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Conversion

Written by
Katherine Howe

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PRELUDE

SALEM VILLAGE, MASSACHUSETTS

MAY 30, 1706

How long must I wait?
His tongue creeps out the corner of his mouth while he writes, the tip of it black with ink, the blacking in his gums staining his teeth. He looks like he's got a mouthful of tar. I've been waiting for some time, but Reverend Green's still writing. His quill runs across the paper, scratching like mouse paws. Scratch scratch, dip, scratch, lick, scratch.

My feet ache, and shifting my weight just makes the one hurt worse than the other. I'm leaning in the door frame, and in my mind my mother prods me in my back to make me straight. It's so sharp, the prodding, I could almost swear she was really there.

"Ann?" he says.

I'd gotten so used to the waiting that I don't hear him at first.

"Ann!" He's tossed his quill down.

"Yes," I whisper.

He turns a chill eye on me, an arm over the back of his chair. His elbow's worn the turkey-work well away, 'til it's so threadbare, it

shines. Reverend Green's the kind of man who's always being interrupted. A harassed look about him, as if he can never get time to concentrate on one thing altogether. Spends his whole life turning around in his chair.

I take a step back, thinking better of my errand. He gives me a long look. He's none too eager to hear what I've got to say either.

"Well, you'd best come in," he says at length, returning to his paper.

He hunches over his desk, free hand clutching bunches of his hair like he's anxious to finish whatever he's writing. Scratch scratch scratch.

I should've gone when I had the chance; he'd never've known I was here. I glance over my shoulder, through the parsonage hall. Goody Green, his wife, has got the fire going all right, but the door's open to the yard, as it's a warm day. The patch of sunlight on the floor is so bright, I have to squint. A long stretch of shadow, and a cat wraps around the doorjamb and flattens himself out in the sunshine with a yawn. He rolls on his back, batting at ghosts.

Goody Green's at the table wringing out cheesecloth. She looks harried, and no wonder, with the baby hiccoughing so. She was bouncing him up and down the hall when I arrived, beating him over her shoulder. I said she should hold him upside down and give him a little shake, but she glared and said, "If you'll just wait for Reverend Green over there."

I not being a mother, I suppose she'd ignore my advice, though it's common knowledge how many Putnams I raised myself. Now I see she's given up. The baby's stashed in a long wooden cradle near enough that she can rock it with a foot, but she's just letting him cough, all red in the face like a baked apple. And to be sure she can't call on anyone for so much as a poultice.

No one can, in the village, anymore.

"Go on, then," she says to me, giving the cloth a final twist. She's got some arms, has Goody Reverend Green. "Don't you keep him waiting."

If she weren't there, I could sneak away. I feel my heart pressing

against my ribs, and the top of my head opening, as if my soul were being ripped from my body by the hair.

A girl in a dirty coif wanders from the yard, finger in her mouth, her apron splotched with mud. She looks over at me all shy, because she doesn't know me, or perhaps because she's been warned to keep away. She's like a sweet piglet walking on two legs, with those pink cheeks all in mud like that, and I smile at her. She squeaks in terror and runs to hide behind her mother.

"Come now, Ann," the Reverend coaxes me from within his study.

It's cooler in there. It's away from the kitchen fire, with its window over the side yard, facing away from the sun. I'd like to sit. My feet are so tired.

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

But there is.

There is everything to be afraid of.

I swallow the lead ball in my throat that no amount of swallowing can be rid of, and move into the shadows of the Reverend's study. There's a bench between his desk and the fireplace. It's as hard as a church pew. I could swear the back isn't so much straight as curved, to force my head to bow. But it's not the bench that's making me hang my head.

The Reverend gingerly sands his paper, blows it clean, and blots, holding the paper to the light to approve of his work. Satisfied, he turns at last to me.

But when his eyes fall on my face, he recoils, as if I'd moved to strike him.

I've come to Reverend Green to make my confession.

