

THE DRAGON'S DAUGHTER

Sharon Honeycutt

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For Terry, because your faith and love sustain me

and

*For Tori, because you have always been,
and will always be, the light of my life*

God bless you both

Part One

*Late Summer
Just Before Junior Year*

Chapter One

“Mom! I can’t breathe!”

“Mariah! You only have to wear the hood for a few minutes—ten at the most,” Mom had said. “You’ll be fine.” Putting a robe and a masked hood on a seven-year-old and a torch in her hand was not my idea of “fine,” but then nobody ever really asked for my opinion. If they had, I’d have told them, *I won’t be fine, but I’m going to live through it*. Truly, I think that’s what Mom meant too.

In the nine years since, I’d learned to cope with feeling suffocated behind the mask, but I could do nothing about the heat. Sweat trickled down my scalp and into my eyes, and it burned. I blinked rapidly, which didn’t help, so I scrunched my eyes shut, which actually made it worse. With my torch in my left hand, I reached up under my mask with my right and swiped at my eyes, trying to relieve some of the stinging. It didn’t help. I sighed. I hated these damn rallies. Where the hell was Dad and what was he waiting for? I wished he’d just light the cross and be done with it. I wanted to swim.

All at once, the others standing with me around the cross began to chant. Dad must be making his appearance. My peripheral vision was next to nothing,

thanks to the hood, and I stood opposite the cross, so he approached from behind me and to the right. I couldn't see him until he'd already passed me, but I'd begun chanting with the others. Looking like evil ghosts in our pointed hoods and long white robes, torches blazing in our hands stretched out in front of us, we threw our voices into the night, spears of intolerance.

"White power! White power!"

One year, when I was fourteen, I didn't yell. I'd stood there, torch held high, and watched Dad in his robe—his special robe trimmed in green braid—light the cross on fire. He never wore a mask and the fire danced and glinted in his eyes. He'd thrust his torch high, grimacing as he yelled, and I'd stood silent and wondered, *Who is he? How can he be my dad? How can Mom be married to him? Why on God's earth does he believe all this bullshit? Why can't we just be a normal family?*

Gideon stood beside me that night. He gave me the creeps, even then. He made me wish for a turtle's shell that I could shrink myself into whenever he was around. He was the one who told Dad I hadn't yelled, and Dad beat me for it that night, in our tent within earshot of everybody else. I cried and I know I whimpered some, but I took it as silently as I could. I'd disgraced the grand dragon and I had to be punished. I knew the drill and so did Gideon. Dad drew Gideon closer to him after that night. I think that's why he made me date him. Gideon was the picture-perfect Klan boy—surely he'd bring me to heel. We'd been together for almost two years, and he still made my skin crawl.

The Dragon's Daughter

So tonight, and at every rally since the one two years ago, I yelled with the rest. Dad touched his torch to the gasoline-soaked, sheet-wrapped cross and the flames swooshed up the spire. With his torch burning in his outstretched hand, I saw a demon in Dad's robe when he spun around to face us. I shivered. I yelled. I extinguished my torch. The August night had already been thick and humid before the cross burned, and all I really cared about was stripping off the robe and running for the pond. I couldn't tell where Chloe, my best friend, had gone, but I knew she was here somewhere and probably just as eager to swim. If I could find her quickly, she'd be the buffer between me and Gideon. She'd gotten good at it.

There was a slight breeze tonight, and it brushed lightly against my skin once I stripped off the hood and robe. It felt so good that I just stood there for a minute in my shorts and halter, my eyes closed, my feet apart, my arms stretched wide, drinking in the cool air, the Klan paraphernalia on the ground at my side.

"God, babe, you look amazing."

Gideon. Shit. My quiet little moment to myself was gone.

I opened my eyes and there he stood, his blond hair sweat-soaked and sticking up in odd tufts all over his head. His blue eyes—so like my own—drilled into me then raked my body with his gaze. He licked his lips and inwardly I cringed.

