

CHAPTER 1

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” I looked out of the car window frowning, the densely-packed trees were so close as they shot past us that branches kept hitting the glass.

“Of course I’m sure. Don’t be such a sissy, Alice”, Cordy replied, managing to hit every root and pothole that came our way. The fact that she didn’t take her foot off the gas didn’t exactly make the whole thing any less bumpy.

The truck’s decrepit headlights cast a weak beam through the dark forest and lit up the furrowed tree trunks rolling by us like huge giants with wizened faces.

The forests in Maine were kind of creepy. Especially at midnight in the middle of nowhere. Cordy – actually Cordelia, my best friend and Foxcroft High School’s cheerleading captain – clicked her tongue in irritation as her truck made a roaring noise as she forced it round the next corner like a stubborn old nag. There was a jolt and for a moment the entire contents of the car lost all sense of gravity. My stomach included.

“Cordy!”, I complained, clinging to the dashboard for dear life. “Just drive a bit slower, would you?! The sat nav says we’re in the middle of nowhere. We’re lost; nobody would ever have a party up here.”

Cordy gave me a look that made clear what she thought of the party pooper sitting in the passenger seat. “Relax, Alice. That stupid thing is total junk. A little while back it wanted me to take a shortcut to school through a cornfield.” She tapped on the sat nav screen with her carefully manicured fingernail.

“It’s the end of November, there’s no corn anywhere”, I reminded her.

“Well, fields then”, she rebutted while the sat nav interjected tinnily.

“*Where possible, make a U-turn*”, said the voice for what felt like the hundredth time.

“There, look! Just more stupid fields”, grumbled Cordy. Looking at the screen I really could see a just about endless green surface apparently stretching out ahead of us. As if we were driving straight into the void.

“Who would buy a sat nav at Walmart anyway?”, I teased her, grinning.

Cordy gave me a mock poisonous look as we jolted over the next lot of roots. The pink fluffy dice hanging from the mirror were swinging back and forth. Just like my head.

“Not everyone’s rich enough to be able to afford a villa”, she retorted, abruptly taking her foot off the gas a moment after as the headlights lit up a deer’s eyes. The truck choked and there

was a loud bang. A charred smell filled my nostrils, I had my finger crossed it wasn't coming from the engine. The deer was startled and bolted into the undergrowth.

"I am not rich, Cordy, as you well know."

"Err, so why do you live in a huge old villa then?"

I pulled a face forgetting for the first time since she'd put her foot on the accelerator to fear for my life. "The house is ancient, the roof leaks, the heating is practically non-existent and I think we've got bats. And if Granny Emerald hadn't had a stroke, I would still be living in a two-bed apartment in Louisiana", I reminded my friend about the circumstances that had brought my Mum and me to Foxcroft two years ago, something she was well aware of. Cordy, however, had the unbeatable talent of twisting the truth whenever it suited her.

"A villa's a villa", she said and the next thing I knew she hit the break so abruptly that I was hurled hard against my seatbelt. The truck's engine spluttered and stalled.

"Damn, Cordy, what's going on?", I croaked still trying to recover from the latest incidence of whiplash.

"What do you mean, *what's going on?* We're here!" Cordy grinned at me triumphantly and threw her long dark hair over her shoulder. She was still wearing the uniform from the diner where she worked part-time after school. She looked like she'd just stepped out of a black and white film from the sixties.

"This is where the party is?"

I looked sceptically out of the window. The trees outside were so densely-packed that I had serious doubts that a secret party would be held here. My reluctance to leave the warm cab meant I was jiggling about even more anxiously on the fluffy pink seat.

Cordy frowned, tapping the sat nav, that was showing that we were parked somewhere in the middle of Maine.

"Yep! No idea, fancy a little adventure?" she asked with a classic Cordy twinkle in her eye.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Could you please remind me why we're actually friends?"

"Maybe because I broke Thomas Buffort's nose because he grabbed your ass on your first day of school?"

"True..." I grinned. "That was awesome."

“I am awesome”, argued Cordy laughing and rummaged in the foot well for her handbag, out of which she pulled a dress so short that it didn’t really deserve the title. “Apart from that I feed you fries and sandwiches when your mom pulls yet another 36-hour shift. Without me you would starve, be completely alone and probably give names to the mice in your villa.”

“Okay, okay, you’ve convinced me. You’re a great friend”, I said pretending to award her a medal.