Part 1

JANUARY
YULETIDE



And it was at Jerusalem
the feast of the dedication,
and it was winter.

JOHN 10:22

CHAPTER 1

DANVERS, MASSACHUSETTS

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2012

The truth is, I'm not sure when it started. I don't actually think anybody really knows.

For a while figuring out the very first instance of it seemed really important. They were interviewing all of us because they wanted to find the locus of it, or whatever, I don't really know. They marched us into the office one at a time, and there was this big map of the school up on a wall. It was covered in pins with little flags, each one with a date. It was super complicated. I think they thought that with enough pins and flags and yarn and everything, they'd figure it out, or at least it would look really impressive for the news cameras. And don't get me wrong, it *was* impressive. All those arrows and everything looked wicked complicated. It didn't help them figure anything out, though. I think it just made them feel better.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

If I was really forced to pick a date, like at gunpoint, I'd have to go with January 11. I'm saying that only because it was just a completely basic Wednesday with nothing much to recommend it.

Exactly the kind of day I shouldn't remember.

We'd been back from winter break only a couple of days, but we'd already gotten into the routine. Senior year. Last semester. We were pretty keyed up. I mean, everybody's always on edge when the semester starts, kind of, except spring semester senior year is like that normal nervousness times a million. Senior year is when it all comes together, all the years of studying and work and projects and sports and campaigns and whatever we're into that we've been working really hard for—it's either about to pay off or everything is about to completely fall apart. And don't even get me started about waiting for college acceptance letters. But even though senior year is massive, is basically the moment that sets up the rest of our entire lives and whether we're going to be successful and get everything we want or whether we're going to die alone in a ditch in the snow, we still have to get up and make it through every day. I still get up and brush my teeth, right?

This Wednesday should have been the most generic Wednesday imaginable, even if it was a Wednesday of the spring semester of our last year at St. Joan's.

"Sit," my mother said.

I was standing by the kitchen sink shoving a cranberry muffin into my mouth.

"What?" I said, plucking at my shirt to shake the crumbs out the bottom.

"Colleen, for God's sake. You won't be able to digest anything. Would you sit down for five minutes?" Mom used the toe of her slipper to brush the crumbs under the edge of the dishwasher.

"Can't. I've got to go," I insisted as Dad came up behind us, rattling the car keys.

"Did you get the problem set done?" Mom asked. She licked her thumb to rub crumbs from the corner of my mouth, and I squirmed away from her.

“Mom! Get over it! Yes, I got the problem set done.”

“You want me to look it over real quick?”

“Linda,” my dad warned from the front door. He jingled the keys again, and I slung up my backpack and kissed Mom on the cheek.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I promise.”

Could there be a more normal Wednesday morning? It’s so normal, I almost want to embellish it, and add something kind of exciting or dramatic or interesting. But I just can’t, because nothing like that happened. Dad dropped me off at school, and the upper school hallway was awash like it always was in an ocean of girls in plaid skirts and cardigans and wool tights and Coach handbags from the outlet store. I knew most of them, at least well enough to say hello, though every class adds a lot of new girls freshman year and so the older we got, the more strangers started peppering the hallways.

“Hey, Colleen,” said someone in passing, I didn’t see who, but I said “Hey” back and nodded to be nice. I stopped by my locker to swap out some books and scroll through a few texts that didn’t seem very important. I was just replying to something, I don’t remember what, when I heard it.

“Colleeeen, I saw you standing alooooooone, without a dream in my heart . . . without a love of your own. Colleeeeeeeeeen,” a voice hummed from inside my advisory classroom.

I looked up and grinned at the spines of my textbooks. Deena was stuck on “Blue Moon.” Again.