Remember, Dad likes him. That means you like him—for another two years and two months until college—you like him.

“Thanks,” I said, swiping my robe and hood off the ground as I turned away from him. “I’m taking this stuff to camp and then I’m going swimming. Chloe’s meeting me,” I added, hoping he’d get the hint that I didn’t want to be alone with him. He’d been pressuring me a lot lately to let him go further when we made out. It was hard enough just kissing Gideon. The idea of letting him ... of his hands ... of his ... anything else anywhere else on my body made me sick to my stomach. I didn’t know how I was going to keep him off me for two more years. I shivered as I made my way across the field to my family’s camp because I knew I might not be able to stop him.

“I’ll meet you over there,” Gideon called after me. “I need to talk to your dad.” I shivered again and kept walking.

When I got to the campsite, Mom was there with Sandy Thompson. I heard them laughing before I actually saw them, and I smiled when I heard them. Mom didn’t laugh much at home. Sometimes, if we watched something really funny on TV, she’d smile, but I couldn’t remember the last time I’d heard her really laugh like she was doing now with Sandy.

As my relationship with Gideon dragged on, I’d been thinking more and more about Mom’s relationship with Dad. Gideon idolized my dad—he mimicked Dad’s walk, he repeated things he’d heard Dad say, and he’d started treating me the way he saw Dad treat Mom. One night, about a week ago, he’d been over to our house and all of us were watching a movie in the living room. It was the middle of an important scene, and Dad told Mom, “Leah, go get me another beer.” He never looked away from the

TV. He never said “please” or “thank you.” He’d just noticed he was out of beer and wanted another one.

Without a word or a sigh, without even rolling her eyes, Mom got up, went to the kitchen, and got Dad his beer. Although I’d seen Dad tell Mom thousands of times, “Get me a beer,” and I’d seen Mom do it thousands of times, I really noticed it that night because Gideon noticed it too.

Once Mom came back in the room with Dad’s fresh beer and sat down again to try and pick the movie back up, Gideon tried Dad’s trick out on me.

“Mariah,” he said, “go get me another Coke.” He’d tried to do it just like Dad, without looking at me, without breaking his concentration on the movie. But he couldn’t. He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye to see if I’d actually leave my place beside him and run and fetch his Coke. I was dumbfounded.

I just stared at him for a minute as my cheeks grew hot. I looked across the room at Mom. At first, she only stared at the glass of iced tea she held in her hands. But she did eventually raise her eyes to mine, and in her eyes I saw only pity and regret. She shrugged her shoulders and looked away.

I looked at Dad, who seemed oblivious to everything and completely engrossed in the movie. I looked back at Gideon, who had also returned his attention to the TV, though I knew he felt me staring at him.

“Mariah, you heard your man. Go get him a Coke.” Dad hadn’t shifted his gaze, but I knew better than to argue. I left my seat, grabbed Gideon’s empty can from the coffee table in front of us, and marched from the

room. The recycling bin was on our back porch outside the kitchen, so I slammed the kitchen door as I went outside. And then I slammed the empty can against the wall, splattering myself with the last few drops of Gideon's soda, and threw the can as hard as I could into the yard.

I stood there shaking for a few minutes. I think I was hoping that Mom would come out and tell me ... something. Something that would give me some hope. *Maybe she spits in Dad's dinner before she serves him*, I thought. I just wanted her to come out and tell me something that would make me believe that being a Klan woman wasn't as horrible as it seemed. I think I stood on our porch for at least five minutes, and maybe even ten, but no one else came out that door. Neither Dad nor Gideon came out to yell at me for taking so long. And Mom didn't come and offer me any hope. It was then that I began to realize, there wasn't any hope to offer women like us.

I was thinking about that night when I got close enough to camp to make out Mom and Sandy in the dark. They sat close together in lawn chairs behind a small fire they'd started, and with their heads bent together and their laughter on the breeze, they looked like Chloe and me. Mom really confused me at times like this. She could be happy—I was seeing it right in front of my eyes. She could laugh. She could relax. Why did she stay with Dad? Why didn't she take me and Jeremy and leave?