“And you’re funny and help me in Math, so I happily feed you”, responded Cordy generously as she slipped out of her antiquated diner uniform that smelt of sausages and waffles, and pulled the tiny handkerchief dress over her head. At least Cordy was practically-minded enough to keep on her thick tights and black Docs for a secret party in the middle of the forest. In Foxcroft pragmatism was born of necessity. Especially when there was a frost at night and you didn’t want to break your legs on the uneven forest floor. Whilst Cordy freshened up her make-up, I opened the car door and made myself jump out into the cold.

The cold, damp ground smelt of grass, soil and pine needles, and the autumn air already tasted of snow and winter. I was happy that I had put on my jeans with the ripped knees, as well as my Dad’s ancient thickly padded check shirt. I walked around the car to the driver’s side.

“Are you nearly ready?”, I asked Cordy, who was pulling a duck face in the sun visor mirror as she put the lid on her lipstick.

“Now I am”, she said visibly content pushing up the sun visor and jumping out towards me.

Hugely sceptical, I looked around and approached her. “You do know that we’re marching straight into a scene from a horror film, don’t you? Two girls creeping to a party in a dark forest. The only thing that’s missing is that our tyres haven’t been slashed.”

“Whaaat?” I stared at her in mock horror.

“Don’t worry...”, Cordy patted me on the shoulder, “...the geeks always die last. The murderers always go for the pretty ones first. So you’re safe for now.”

“Ha, ha, ha, thanks, Cordy.”

She grinned broadly. “What? Who cleaned up today with ninety-nine percent on their pre-college SATs? It wasn’t me.”

“But you were the ball queen”, I reminded her about the Winter Ball two months ago.

An ecstatic smile brightened her face. “Yeah, man, that was nice! I will never forget Angie starting to cry in front of everyone.” She giggled and I looked at her sternly. Cordy could be a total bitch sometimes, and sometimes being her friend was really hard work. But since Angie was an even bigger bitch, I couldn’t really hold the mean comment against Cordy.

“So, where exactly...” I started, when Cordy suddenly stood still.

“There!”, she shouted excitedly, and I jerked my head around.

“What do you mean *there*? An axe murderer? Or Angie? Almost the same thing“, I hissed anxiously.

Cordy exploded with laughter. “No, can’t you hear it? I think there’s a party ahead!”

Cordy dragged me on excitedly, and in reality: after a little while muffled party sounds thudded over to us. Heavy base mixed with the unmistakable smell of beer. Light, probably from car headlights cut through the darkness.

“Who exactly is throwing this party again?“, I asked Cordy, who, in her excitement, had just tripped over a root. I quickly reached out my hand before she fell flat on her face.

“Damn thing, kindly grow somewhere else! Sorry, what did you say, Alice?”

“Which genius decided to throw a party here, a party that I had to climb out of my window in the middle of the night for?”

“Oh, some rich kids from the private school.”

“Which one? There’s two.” I pressed. “Chesterfield or St. Burrington? They’re both in this area.”

Cordy shrugged her shoulders. “Is it important? The main thing is, there’s free beer.”

I knitted my brow sceptically. “Wasn’t Chesterfield’s last party busted by the cops?” It had provided a topic of conversation for weeks at Foxcroft. “You know if my mom finds me here I’m as good as dead.”

“That’s garbage, your mom is the Sheriff, you can get out of anything“, Cordy brushed it off. In the partial darkness I could just make out that her eyes were sparkling with excitement. “The last party was apparently legendary. And that night you convinced me to have a lousy cinema night. Tonight is just long overdue justice.”

I rolled my eyes, snorting, and got a shove for it that nearly sent me flying into the next bush.

“Hey!“, I snapped at her indignantly.

She laughed and plugged on. “Come on, we’re partying with the rich kids today. Oh, there’s Peter and Matthew! Hey Peeeeter! We’re here!”

She waved excitedly across the clearing in front of us. A bit dazzled by the sudden light I stood still and let the scene wash over me for a few moments.

The clearing in front of me was incredibly large and almost looked like a car park. At least the grass had been flattened and there were deep tyre tracks in the wet ground. Half a dozen expensive cars were stood in a loose semi-circle. As we had thought, the light was coming from the headlights. Loud music boomed from a sleek Lamborghini, it was so loud that the dull hypnotic beat was making the ground beneath my feet shake. Beer was being poured from big silver barrels on the bed of a black monster truck. Two boys were busily handing out red paper cups, whilst the smell of cigarettes and one or two joints hung in the air. About half of Foxcroft had come up here to be at one of the private school's legendary parties.

"Alice, there you are! Have you been hiding from us?" A big strong arm wound around my shoulders before his warm chest pushed against my back. The smell of soap and sweet energy drink wafted into my nose.

