworth founded our school. She was a teacher in England, and taught the children of Whitfield as soon as the land here was settled. She was, by all accounts, an extraordinary woman.”

“I see.”

She smiled again. “We’ll still call you Katy, though.”

I relaxed. “Thanks.”

Chapter Three

Empress

As soon as she was gone, I fell back on my bed, exhausted. I hadn't slept much during the past three weeks. Or the past three months, really.

I turned my head to look out the window. A breeze was sending ripples over the lake. Somewhere a woodpecker was *klok-klok-kloking* like crazy, and from far away I could smell the salt air of the ocean. I closed my eyes. Strangely, I felt safer in this room where I'd been for approximately seven minutes than I had for almost as long as I could remember. Oh, I knew I'd probably have a hard time fitting in with the other students—nothing new there—but things like that didn't rattle me anymore.

Not after Madam Mim.

Her name was Madison Lee Mimson or, as I'd dubbed her, Mad Madam Mim, after a crazy sorceress in an animated Disney movie. She was Grendel. Mim was the Beast, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, Godzilla, Mothra, Lex Luthor, Saruman. The Motherlode Of Horrors. And the number one reason I was stuck in Whitfield, Massachusetts for the foreseeable future.

As a VP of Public Relations for Wonderland, Mim represented “the interests of Wonderland” up and down the East Coast. I'll never know exactly how she met my father, but within days they were shackled up and some weeks later, Dad and I were on

our way to New York to start our “new lives.” After years of slumming it in the Florida State system, Dad had gotten an assistant professorship gig at Columbia. Major strings must have been pulled for that. And where there were major strings, there was Mim doing the pulling. It was during the plane ride over that Dad decided to let me in on his plans for my future.

“We . . . that is, *I’ve* found a school for you, Katherine.” Dad looked serious.

Something in his voice made me shiver. He wouldn’t make eye contact with me.

“Where is it?” I asked quietly, carefully.

He cleared his throat. “It’s a . . . it’s a boarding school, Katherine.”

“A boarding school?” I squeaked. “Where?”

“It’s a fine place, really—”

“But why do I have to live there? How far away is it from you? And *her*.”

A long moment passed. Too long. “It’s in Whitfield, Massachusetts,” he said finally. He looked out the window.

“I see,” I said.

“Let me explain.” He put his hand over mine. I yanked it away. “There are some things I’ve never told you, Katherine. About your mother. And her family.”

My mother? He had never spoken a word about her. I inclined my head slightly, listening, though I wouldn’t look at him. “Go ahead,” I whispered.

“Agatha—your mother—er, went to school at Ainsworth. That’s the name of the school where you’ll be going. Her family founded it, in fact.” He smiled. “Which is why they’re willing to accept you at no charge.”

I felt my jaw clench. “Are you telling me . . . ” My voice caught. “. . . that you’re dumping me in some Dickensian institution in fricking Massachusetts BECAUSE IT’S FREE?”

The people in the row next to us turned to stare.

“Katherine—”

“Excuse me,” I said, and went to the restroom, where I spent the rest of the flight.

Mim was waiting for us at her Sutton Place apartment. She was blonder than she’d been in Florida, and dressed in a silk and lace camisole and jeans, trying to look like the teenager in the family.

“Hi, Kathy,” she bubbled.

“Katy.”

“Riiiiight. So, nice to see you.”

She showed us around the apartment, pointing out all the tacky, expensive details that were supposed to impress us.

“And here’s where *you’ll* sleep, Kay-Kay,” Mim said cheerily, gesturing inside a leather-appointed office strewn with papers. “The couch is really comfy.”

“Kay-Kay will be fine here,” I said dully. I went inside and closed the door.

That night I tried to sleep, but it was a losing battle. This was supposed to be the quietest address in Manhattan, but it still sounded like a jet runway to me. And the leather couch I was lying on was covered with buttons that stabbed into my flesh like pokers. I

spent most of the night reading through Mim's work memos, which was how I found out that Wonderland Corp. was considering opening a store in Whitfield, Mass.

So I knew whose idea this really was.