I knew the Klan's beliefs weren't her own. A year ago, I'd been rooting around in her closet for something to wear to the movies. I'd finally hit the stage—at five feet

eight and 125 pounds—where I could wear Mom's clothes. Her closet was a treasure trove of "new" stuff, even if it was old to her. I just called it "vintage" and put it on.

As I swiped hangers along the rod in the closet, looking for a blue shirt I'd had my eye on for a while, I came cross Mom's Klan robe. I realized I'd never seen her in it.

"Mom?" I called to her, my face still buried in the closet. I pulled the rest of the clothes farther away from the robe and looked at it closer.

"Mom!" I called again, a little louder this time, still not bothering to take my face from the closet. Her robe looked almost as new as mine. I'd gotten a new one that year because I'd grown and the old one didn't fit anymore. After wearing it twice, it was already stained in a couple places—grass stains on the back where I'd stepped on it accidentally (because I liked to throw it on the ground when I took it off) and iced tea on the front (because I was also so damn hot and thirsty when I took it off). Mom's, I saw, was pretty much spotless.

"Mom!" I hollered, turning around out of the closet to go find her and jumping back into the closet when my nose bumped hers at the door.

"Geez!" I said, laughing. "You scared the crap out of me!"

"What are you doing in my closet?" Mom wasn't laughing. Or smiling. I sobered up.

"Looking for that blue shirt," I began. "I want to wear it tonight to the movies with Chloe."

She didn't say anything. She just stared at me.

“Um ... I mean, can I wear your blue shirt to the movies tonight?”

“Yes,” she sighed a little. “But you’re supposed to ask me before you go digging around in my closet.”

“I am?”

“Yes, Mariah! Yes, you are.” She sighed louder and shook her head. “I deserve that much respect from my daughter at least, don’t you think?” I blushed and nodded.

“Sorry, Mom.” I stepped away from the closet. “I don’t have to wear it tonight. It’s okay.” I started to leave her bedroom.

“Mariah?” I turned around and looked at her. “It’s right here, right in front of your face. You couldn’t find it?” She offered me a small smile, so I smiled back.

“Oh, I guess I didn’t see it.” I walked over to her and took the shirt from her outstretched hand. “Thanks, Mom. You sure you don’t care?”

“No, I don’t care. Don’t spill anything on it and wash it for me tomorrow.”

“I will,” I said. “Thanks again.” I turned around to leave and she called me back again.

“Is that why you were yelling for me? You’re hopeless, Mariah.”

“Oh!” I remembered the robe. “No, Mom. That’s not why I was calling you.” As I turned to face Mom again, I looked at the lines around her eyes and her mouth. I took in the perpetual gray shadows that surrounded her eyes. I thought about not asking. I thought about leaving it alone.

“I found your robe.” I’d never been very good at leaving things alone.

"Yes." She straightened her back and crossed her arms across her chest. I fidgeted with the shirt in my hands for a minute, dropping my gaze to the crystals that lined the V-neck.

"Well," I said, still not looking at her, "it's just that I've never seen you in it. I didn't even know you had one." I looked up at her and asked, "Why don't you wear it? Why don't you stand with us for the cross lightings?" What I really wanted to know was why Dad let her get away with it and how could I do the same.

"Your dad and I have an agreement about it, Mariah. That's all you need to know."

Shit. That's not helpful, I thought. But I didn't push. I decided I could leave some things alone.

"Thanks again for letting me wear the shirt, Mom. I'll wash it tomorrow." I left the room and we never spoke again about her robe.

Sandy saw me approaching first and broke away from the conversation she and Mom had been having. "Hey Mariah," she said.

"Hey Sandy." Mom turned to look at me. She glanced at the robe slung across my arm and the hood dangling from my hand.

"Any stains tonight?" she asked. I shook my head.

"Shouldn't be. I was careful."

"Good," Mom said. "Put it in the tent." I walked across the campsite to where our family tent sat in the shadows of their small fire.