"Hey Peter." Smiling, I looked at Foxcroft High's quarterback, who was hugging me, grinning.

"You look great", he whispered in my ear, before giving me a peck on the cheek.

"Thanks, so do you." I glanced away, embarrassed.

Peter laughed and manoeuvred me through the crowd with his broad shoulders like a football. Keeping his arm around my shoulder the whole time. As usual when he was so close to me, I got palpitations. Peter was great, and I had decided to tell him exactly that today. Perhaps after a beer or two.

We smiled at each other, as if we had just shared the same thought. Peter's blue eyes sparkled and my heart raced.

"Are you wearing that shirt to make a statement?" I teased him, whilst I tugged his shirt again, it had a few grass stains from today's training.

"Pfff. Burrington should know who's going to wipe the floor with them this season" Peter said a bit too loudly, which earned him a few hostile looks.

"If you start a fight, don't imagine that Alice and I are going to nurse your boo-boos", Cordy shouted to us over the noise.

She and Peter's best friend Matthew were next to us leaning on a black monster truck, being poured two beers by a guy with turquoise-coloured hair. The white foam ran slowly over the rim of the cup and dripped on the hard floor, as Cordy took the cup with a broad grin. "Thanks, what do you want for it?" She looked up at him with a look fit for the movies.

"On the house for beautiful women", responded turquoise-hair with a deep laugh. His shoulders were so broad that even Peter looked small in comparison. He checked him out as if he was trying to find out how he could best tackle him at the next football game.

“Cool party”, Cordy carried on flirting. “You’re from Burrington, aren’t you?”

“Yep, welcome to the black side of the force!” he laughed again and elbowed the guy next to him in the ribs. “Hey, Hawkins, did you hear him? Black side of the force, not dark! Classic!” He raised his hand for a high-five.

The boy at the beer tap turned away with an irritated expression and left the guy’s hand hanging in the air. “You’re not funny, Bastion. You never were and never will be.” While he talked he filled up the next cup and held it out to me even though I hadn’t asked for it.

A car’s headlights lit him up from behind so he nearly looked like he was surrounded by a halo. Peeking out of his black beanie were a few strands of similarly black fringe, that fell into his chiselled face with round Asian eyes.

“You haven’t had a drink yet, have you?” he asked me amicably.

“Me? No, thanks, that’s very kind”, I responded in surprise and took the cup from his hand. “Is there a reason for the party? Is it someone’s birthday?” I asked curiously, whilst Peter got a beer too.

Turquoise-hair alias Bastion grinned and crossed his muscular arms over his chest. “We’re just celebrating our bloody short lives.”

“Bastion, that’s enough”, growled Hawkins, then he looked at us questioningly. “Do you want anything else?”

“No, thanks, we won’t disturb you anymore.” reassured Cordy, shooting Bastion an unambiguously ambiguous look.

He grinned broadly and winked. “You can disturb me after the party, if you like.”

“She doesn’t like. Thanks for the beer”, I responded, before Cordy could enthusiastically agree and grabbed her hand dragging her behind me through the crowd.

“Alice! What was that about? I nearly pulled someone from Burrington. That makes twenty points!”

“Seriously, Cordy?” I let her go snorting incredulously. “You really want to score those stupid points?”

Cordy pulled a shocked face and pressed her hand against her chest. “Stupid? It’s a Foxcroft tradition!” She squared her shoulders and began to rattle off:

“Five points for first base.

“Ten points for second base.

Fifteen points for third base.

Twenty points for..."

"I don't want to hear it. Lalala", I trilled and quickly covered my ears.

"What doesn't she want to hear?", asked Peter, who had caught up with us, gulping his beer.

"That she's a prude. You really need to do something about that, Peter", said Cordy grinning.

"Hey! I am not a prude, I'm just not keen on using private school kids for, you know, to score stupid points."

"For a screw?", Cordy kindly obliged.

"Who's going to screw who?", Matthew got involved now too.

Peter screwed up his face. "Oh, it's about the points, if you pull one of the snobs."

Matthew grimaced too, as if there was a bad smell. "That still exists? My sister used to play that. What do you girls want with the guys from the boarding school? They're all crazy."

"Secretive, rich and hot, you mean", Cordy responded and looked entranced in the direction of Bastion with his turquoise hair. "Shame they're hardly ever allowed into town and always keep to themselves. Seems almost like they're in prison, instead of attending a damn expensive private school." She sighed wistfully.

"Have any of you actually been to Burrington or Chesterfield before?", I asked. The general boarding school gossip had never really interested me before. But I had never had anything to do with students from there before. Until now that is.