I opened the window. Then I concentrated on the papers. They swirled into a cone, very attractive, very neat, like the funnel of a tornado. Then, when they were all in motion, I pushed them with my mind out onto the street.

Bite me, Wonderland.

"Why couldn't you?" I heard Mim saying. She had two voices, I'd learned: The throaty, sexy blonde voice she used with my father and her Wonderland voice, the sound of corporate fingernails against a blackboard. It was demanding. It was confrontational. And it carried.

It was the Wonderland voice I was hearing now. I opened the door a crack.

"You had every chance to explain things on the plane."

"Keep it down, please. She's asleep."

"You've been protecting her far too long, Harrison."

"She doesn't have to know everything."

"Is it better that she find out from the other students?"

"It was a long time ago, Madison. My guess is, no one will even remember."

“Not remember? It was all over the national news! For the past ten years, Wonderland has been paying through the nose for that woman’s insanity, and that girl—”

“Her name is Katherine.”

“Then *Katherine*”—she spat out my name as if it were an insect that had flown into her mouth—“had better be prepared with a believable story.”

“You mean *your* story,” Dad put in sharply. “The story your staff wrote to make Wonderland seem like a superhero fighting against a demonically possessed woman.”

My breath caught. Who were they talking about?

“It’s for her own good, Harrison. If she appears sweet and humble, everything will go easily. With that angelic face, she can carry it off. It can work, a win-win situation all around. We’re saying yes, her mother may have been criminally insane—”

What?

“But things are different now, thanks to—”

“Wonderland,” Dad said cynically.

“Thanks to the forgiving community of Whitfield,” Mim finished. “And Wonderland.” She giggled.

I pushed. Their door slammed open.

“What was that?” Mim asked.

Dad appeared in the doorway down the hall, wearing a silk robe. “What are you doing awake?” he asked, annoyed.

“Criminally insane? Demonically possessed?”

He stared at me for a moment, looking scared at first, and then defeated. Without answering me, he closed the door.

We never discussed it again. Dad started teaching at Columbia, Mim worked sixteen hours a day, and I stayed in “Kay-Kay’s” room. Three weeks later, a taxi picked me up and took me to LaGuardia Airport.

That was how easy it was for Mim to take my dad from me.

Slowly I sat up and keyed in his cell phone number. The phone rang for a long time before his voicemail message came on.

This is Dr. Harrison Jessevar. Please leave your name and number and the reason for your call.

“Hi, Dad,” I said. “I got here safely.” I hesitated. There must have been something else to say. There must have been, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. “Bye,” I whispered.

Mim took him, but I guess he hadn’t been hanging on very tight to begin with.

Chapter Four

Cakes & Ale

The first thing I saw when I woke up the next morning was a pair of cardinals perched on my window sill. Behind them, the water on the lake looked pink in the dawn light. Even my memories of yesterday's debacle in the school library had receded somewhat after a decent night's sleep in a place other than Madam Mim's home office.

I walked through the fog, which was thicker than it had been the day before, to a little building that looked as if the Seven Dwarves might have lived there, with sloping, rounded eaves, stucco walls, and windows with hundreds of little square panes separated by black leading. Over the Romanesque door was a sign in rounded script: *Hattie's Kitchen*.

Inside, it was everything Miss P said it would be, charming without the self-conscious cuteness of places with names like Ye Olde Pubbe. The wooden chairs were big and sturdy and comfortable, four to a table. The windows looked out on every side except for the one facing the street so that, like the school, it gave the sense that the place was in the country, and not in a town at all.

I was seated at a table against a wall with two other students, a girl named Verity Lloyd who wore striped tights and a beret, and a boy with white-blond hair that looked as if it had been electrified.

"Cheswick," he said, formally extending his hand to me.

"Uh . . . is that your first name?" I asked.

He nodded crisply. "Cheswick Fortescu."

That figures, I thought. I wasn't going to bring it up with these two, but from what I'd seen, the student body at Ainsworth seemed to be divided into two distinct groups.