"I'm going to the pond. That okay?" I folded the robe and hood and tossed them into the plastic tote we kept them all in—mine, Jeremy's and Dad's, anyway—at the

rallies. "I'm so stinkin' hot," I added as I zipped the tent flap back into place.

"That's fine," Mom said. "Jeremy's there already, I think."

"Cool. I'll avoid him." I bent down and kissed Mom's forehead. "See ya later. Bye Sandy," I added.

"See ya," Sandy responded.

"Not too late, Mariah," Mom told me.

I waved in affirmation, watching the two of them bend their heads back together to continue their conversation.

I'd hoped to run into Chloe at the campsite so that we could cross the field to the pond together. It was pretty dark and I didn't know where Gideon was.

"Wait up, babe!" And there he was, somewhere behind me. I didn't stop. I didn't turn around. I increased my speed as much as I could without turning my walk into a jog—which would only piss him off—and he caught up to me easily anyway. At six feet tall, Gideon was Jeremy's size and almost exactly the same age—eighteen. And they were both excellent young Klansmen.

Chloe, where are you? I thought as Gideon loped up beside me and draped an arm across my shoulders.

"Gideon! It's too hot!" I shrugged off his arm and tried to walk a little faster. It was useless. His legs were longer than mine. And I thought he was enjoying the chase just a little too much, so I stopped and glared at him. There was just enough moonlight that I could see the hunger in his eyes.

"It could be hotter," he said. He closed the space between us and clamped his hands on my sides just below my ribs. He squeezed and it hurt.

"God, don't you ever think about anything but sex?" I squirmed, trying to get loose from his hands, but it was no use. He was bigger and stronger. And he knew it.

"Not when I'm with you, I don't." He moved his hands around my back and pulled me into him. "Come on, baby, don't tell me you don't think about it." I could feel him, hard against me through his jeans and the thin fabric of my cotton shorts. He wanted me to feel him, I knew. I hated him so much at that moment, and I couldn't deny it—I feared him too. I knew I could yell if it got too ugly, but I didn't know for sure who would hear. And what was worse, there were few who would intervene on my behalf.

"Gideon, let—me—go!" I struggled against him and I saw it in his face—the excitement. *He's getting off on my fear*, I realized and immediately stood as still and confident as I could.

"Please, Mariah," he whispered, his lips brushing against mine, "please, I've waited so long. You know I love you." He slipped his tongue between my lips and snaked it between my teeth. Before I even knew what I was doing, I bit down hard on it and immediately tasted blood.

"Shit!" he screeched, jumping away from me as I spit into the grass, trying to get the taste of his blood out of my mouth. "You bitch!" He came at me fast and slapped me across the face. I fell to my hands and knees, spitting

blood again—this time my own. I hung my head and tried to think.

“You are just like my dad,” I murmured.

“You’re damn right I am, you bitch.”

I looked up in time to see him draw back his foot, and I knew he intended to kick me in the gut. I dropped to the ground, drew my knees up to my chest, and wrapped my arms around my legs, turning myself into the smallest human ball I could as I waited for the blow. It never came. Instead, I heard the sound of a solid punch, of flesh and bone meeting flesh and bone. I heard a crack and a grunt and a body hit the ground. When I looked up, I saw a shadow that looked and sounded a whole lot like Jeremy, but he’d never come to my rescue once. Not ever. What the hell was going on?

“Don’t you *ever* even *think* about touching my sister again! Hear me asshole? Not ever! Do you hear me?” I’d never heard Jeremy that angry, and I’d never been so grateful for his presence.

Gideon didn’t respond, and I saw Jeremy bend low over him. I thought I saw his hands go around Gideon’s throat.

“Answer me, boy!”

I heard muffled, frantic attempts for breath and then I heard Gideon’s voice, raspy like sandpaper. “Sucker punched me, dickhead.”

At that, Jeremy must have tightened his hold on Gideon’s neck because I heard Gideon cough and sputter. I stood and shuffled away from them.