They all shook their heads, and Matthew said: "If you can't raise the school fee, you're not even allowed on site."

"Man, I don't want to go in there and wear a tie every day.", Peter added laughing.

They both chinked their cups and downed their drinks in one. I rolled my eyes and sipped my beer. As the bitter taste filled my mouth I tried to suppress a grimace.

"Do you still not like beer, Alice?", whispered Peter into my ear, amused.

"It tastes disgusting. When nobody's looking, you have to drink it for me, yeah?"

Peter grinned and winked at me. From the corner of my eye I could see Cordy giving me an enthusiastic thumbs-up signal. Her flirting tips had taken on dramatic proportions recently. When she made an encouraging movement I took a deep breath and looked up at Peter.

“Do you maybe want to dance?” I pointed to the centre of the clearing where a few people were already moving in time with the booming beats.

“As long as I only have to bob from one leg to the other, sure”, said Peter, took my cup and drank it in one gulp before putting it on a car bonnet.

“Bobbing works”, I responded and smiled up at Peter as he pulled me into his arms and started to dance.

“And? Was this party such a bad idea after all?”, Cordy asked me happily as she joined us with Matthew.

“No, it’s great here, you were right”, I had to admit, even to myself.

“I am always right, and the beer is awesome! We’re going to get another!”

“Is beer the new code word for boarder with turquoise hair?”, I wound her up.

Cordy grinned, wiggled her eyebrows and disappeared into the tumult, with Matthew in tow, whilst Peter wrapped his arms more tightly around me. I snuggled up to him smiling while he kissed my neck. I took a deep breath and it felt like I was trying to inhale this moment in minute detail. I could feel the gentle wind in my blond hair; smell beer, smoke and the forest; whilst the music vibrated in my chest like a dull heartbeat. *Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.*

Smiling I opened my eyes – and met the gaze of a guy standing on the edge of the crowd staring at me.

Ba-dum.

Irritated I stared just as resolutely back.

The guy was wearing a white shirt that he’d rolled up to his elbows, and he had a loosened blood-red tie around his neck. There was a school crest on his left breast pocket.

He was leaning on a black motorbike and smoking a glowing cigarette. Fascinated I watched the smoke coiling out of his lips and getting caught in his black hair that fell around his face in thick waves. Perhaps it was just the dazzling light, but his eyes seemed jet black.

As if he had sensed me looking he looked up and stared idly at me.

Ba-dum.

My heart stopped, or maybe just the time in between the beats seemed longer than normal. We stared at each other and time seemed to warp. I could only hear dull and distorted sounds, the people around us were moving in what looked like slow-motion, just like the smoke rising from his lips.

Then all of a sudden, a confused, almost scared expression darted across his face.

Did he know me? I hesitantly raised my hand and waved. The guy flicked the cigarette to the ground and got off the car. He took a step towards me, then another. I held my breath and...

“Alice?”, murmured Peter in my ear suddenly.

His warm breath blew strands of hair in my face and tore me back to reality so abruptly that my heart stumbled on again with a start. As if a protective bubble around me had been burst, the party action suddenly assaulted my senses again. The music almost hurt my ears, the overpowering smells stung my nose, and the colours seemed so bright that I blinked, irritated.

The guy stood still. His eyes darted towards Peter before he shook his head, turned around with a jerk and disappeared into the crowd.

“Would you like to maybe...”, Peter began and stroked along my spine with his finger, which caused a deep shudder, “...grab another drink?” His neck muscles tightened almost imperceptibly.

“Sure.” I made myself shake off the strange feeling caused by the exchange of looks with the other guy, and followed Peter back to the truck where Cordy and Matthew were already downing their next beer.

“If you two dance any more lovingly, someone’s going to end up slipping on your slush”, Cordy whispered to me with a grin.

“You’re just jealous”, I wound her up before turning to Peter. “I’m gonna ask if they’ve got anything other than beer, okay?”

He winked. “Sure. Good luck with that”, he responded and grabbed Matthew’s cup.

I stepped closer to the monster truck and banged on the black lacquered bodywork to get Bastion’s attention.

“Another beer, sweetheart?”

“Could I possibly just have a cola, please?” I murmured sheepishly.

“A cola? On its own?” When I nodded, his pierced eyebrow wandered upwards. “I can see you’re a wild one, huh?”, but he stood up and tapped his mate on the shoulder.

“Hey Hawk. Have we got any more cola?”

Hawk shook his head. “Not here, but maybe there’s a crate at school. I’d have to check.”