There were the typical boarding school types, rich kids with cool clothes and names like Muffy. But the second group was totally different, not just different from the Muffies, but different from any kids I'd ever met.

They were definitely geeky, but not public school geeky. For one thing, there was a lot of them, at least half of the student body. Most were local. Some stayed at the school even though their families lived right in town.

But there weren't a million varieties of geeks like there had been at Las Palmas where the halls teemed with Emo kids wearing black eye makeup and tight pants, techno geeks, *Avatar* dorks, audiophiles, the Anime freaks, Goths, theater nerds, and the kids who wrote poetry and listened to groups like Coldplay and Starsailor, the types I called the QMSes, or Quivering Masses of Sensitivity.

None of these would describe the geek faction at Ainsworth. They were, rather, *confident* geeks, if there is such a thing, kids who dressed exactly how they felt and were proud of it, who didn't hate school, or their parents, or even the village they lived in. These were hard-core townies, unapologetic and united. A *tribe* of geeks.

Not that I was part of that tribe. So far, no one except Miss P and Cheswick Fortescu had even said hello to me.

"Have you ever been here before?" Verity asked me.

"No." I looked around. At the table next to us, a couple in their twenties was arguing. They were so truly pissed at each other that I could almost see sparks flying out of their mouths. "Did anyone get a menu?"

Cheswick laughed, his dandelion-puff hair bouncing. “Nobody gets a menu here,” he said. “You just get what you need.”

“And you never know what that’s going to be,” came a deep woman’s voice from behind my shoulder.

With a gasp, I turned around to see a beautiful middle-aged black woman standing over me. She was very tall, with gorgeous silver streaked hair that looked as if it had never been cut. Pushed back behind her ears, it hung in dreadlocks to below her waist, interrupted only by a pair of big gold hoop earrings.

“Well, looky here,” she said, grinning at me. “An Ainsworth.”

Again. WTF.

“Actually—”

“And a beauty, too!” Her eyes widened. “Could you be little Serenity, all grown up?”

I felt myself melting with embarrassment, while making a mental note to complain to Miss P for blabbing about students’ personal details.

“How old are you, now?”

“I’m sixteen,” I said. “And my name’s Katy. Katy Jessevar.”

“Katy Jessevar,” she repeated slowly. Then she burst into peals of loud laughter.

“Trying to be someone else,” she said. “Why? Don’t you like who you are?”

I didn’t know what to say. I wished the sky would open up and hurl me into another dimension.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said, touching my cheek. Her hands were rough and bony and warm. “You don’t even know who you are yet, but I do. Your eyes tell me everything.”

I smiled wanly. She laughed again. So did the others at my table.

The woman chatted with the two of them for a while before moving on to the other new students, but when she passed by on her way to the kitchen, she gave me a big wink.

“That’s Hattie,” Cheswick said.

“I figured.” I folded my hands so that no one would see how they were shaking.

“It’s always a little scary the first time you meet her,” Verity said kindly. “My parents said I cried.”

“Yeah, I can see that as a possibility,” I conceded.

“Hey, over there.” Cheswick was gesturing with his chin toward another table, where an old man was sitting alone eating soup and biscuits.

“What is it?” Verity whispered.

“Look what just came in the door.”

It was a dog, a spotted little fellow with a jaunty walk and a big canine grin. It made its way directly to the old man and sat down next to him.

The old gent took a while to notice the dog, but when he did, his wizened face broke into a broad, toothless smile. “And who might you be, sir?” he asked in the too-loud way of people who are hard of hearing.

“Woof!” the dog barked in answer, jumping up onto the chair opposite. The man howled with delight. At that moment, a server placed a bowl of kibble in front of the dog,

who gobbled it up with gusto. It was a very weird sight, the old man and the dog sitting across the table from each other like old friends playing cards.

“He got what he needed,” Cheswick said.

“They both did,” Verity added.

“Are dogs allowed in here?” I asked, knowing instantly how lame I sounded.

They laughed. “Everything’s allowed here,” Cheswick whispered conspiratorially.

The fighting couple was served cake. Within minutes they were eating off each other’s forks and playing footsie under the table.