Jeremy landed a couple more solid punches and Gideon stopped struggling and lay still in the grass. I

couldn't see them well from where I stood, so I didn't know if Gideon was still conscious. I hoped not.

"Mariah?" Jeremy called to me quietly.

"What?"

"Come here. Gideon has something to say to you."

I crept through the tall grass to where Jeremy towered over both me and Gideon, who remained prone on the ground. Gideon's eyes were open and he was breathing, though it sounded like every breath hurt him. I was glad of that.

When Gideon saw me standing over him, he clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyes, then grimaced again in pain.

"Say it, asshole," Jeremy demanded, prodding Gideon in the ribs with his foot. Gideon winced, sucking in air.

"I'm sorry."

"What else?" Jeremy punctuated his agitated question with another kick to Gideon's ribs, eliciting another grunt of pain from the boy on the ground. Gideon swore and coughed for a minute until he was able to catch his breath.

"I'll never hit you again, Mariah," Gideon whispered. As Jeremy's foot rose slowly one more time, he added, "And I'll never make you do anything you don't want to." Jeremy lowered his foot and stood solidly beside me. I looked up at him, and for the first time, I looked up to him as well.

Regardless of how good it felt to have Jeremy's protection, I had no words for either of them. I didn't believe Gideon was sorry. I knew the only thing he regretted was the beating he'd just taken at Jeremy's

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hands, and I was afraid I'd pay the price for that. *If only Dad would let me break up with Gideon*, I thought as I stood there staring at his miserable face. I didn't see that happening, though, even after this fight. I knew I'd have to make peace with my situation and soon—at least for the next couple of years—until I could escape to college and more freedom than I dared dream about at home.

Chapter Two

A week after the rally, in the godforsaken August heat, school started. I'd been worried that Gideon would tell Dad what happened at the rally, but Jeremy told me that wouldn't happen.

"He won't want to tell the dragon that he got the shit kicked out of him," was my brother's explanation and I figured he was right. "And Mariah, he tries any of that crap with you again, you let me know," he'd added.

My shock kept me silent.

"I mean it. You hear me? He's not gonna treat you like that."

"Who are you?" I'd asked him, and that earned me a classic Jeremy grin.

"I'm the goddamn dragon's son, and no wannabe is gonna treat my kid sister like that. Got it?"

"Got it," I said. "And Jer?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"A little late, sis," he said, still grinning, "but you're welcome."

Turned out Jeremy was right. Gideon was ashamed he'd lost the fight, and he kept quiet about the whole

incident. I'd managed to keep myself busy over the last week—volleyball practice had started—and avoided being alone with him. I knew my time was coming. I knew he was dying to get me alone and prove his strength over me. I had to be ready for that.

At lunch on the first day of school, Chloe looked at me over our trays of hot dogs and tater tots.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just thinking about Gideon. Worrying about Gideon," I added. Chloe nodded her head. She knew. I'd told her—as I told her everything—about Gideon slapping me and Jeremy beating him up. My best friend and I had a lot in common: We both hated the Klan. We both hated our boyfriends. Our dads made us date assholes. Chloe's dad, Jimmy Burns, Jr., was my dad's blackhawk—his head of security. He knew where everybody went, what everybody said, and what everybody did. I truly wasn't sure who had it worse—me or Chlo.

"Have you seen Gideon today?" Chloe asked.

"Yeah," I frowned. "He was waiting at my locker after early-morning practice got out. Totally screwed up my high." I always felt so good after I got out of practice. He came along and blew it this morning. "He wants to come over tonight, but I'm counting on that new woman—Chan, the chemistry teacher—and Gibson in algebra giving me enough homework that I can tell him I can't do anything but study."

"Oh! That reminds me," Chloe said, leaning over her tray and lowering her voice. "Dad's pissed they went ahead and hired Mrs. Chan. I heard him talking to

somebody on the phone last night—he'd gotten a look at my schedule and saw I was gonna have her. I guess he thought the stink he and Craig made at the school board meeting was gonna be enough to keep them from hiring her." She chuckled. "The blackhawk dropped the ball—didn't follow up. Now he's trying to cover his ass before Craig gets pissed at him. Has your dad said anything about it?"