“Oh no, don’t go to any trouble. I just won’t have anything.” I backtracked quickly.

Hawk looked at me, then he jumped off the car. “Don’t worry, I’ve got to get more beer anyway. I’ll be right back, Bastion.”

He nodded and kept serving beer.

I did join the others again, but watched Hawk guiltily as he disappeared from the car park, until finally my good manners won out. I tugged at Peter’s sleeve. “I’ll be right back, yeah? I’m just gonna help that guy over there with the drinks.”

Peter furrowed his brow. “Should I come with you?”

“No, it’s okay. I’m a big girl, I’ll manage”, I played it down with a smile and hurried off to follow Hawk before he disappeared from view.

“Hey you! Wait!”, I called to him and found him turning onto a dark footpath between the densely-packed trees. “At least let me help you carry them.”

Hawk stood still and turned towards me. “Don’t worry, you don’t have to.”

“I’d like to though, otherwise I’ll have a bad conscience.”

The corner of Hawk’s mouth wandered up. “Are you doing it because of the thing with the points?” he asked me with amusement.

Appalled, I stared at him. “What? No!”

“Are you sure? If you are, I’ll tell you straight away that I’ve got a girlfriend.”

“God! It wasn’t like that...sorry, I really just want to help”, I justified myself and felt myself going bright red.

Now the other corner of his mouth wandered upwards. “It’s okay, you can come. It’s just over here.”

He signalled for me to follow him and with a last look at the clearing I walked behind him into the forest. It immediately got a degree colder, so that my breath condensed in front of my face.

“What’s your name?” Hawkins asked me amicably, holding a low-hanging branch out of the way.

I gratefully ducked under and hurried to keep up with his long legs.

“Alice, Alice Salt”, I introduced myself.

Hawk put his head to one side out of interest and looked at me. “Salt? Are you related to the Sheriff?”

I pulled a face with a sigh. “Yeah, she’s my mom.”

He exploded with laughter. “And you’re at a party like this? Does she know about it?”

I gave him a look that was heavy with meaning and tucked my hair behind my ear. “No. And if she turns up I’ll say that I’ve been kidnapped by you lot.”

Hawk laughed again. His voice sounded soft and warm, and to my surprise I thought he was nice. He seemed so unbelievably...normal. “We’re here. Wait here for me, I’ll be right back”, he said.

Amazed I tilted my head back and stared at the wrought-iron gate that had appeared in front of us in the middle of the forest. A brick wall almost as high overgrown with wild ivy stretched from either side of the gate and separated the boarding school from the outside world. Cordy’s comparison to a prison immediately came to mind, it seemed quite apt looking at this.

“Fine”, I said and watched Hawk disappear through the gate.

I was probably just imagining it, but I almost got the feeling that the air coming through the slightly ajar double gates was a few degrees cooler than the air in the forest.

Freezing, I watched Hawk disappearing into the darkness, quiet as a cat. Only mist was missing and this location would have been the perfect setting for a horror film. I looked around nervously, biting my lip and hopped from one leg to the other waiting for Hawk to come back. For something to do I went closer to the gate and looked at the elegantly ornate black ironwork. You could just make out the words *St. Burrington* on a silver plaque on the left-hand brick wall. Out of curiosity I got even closer, until I was standing right in front of the gate. The school crest was mounted next to it, which depicted a delicate hand holding a rose. I stroked the crest running my fingers along the grooves, and the cold got so biting that my teeth began to chatter. I got goose pimples and, shivering, I wrapped the check shirt around myself more tightly.

As fun as the party had turned out to be, outside of the hubbub the adrenalin wore off and I realised how tired I was. I was hungry too, my stomach was rumbling. I sighed, when a cracking sound in the undergrowth made me jump. My head shot round but I could only see densely-packed trees, their roots coiling out of the ground like snakes. Shit, it was creepy! I only hoped Hawk would come back soon before Jigsaw could pay me a visit. I lifted my head expectantly when the undergrowth in front of me started moving and...

“Aahhh!” My heart stopped briefly as the panic drove all the puff from my lungs. I stumbled backwards. There was another cracking sound in the undergrowth, and out came...a cat?

“For God’s sake, you scared me! Are you trying to kill me?” I screeched still feeling like I could cough up my lungs out of fright.

The snow-white cat stood in front of me and seemed almost bewildered. Relieved I breathed in, my heart rate calming down again.

“So, what are you doing here?” Freezing, I knelt down and put my hand out. The cat – was it a Tom cat? – twitched its ears almost as if it was amused, as it came closer.

