

That's why I want to stay here," I told him. "With you."

He shook his head a little, but didn't say no. Instead, he jumped up and said, "We'll talk about that another time. Right now you gotta go. It's late. Too late."

I looked at the sky. The sun blazed overhead like it was noon.

"But—"

"Don't go by this sun. It never rises and it never sets."

"So it never gets dark?"

He looked at me hard, his face was grim. "That doesn't mean there aren't dark places here. Remember that."

I was perversely happy when he said that, because I knew he was going to let me come back.

"Joe, I have never seen so many flowers in one place in my whole life!"

I was playing for time, and he knew it. I jumped up and started picking them. They grew as thick as the grass, more like a garden than a meadow.

I knew the names of some of them, because Aunt Doe had tried to grow a garden for years in our thin sandy soil, with disappointing results. I'm no horticulturist, but I knew that these flowers were flourishing outside their natural habitats and rhythms.

"Look, Joe, lilies of the valley."

"Those are bluebells," he said.

"But bluebells are blue."

"These are white bluebells."

"Daisies." I picked one and showed it to him. "At least I know a daisy when I see one. It's a pink daisy."

"It's a gerbera," Joe said. "Technically."

"What's this one, then? It looks like a firework on the Fourth of July."

"That's an aster."

I said, not willing to believe him, "How come a guy knows so much about flowers?"

He laughed. "I worked in the garden department of Home Depot for a couple of summers." And then he started wading through the grass, picking flower after flower and calling out their names. "Geraniums. Anemone. Larkspur. Daffodils. Crocuses." Pretty soon he had a big fat bunch of flowers in his hand, and presented them to me. It was a bouquet so lush and luxurious it would have made a queen jealous.

He wasn't finished. "Goldenrod," and he handed it to me. "It smells like licorice."

He picked another flower and held it out. "Trillium."

"Joe," I said, "I am truly 'trilled' by the trillium, but I can't hold any more in my hands."

"Okay," he said, and he stuck it behind my ear. He plucked out another flower and stuck that behind my other ear. He stuffed chrysanthemums in the back pockets of my jeans, and violets in my front pockets.

"Well, you might know their names," I said. "But do you know their meanings?"

"Flowers have meanings now?"

"Flowers have had meanings since ancient times," I told him, glad to finally be the one who knew stuff. "Roses mean love. So do violets. Different kinds of love. Forget-me-nots mean—"

"Let me guess: 'Don't forget me'." He picked me up and twirled me around. "Don't worry, Newbie. I could never forget you."

I didn't know how he meant that; but it made me sad. He put me down, and I started to recite all the meanings of all the flowers I could remember.

"Come on," he said, "we should have gone before, but since we're talking flowers, I want to show you this, and he pulled me to the borders of the Meadow and pointed up at small delicate flowering trees. "Dogwood. Rose of Sharon."

Then we went to where flowering vines and bushes grew. "Primrose. Azalea. Lilac. Bayberry, honeysuckle." Honeysuckle. I could have stood there forever and a day breathing it in, but Joe pulled me away, and pulled us between the trees, and I instantly forgot about the honeysuckle: because lo and behold, beyond the bushes lay a perfect oval pond, silver in the shade. And floating upon its surface was a flotilla of pure white lilies swaying on top of long slender stems that rose up from bright green pads.

I could hear frog chirp and bee buzz and I thought: this is a charmed place, cool and fragrant and flickering in the breezeblown sunlight.

"Shall I get you a water lily too?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Let them be."

"Okay, then sit," he ordered me, and I sat and he sat down next me. He took my bouquet and spread the flowers out on the ground. He took the longest stems and somehow knotted them into a garland.

"You did not learn that at Home Depot," I said, amazed.

He shrugged and grinned. "Boy scouts?" He placed the garland on my head like a crown. We reached out and caught each other's hands in the same instant.

"Joe, as long as I live, I will never forget that you took me to this beautiful place." I put his hand that I was holding up to my cheek. "Thank you."

Well, thank god he didn't jerk his hand away like my cheek was on fire (which it was) but he slowly disengaged his hand from mine.

He cleared his throat. "Just one more thing," he said, and pulled me up, but seemed to hesitate before he led me past the pond up to the edge of the forest. Just to the edge, but I still felt a seeping chill.