"No," I shook my head. "Not that I've heard. I remember when he and Jimmy went to the board meeting. I was mortified. I had to go to volleyball practice the next day and Angela Kim is on the team. You know her?" Chloe shook her head.

"I've never had her in any classes either or anything," I said. "But I've played on the team with her for two years and she's so nice. I think we could be friends if I could do it without Dad or Jimmy finding out—"

"Mariah—"

"I know!" I said, interrupting Chlo as she'd interrupted me. "I don't think it's really possible, it's just that I like her, I respect her, and until that stupid meeting, I thought she was starting to look beyond the whole KKK-ness of my life and give me a chance just to be me." I sighed and drew my spoon through my applesauce. "You should have seen the way she looked at me that morning at practice."

"Our lives pretty much suck, Mariah," Chloe sighed. "I'm just glad I've got you." She smiled a ghost of a smile at me, and I offered her one in return.

"Me too you, Chlo. I don't know what I'd do without you." I looked around the cafeteria. Chloe and I sat in our

usual spot at the end of a table in one of the corners. Two empty chairs sat between each of us and the next person at the table. That distance—physical and otherwise—was always there between us and the rest of Fountain Park High. Once in a while, another Klan kid or two would come over and sit with us, try and hang out. We were polite because we had to be, but we always made it clear we didn't want them around. When it was just the two of us, we didn't have to guard what we said, and we liked it that way.

"How was history?" Chloe asked, changing the subject.

"Great! Mrs. Weber's awesome. I swear she's been everywhere," I said. "She and her husband backpacked through Italy this summer. Wouldn't you love to do something like that?" Chloe smiled her small smile at me.

"You're always dreaming, Mariah," she said. "I just want out of Fountain Park. I want away from my dad and your dad and Alex. If I can have that, I'll have it all." She saw me frown at her, so she smiled a little wider. "Oh, okay. You wanna go to Italy? I'll go with you! That better?"

"Much!" I said just as the bell rang. We walked our trays up to the window to return them and wrinkled our noses simultaneously at the soggy bits of food on the metal counter, which made us laugh. We walked side by side up the stairs to our lockers, which were close to each other as "Baxter" and "Burns" were separated by only two other students alphabetically. It had been like that all through school, and we loved it.

"You going to history now?" I asked Chloe.

"That's a class you need to take, Klan-girl," Sam Blake said to me as his fat fingers latched onto a binder in his locker and his glasses slid down his nose. "We outlawed slavery a long time ago. You should read about that," he continued. "Bet that really pisses you off, don't it?"

I felt my face grow hot as I stared into my locker. There were so many things I wanted to say: *I don't hate blacks, you moron, that's my dad! You've hurt me more than I've ever hurt a black person!* But I kept my mouth shut, blinked back tears, grabbed my notebook, and slammed my locker shut. I felt him smirking at me as he walked away. Chloe was at my side in an instant.

"Don't let him get to you," she said. "He's shitty to us because everybody else is shitty to him." I nodded and took a couple deep breaths. I didn't trust my voice yet.

"You have chemistry now, don't you?" Chloe asked. I nodded. "You have algebra with me after that, right?" I nodded again, took another deep breath.

"Is my face all red?"

"No," Chloe said. "You look beautiful—as always." I smiled at my friend. Truly, I didn't know what I would do without her.

"Thanks," I said. I felt a little better. "I'll see ya in algebra."

Chloe headed back downstairs to Mrs. Weber's room, and I took a right after our lockers ended to get to the chemistry lab. I knew I was pushing it to make it on time, but there was a water fountain on the way with a mirror above it. I stopped to check and make sure I didn't look as splattered as Sam had made me feel. I brushed my blonde, curly hair back behind my shoulders and took in

my reflection. My eyes still looked freaked out a little, but otherwise, I thought I was okay. I bent down and got a quick drink from the fountain, which helped a little too, and then hurried down the hall. Chem was all the way at the end. I stepped through the door just as the bell rang and came to a crashing halt, almost dropping my notebook.