“Hey, I’m Alice. And who are you?” I asked as if a cat could answer me.

It tilted its head to one side, raised its paw as if to give me its hand, and answered with a velvet-soft and unbelievably deep voice: “Hello Alice. I’m Curse.”

My scream was so shrill that it even hurt my ears. I jerked back and hit my back hard on the iron gate. The *clang* of the impact resounded through the whole forest.

The tom cat arched his back in fright and snarled at me, whilst I stared wide-eyed at him. My heart was racing so fast that I could feel it in my mouth, whilst I wildly shook my head.

“Did you really just speak?” I gasped, stunned.

“Did you really just hear me?” came the surprised counter question. Clear as day. From the Tom cat. The cat that had just told me his name was Curse.

I screamed again.

“Holy shit!”, the cat gasped.

“Alice? What’s wrong?”, asked a shocked voice that luckily wasn’t coming from the cat this time.

I turned around and, full of relief, saw Hawkins standing in front of the iron gate with a crate of soft drinks in his hands.

“The...the...I...I heard something, and then there was the...the cat!”, I stammered pointing at Curse.

Hawkins hesitated. “Huh?”, he asked.

“Miaow”, said Curse innocently. I spun on my heels, but could only see the critter, tail up, making a run for it and disappearing lightning-fast into the bushes.

“That cat...it...”, I stuttered completely confused as Hawkins put down the crate and opened the creaking gate.

“Are you unwell? Have you had too much to drink?”, he asked visibly concerned and hugged my shoulders. His fingers only touched me gently, almost fleetingly, but goose bumps spread over my skin without any warning. Even the hairs on my neck stood up. I flinched, but the gruesome feeling remained, got stronger even. Like cold creeping through your temples until it arrives in the windings of your brain. Brain freeze. The pain was sharp and stabbing. I could feel my knees shaking.

“Alice?”

I felt Hawk wrap his arms around me. I opened my mouth, but only ice-cold mist came out, as dark spots blurred my vision. My blood curdled in my arteries, and I heard a sound boom through my skull like a bell:

*Damned are we, in this game of chess,
sixteen of us under eternal duress.
Spared are neither black nor white,
between life and death, an eternal fight.*

Blood for blood, so it must be,

At the end, alone are we.

But calm my heart shall never be

for cursed are we, both you and me.

“Alice! Hey!” I was being shaken and dragged so abruptly back to reality that I gasped for air like I was drowning. I blinked and saw Hawk kneeling over me. Had I fallen over? When did it happen? *What* had happened?

“What...what was that? What was that voice?”

I shut my eyes tightly. My temples were throbbing, and when I opened my eyes again, Hawk was looking down at me, a terrified look in his eyes.

“You heard what? Shit! What exactly did you hear?”, he asked, and his look seemed haunted.

“Of course I heard something. That voice and that...that cat...what was it?”, I croaked, trying to sit up and groaned, “Fuck!”

Everything hurt. The stabbing pains were boring into my back and I sucked in air wheezing, Hawk staring at me with a strange expression on his face.

Then he said slowly: “If you heard something... can you see that too?” His finger pointed to something on me, and my neck muscles suddenly tensed.

“What...”, I began, shaking, and stroked my arms, touching something strange. Startled, I looked down and saw a few long, quivering spider legs clinging on to me.

“Shit!”, I screamed out of repulsion, frantically rubbing my upper arm. “What was that? Was it a spider? Is it still there?”

Hawk grimaced, swearing. “Oh man, you really can see them?”

I opened my mouth and the next moment felt something ticklish in my hair. When I looked up, my eyes goggled. Above the jagged points on the gate it was crawling with spiders. Big ones, small ones, crawling all over with their long, spindly, quivering legs.

“Holy shit!” I struggled up, but doubled over again straight away. Hawk helped me up slowly. His eyes stayed fixed on me like...like...like in a nightmare. Absolutely, this had to be a nightmare! “What sort of sick shit is this?”

Hawk grimaced and just said, “I’m sorry.”

“*What* are you sorry about?” I spat and frantically pinched my cheeks. I had to wake up. Quickly! But I didn’t. I just didn’t.

At that exact moment a particularly fat spider suddenly crawled right over Hawk’s face. He flinched and smacked his hand against his cheek. But the next moment dozens more fell on him, scurried and scuttled over him, all of them making their way...straight towards me.

“Run, Alice!”, Hawk screamed. Our eyes met as he brushed a few spiders from his shoulder. I stumbled backwards. One step. Two. “Run, while you still can!” he shouted at me.