“Everyone gets what they want?” I asked.

“What they *need*,” Verity corrected, accepting a platter of tofu from the waitress with a sigh. “I just wish I liked tofu.”

Cheswick hit the jackpot with a cheeseburger and fries. I was eyeing it longingly when my meal came—a tuna fish sandwich.

“Isn’t it fabulous?” Verity asked, scarfing down her tofu. “Mine is.”

“It’s okay.” I mean, tuna’s tuna. It’s not like it turned into the nectar of the gods or anything.

I was trying not to drool as Cheswick inhaled his cheeseburger when my foot came across something on the floor. It was a book, a blank book filled with handwriting. I looked at the first page. *Peter Shaw*, it read. #412.

“Do you know this person?” I asked.

“Sure,” Verity said between mouthfuls. “He’s one of us.”

“Would you take this to him?”

“Just give it to Hattie,” she said.

Since I'd finished my sandwich—it was disappointingly small, with the crusts cut off—I excused myself and took the book into the kitchen, where a staggering number of different platters lined every surface. Hattie was hovering over them all, adding a radish here, a Florentine cookie there. In the background, loud reggae music made it seem as if the dishes were all dancing along, moving of their own accord.

“Um, ma’am,” I mumbled, way too low for her to hear me.

“Yes!” she answered, whirling around to face me. “Ah, the girl with the false name,” she said. “You were not happy with your meal, then?”

“No,” I said. “I mean, yes. It was fine. I like tuna.”

She laughed. “Good. Do you think you could make such a sandwich yourself?”

I blinked. It was a strange question. “I guess so,” I said. “I used to cook for my dad. I can make a few things.”

“Good, good.”

“Er . . .” I held out the book to her. “This was under my table. It says it belongs to Peter Shaw.”

“Ah, Peter, yes. You can take it to him.”

I hesitated.

“He’s in room 412.”

“Yes, I saw that—”

“Fine. I’ll speak to Miss P about you. Come back soon!” She blew me a kiss.

I stumbled out, not sure exactly what had transpired. Verity and Cheswick were waiting by the door for me. “She told me to give it to this guy Peter,” I said. “So if you’re going to see him . . .” I held the book aloft, hoping one of them would take it from me.

“She told *you* to give it to him,” Verity said.

“All right, all right.” Jeez, I thought, what sticklers. I was still resentful over the cheeseburger.

I left the two of them at the gym—they were both runners—promising them I’d see them at dinner, then began the long trek to room 412, which naturally was at the very end of the last hall on the fourth floor of the most distant wing of the school. No wonder Verity and Cheswick had refused to help. I hoped Peter Shaw, whoever he was, would appreciate the effort I was making to return his stupid notebook.

I knocked. As soon as the door cracked open, I knew exactly who would be there: Of course, with my luck, of *course* it would be . . . and it was . . . the nasty boy from the library.

That’s great, I thought as his scowling face came into view. Just great.

“I found this at Hattie’s Kitchen,” I said, holding out the book. “She told me—”

“Thank you,” he said coldly. He took the book from me and then, in the same motion, pushed the door so that it would close in my face.

“Hey,” I said, pushing it open again. “What the hell’s going on with you?” I asked, full of righteous indignation.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

“No?” I coughed slightly, hoping to produce a few molecules of saliva. “Well, maybe we can start with that name you and your buddies keep calling me.”

He took a step backward, looking as if he were totally surprised. “What, Ainsworth?”

“That’s it. Look, whoever you think I am—”

“I *know* who you are, all right?” he bristled. “Even if you pretend you don’t.”

“I’m not pretending anything. And I’ve never met you in my life.”

He frowned. Two spots of pink appeared on his face beneath the smoky gray of his eyes. “Whatever,” he said. “Are we done here?”

We weren’t, but I felt the corners of my lips quivering, and I didn’t trust my voice. It was just so *unfair*. I hadn’t done anything except exist.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Miss *Jessevar*, I’ll say goodbye. Have a nice day.” He closed the door.

“You, too, jerkface,” I muttered.