I'd thought I was just going to be able to glide into the room and into an empty seat. That was my standard MO. If I had a class without Chloe, I just tried to find a seat that was fairly isolated, where I could kind of cocoon myself away from everybody else. It usually worked. But not today.

Ten, two-person lab tables lined the walls of the room, and, to my dismay, all of the seats were filled except for one at the front of the room—and I NEVER sat at the front. To make it worse, sitting on one of the stools at that table was a new girl I'd never seen before. A black girl. I couldn't move. I knew I had to take that seat, but I couldn't move. I quickly scanned the faces in the room and I knew: they'd planned it this way. They wanted to see what I'd do, and they'd take pleasure from whatever reaction I had.

If I chose to sit there without a word, they'd talk about how horrible it must be for me to have to sit next to a black girl. They'd whisper—loudly—about that and about the Klan's "code," voyeuristically wondering what kind of trouble I'd get into for taking that seat. If I made an issue out of it, that would be even better. They'd get to talk about how rotten we Klan members were. They'd make comments a lot like Sam's and veiled threats about

teaching me lessons. I was in a lose-lose situation, and they didn't know the half of it. The dragon would be PISSED—at me—if I didn't correct the situation.

Hoping I could do something about it later, and hating the fact that I had to, I walked quickly to the empty stool and sat down. I tried to avoid the girl's eyes, and for the most part I did, but I could tell she was surveying me with hostility.

She knows, I thought and wilted on my stool.

When I raised my eyes to look at my teacher, I saw her regarding me with interest. I cringed inside. *What's she thinking about me?*

"Well, since you were the last one in the room—narrowly making the bell, I might add—we'll start introductions with you." Mrs. Chan was looking right at me.

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"I'm Mariah Baxter."

"Hello Mariah." I scanned Mrs. Chan's face for any sign that she knew my name—my family name. She should play poker. Her face gave away nothing. "What grade are you in?"

"I'm a junior."

"Do you have any siblings here at Fountain Park?"

Okay, what gives? I wondered. *She's messing with me. I know she's messing with me. She has to know it was Dad at that school board meeting. She has to know about me and about Jeremy.* I took a breath and answered her question.

"My brother, Jeremy, is a senior."

“Very good,” Mrs. Chan said. “Are you in any extracurricular activities?”

Oh, dear God. Seriously? I heard the snickers behind me. I felt the girl beside me stiffen and inch even farther away from me.

“I’m on the volleyball team.”

“And that’s ...,” she seemed to be thinking, “Coach Schwartz?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Ma’am?” I heard the whisper right behind me, but I didn’t know for sure who it was. “I bet that’s not what she calls her at home. Probably more like, ‘slant-eyes’ or ‘chink’ or something like that.” The boy—whoever he was—laughed quietly and so did his female conspirator. My face flushed again. I bit my lip to keep myself from turning around and telling them to go to hell—and to keep from crying.

“Very good, Miss Baxter. Good luck with your season.”

“Thank you.” I wanted out. I wanted to walk away and never walk back into that room. When would Dad stop staining everything I touched, everyone I met? I didn’t have time to think about that, though, because the new girl was already answering Mrs. Chan’s first question.

“Wendy Harris. We moved here a week ago from Indianapolis.” Indy was about an hour north of Fountain Park, but I’d only been there a couple times. Dad didn’t like to leave home much.

Fountain Park’s gonna be a big change for the Harrisese, I thought.

“Do you have any siblings?” Mrs. Chan asked.

"I have an older brother," Wendy said. "He's a freshman at IU—pre-med," she added, sitting up a little straighter.

She's proud of her brother, I thought, remembering my own feelings of pride in Jeremy that had sprung up last week when he defended me against Gideon.