Something scuttled up my back, and I followed Hawkin’s advice. I turned around, whimpering, and ran away as if the devil himself was chasing me. Tears streamed down my cheeks, but I could hardly feel them, just like the branches lashing my face.

This had to be a nightmare.

Just a nightmare.

A terrible nightmare.

CHAPTER 2

6 MONTHS LATER

A nightmare!

I sat bolt upright in bed gasping for breath. Cold sweat was running down my back and the beeping of my phone was echoing shrilly in my ears. My fingers shaking, I pushed the snooze button and fell back into bed. The pillow was rumpled and felt as sweat-soaked as my back. It had been another night of tossing and turning. Another night full of nightmares, as had become the norm for me over the past six months.

Six months.

I fell back into bed and closed my eyes.

There are no speaking cats.

There are no black spiders.

I am not crazy.

It was all just a nightmare.

The mantra calmed my fluttering pulse, and I opened my eyes again – only to see *it*.

It, on this occasion, was as big as a golf ball and had long black legs and a quivering body that looked as if someone had brought smoke to life. And *it* was scuttling across my bed.

“Holy shit!”, I jerked upright again. The spider darted across the bed cover and I discovered dozens more on the floor. Just like every day.

They were haunting me like a living nightmare, and I was beginning to run out of explanations that didn’t amount to me being crazy.

I had tried to find answers over the last few months. I had googled the most likely and unlikely things. Hallucinogenic mushrooms, for example.

After that I tried to get hold of this Hawk’s cell phone number. But nobody was in contact with Chesterfield or St. Burrington. Everyone just saw the boarders at the parties they secretly threw, or in town, driving around in their expensive cars every now and again. In my desperation I had finally even called St. Burrington, and even hung around in front of the gate a few times. But time and again I had just been fobbed off, that’s if I even saw anyone.

“I *am* not crazy”, I told the spiders grimly. They scurried away as I swung my leg out of bed and quickly opened the curtains. Bright sunlight filled my room and brightened up the old wooden floor.

“New day, new beginning”, I reasoned with myself, and the mirror image in the window gave me a less convincing grimace. “New day, new shit” is more like it. But I didn’t want to be pessimistic already at eight o’clock in the morning.

I hurriedly got dressed, grabbed my school bag and ran along the landing in the old villa. Salt Villa was so old that it had started to develop a life of its own. The dark floor boards creaked, the ornate beams groaned, and in my opinion the doors opened and shut of their own accord. The old paintings hanging on the brown-orange patterned wallpaper were proof of the many generations of Salts that had already lived here, as were the worn patches in the once red carpet.

I ran down the stairs and followed the breakfast smells wafting from the kitchen. Large parts of the kitchen were made up of worn wood. Big bunches of lavender and sage, that Granny had picked from the overgrown garden and hung up to dry, hung from the beams. It was the only room on the ground floor that didn’t have an old tree standing in front of it, so sunlight could shine in unimpeded. The windows were open and birdsong floated in and mixed with the sound of a bubbling pot.

“Good Morning!” I tried to sound as care-free as a seventeen-year-old High School girl should feel. Normal, busy with boys and homework at most. A girl, like I once was, which is why my tone almost sounded convincing.

“Good Morning, my darling.”

My mom looked up, smiling. She was already wearing her uniform: brown trousers, brown jacket and the star that marked her out as the Sheriff of the town.

Grandma Emerald was sitting in her usual corner in the armchair knitting. She did that a lot since her stroke, and since then the rhythmic *clack, clack, clack* of the needles had become the heartbeat of the old house.

“Hello, Granny”, I said and kissed her warm, wrinkled cheek that always smelt of sherbet lemons. At the same time I inconspicuously brushed a black spider from her shoulder. Granny smiled, confused.

“How was the visit to St. Burrington, dear? Did you have a nice time at tea?”, she asked and patted my cheek.

“Yes, thanks, it was great”, I answered softly.

“Good, good. You should marry him. He’s a really nice boy.”

I just nodded and Mum laughed quietly.

A white lock of hair slipped from Granny's bun. She looked like the 'kind granny from next door', and as long as the dementia had her in its grips, she was. In the rare moments when her head was clear, unfortunately she was more like an old fury using her knitting needles mostly for poking you in the leg. Granny Emerald was my father's mother, but he had only rarely spoken about her. Before his car accident we had never visited her either, and as soon as the real Gran came out, I knew why too. Because she could be really mean! Nobody could blame my dad for marrying my mum so early and moving away. Apart from Granny, of course! Which she did. Loudly. Even though he was long dead.

The thought made a lump form in my throat but that was better than the uncontrollable crying that had been my constant companion in the first weeks after his death.

"Did you oversleep?", Mum said reproachfully and took a gulp of coffee, that was available at ours around the clock. I could hardly remember a time that the coffee machine wasn't in use in our house. Even before the move coffee was already a fixture in our lives.

A lot had gone, the coffee had stayed. The smell was comforting.

I was trying to pull myself together when a black spider with black legs scrambled over the rim of Mum's cup. I didn't say anything either as she put the cup to her mouth and drank while the spider ran across her hand. It wouldn't have done any good to scream my head off. Because mum wouldn't have seen the spider anyway. Nobody did. And that was probably the scariest thing about it: that I was alone with this nightmare.

"I know. I'm off", I mumbled, tore my eyes from the spider and grabbed some toast from the sideboard.

"Don't go too fast!", my mum warned me as I rushed out of the kitchen giving Grandma Emerald a kiss on her wrinkly cheek as I passed. She didn't look up or stop knitting.

"I won't", I shouted back as I pushed open the old mint-green door. The creaking hinges sounded like a groan.

My bike was lying where I had left it yesterday, in the rhododendron bushes next to the white veranda.

Our old family villa was about a twenty-minute bike ride from school in the south of Foxcroft. Autumn Street was out of the way, cars only rarely drove past. If you didn't already have the feeling that Foxcroft was at the back of beyond, you definitely would by the time you got to us out here.

The villa's once blue facade looked grey and pale like gnawed bones after decades of weathering, and the porch swing squeaked. The trees in the garden were so big and old that their branches reached over the whole roof and plunged everything into half-shadow.

I grabbed my bike, clamping my toast between my teeth, and pedalled off. The summer holidays were coming up and it was already hot, even though the sun wasn't very high in the sky. The chirping of the cicadas accompanied me as I went along the road and the wind blew through my hair. I breathed deeply and felt my pulse finally calm down a bit. Movement had always helped me, and for as long as I could remember, I got jittery and anxious as soon as I had to sit still for too long. That was perhaps one reason why I had started cheerleading, even before Foxcroft.

But recently even that didn't help anymore. After training I was mostly still just as erratic and distracted as before. My nerves were raw. Every shadow made me jump, I was sleeping badly, and every time I saw a white cat I was close to a nervous breakdown.

And I couldn't tell anybody about it, because someone finding out that I was having hallucinations would be even worse than the hallucinations themselves.

I screamed to a halt at a red light and stared into the distance towards the trees that surrounded Foxcroft like a dark ring. It pulled me into the forest, to the boarding schools. What had happened back then...

I made myself look away and eat the piece of toast. Whilst I waited for the traffic light to turn green, loud music and the revving of an engine made me look up out of curiosity. An expensive-looking silver cabriolet stopped next to me. My eyes wandered over the four young people in the car, who didn't look like they belonged in Foxcroft. My eyes fell on the girl sitting in the passenger seat first. She had strikingly light hair and was wearing sunglasses that had probably cost as much as the contents of my entire wardrobe. Two boys were sitting behind her, who must have been twins, because they were so much alike that I had the feeling I was seeing the same person twice. They had delicate faces with almond-shaped, dark eyes and golden brown hair, cut in a precise bob.

It was the guy at the steering wheel who grabbed my attention though. The girl next to him could have been his sister, because his hair, falling in soft curls around his face, was light too. One of his hands was resting casually on the steering wheel whilst he put the car into gear with the other and revved the engine again. An amused grin spread across his full lips and then, all of a sudden, he looked at me with his light blue eyes and caught me staring. I blinked and flinched, and a quiet humming started up in my head, like tinnitus. It had to be embarrassment, which was also flushing my cheeks.

His grin broadened and I could see his dimples flash.

"What's wrong, Vincent? It's green, let's go", I heard the girl, clearly annoyed, shout over the music.

"Okay", he shouted back, "I just discovered something absolutely fascinating!" His warm laugh sent shivers down my spine.

Night of Crowns, Band 1: Spiel um dein Schicksal

Night of Crowns (Vol. 1): Play for your Destiny

by Stella Tack

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The girl's head snapped round, but at that very moment, the blond guy put his foot down and roared off. I stared after the car, fascinated, and once I was finally back in the here and now, the light had already changed back to red. The tinnitus disappeared.

"What was that?", I murmured shaking my head and put my feet on the pedals to race across the junction. If I didn't hurry, I would be too late to class and that really was the last thing I needed so close to getting my report card.

Because as far as my grades were concerned, my life was looking anything but rosy right now.