Once Mrs. Chan had made it around the room, giving everybody a chance to tell her a little bit about themselves, she passed out our textbooks and went over the rules and safety procedures for the labs. We had to sign forms and give them back to her, saying we'd listened and we were going to be good with the Bunsen burners. I wasn't so sure some of my classmates would follow those rules, but time would tell. It was after we signed the forms that things got really bad.

"Now, class," Mrs. Chan said, "I want you to look at the person with whom you're sharing your lab table." She paused so that we could do that. Wendy and I barely made eye contact. "This is your lab partner for the semester."

My eyes got wide and I shot a freaked-out look at Wendy before I could stop myself. She raised her eyebrows when she caught my look then she frowned at me.

Shit. Now what do I do? I could just picture Dad's reaction. I was already worried about what he'd do if he found out I had to sit next to Wendy. If he found out I had to be her lab partner, he'd go ballistic. I was going to have to feed everybody's perception of who I was and try to change lab partners. If I didn't, I knew Dad would come after me first.

I took my time at the end of class, gathering my books so that I could be the last one in the room with Mrs. Chan. I fixed a smile on my face and approached my teacher.

“Mrs. Chan?”

“Yes? Oh, Miss Baxter. What can I do for you?” Mrs. Chan didn’t smile back at me, but she wasn’t frowning either, so I plunged into the ugly conversation I had to have.

“Well, first I want to apologize for being almost late to class.” I paused to see if my apology had any effect. Mrs. Chan nodded her head briefly but said nothing, so I took a deep breath, let go of my smile, and said, “I need to change seats.”

“Why?”

“I just can’t work with that new girl.”

“Wendy? And why is that? She’s new this year, so you can’t possibly be enemies already.”

“No, of course we’re not enemies,” I agreed.

Give her a little more time, I thought. She’ll grow to hate me.

“But, since I don’t know her,” I said to Mrs. Chan, “I don’t know what kind of work ethic she has, and I need to get a good grade in here. I don’t want to be dragged down by someone who may not care as much as I do.”

“What if Miss Harris feels the same way about you?” challenged Mrs. Chan. “What if, indeed, you are the one who pulls down her grade?”

I felt the color rise in my cheeks as I stood there, tongue-tied. *Damn it!* I thought. *Here I am again. A rock and a hard place, except the rock swings a belt when it’s pissed off.* I sighed and dropped my eyes.

"Look, Miss Baxter," said Mrs. Chan, glancing toward the door as her next class began to file in, "I know who you are. I know who your father is. I know why you're asking to be moved. I may be new to the school, but I'm not new to racism and bigots and your father is infamous in this state." My cheeks felt like they were on fire and I had my mouth clamped so tightly shut my teeth began to ache. "You're going to have to learn to live with being Miss Harris's lab partner." She paused. "And, God help her, Miss Harris is going to have to learn to live with being yours."

I stared at Mrs. Chan a second longer then rushed out of the room, pushing against the other students as they made their way in. For the second time today tears stung my eyes, and I went blindly to my locker, realizing once I got there that I didn't need anything from it for my next class. *What was it? Oh, yeah, Algebra 2 with Chloe.* I swam through the sea of faces to Mr. Gibson's room.

Chloe had saved me the seat beside her. As I slid into the chair, I glanced over at my friend and tried to smile and say hi, but I couldn't get the words out. I was petrified, thinking about what Dad was going to say—what he might do—and my mind couldn't get itself around anything else but that.

"Mariah?" Chloe whispered. "You okay?"

"No." I shook my head violently. "No, I'm not."

"What's wrong?"

"Tell you later. It's bad." I glanced across the aisle at Chloe and saw her brows knit together, and I shook my head again, repeating the only word my brain could form.

"Bad."

Sharon Honeycutt

The bell rang. Mr. Gibson began talking. There were papers and books, instructions and homework. But all I saw was the pretty black face of Wendy Harris and Dad's raging fists.

A rock and hard place, I thought, with nowhere to turn.