Deena’s the first one who’s important to know about. She came to St. Joan’s in sixth grade, and when she got here, she was the tallest one in the class, even taller than me, this string bean girl from Charleston with a shock of baby dreadlocks falling in layers to her shoulders. She had such a thick Southern accent that at first I kind of couldn’t tell what she was saying. But she lost the *y’alls* after only a couple of weeks, and then she started dropping her *R*’s. That girl is a total language sponge. The craziest is when she speaks Japanese. I

think she gets a special kick out of shocking people with it, especially when she was on her exchange program in Tokyo last summer—a six-foot-tall African American girl speaking near-fluent Japanese after just three months.

“Hey,” I said, sliding into my seat.

Deena grinned at me, spread her arms wide, and went for the big finish.

“Collleeeeeeeen! You knew just what I was there for, you heard me saying a prayer for, someone I really could care for!”

“She’s already been at this for, like, ten minutes,” Emma whispered to me, loudly enough that Deena could hear her.

Emma. Nominally, Emma is my best friend. I don’t even remember when I first met her, but we were tiny. Before preschool. She’s from Danvers, her parents are from Danvers, her grandparents were all from Danvers, her whole family lives in Danvers. Her brother, Mark, went to Endicott in Beverly because he didn’t want to be too far from Danvers. They all look alike, too, all the Blackburns. And they’re really clannish. Emma’s mom is one of those delicate blondes who is usually shuttered away with a headache, and when that happens, we can’t go over to the Blackburns’ house. They’re all very protective of each other. If somebody mentions, as I made the mistake of doing once, that maybe Emma’s mom would feel better if she just went outside once in a while, Emma will cut them dead with a look and say, “She can’t.”

Emma has always had a quietness to her, which is one of the reasons I like her so much. But it can also make her hard to read. Her reserve is a complete inversion of the chaos of my house. Emma was the last one of us to play with dolls—she was thirteen, which is kind of crazy, and we’d all already gotten our periods and were starting to text boys, but she’d still ask shyly if I wanted to bring my American Girl doll when I came over. They’re still out in her room, and I sometimes imagine her whispering to them when the lights go out. She has buttery-blond hair, which in the summers turns almost white in

the sun. Her eyebrows are so light and pale, they almost don't exist, and she refuses to wear makeup at all, which gives Emma a naked, otherworldly look.

Once it was clear that I liked Deena, Emma decided she was okay, too. It was Emma who taught Deena to stop saying "milk shake" when she meant "frappe."

Deena's elbow was taking up so much room that Fabiana had to squeeze herself around the desk to sit down next to her. Fabiana, I don't know as well. She came to St. Joan's as a freshman, part of that influx of new people when we got to upper school. She's okay. Kind of annoying. I didn't like to give much of myself away to Fabiana. It's not that I didn't like her, it's just that we were applying a lot of the same places, and we were sort of in competition for grades, even though it was spring semester.

I don't know why I just said "sort of" when I don't mean that at all. Fabiana and I were competing for valedictorian. I know it's not cool to seem like I care that much, and I wasn't really supposed to make it look like I was trying hard to get the grades I was getting, but the truth is, I was having a hard time with it. For all of high school I'd been able to hold everyone else off without any trouble, and keep up the fiction that I didn't have to work hard at it, and I didn't really care. But the truth is, I cared. I cared a lot. And so did Fabiana. She watched me as coolly as I watched her.

Fabiana sat near us, but she wasn't part of our group. We're not supposed to have cliques at St. Joan's, but honestly, good luck with keeping teenage girls from forming cliques. It's not like we all had matching satin bomber jackets with our cutesy nicknames on the back. But Deena, Emma, and I were a clique, and the fourth member was Anjali. So Anjali was there already, too, and she'd been talking the whole time, pausing just long enough to give me a wave hello. I could tell we were all alive and breathing because Anjali was talking about Yale. It was the surest way to start a morning off right.

"Like in that movie, where he's, like, a crew guy?"

“*The Skulls?*” someone asked.

“They are totally not like that at all, though I’ve heard that the inside is actually really that nice. It’s all crazy old, with portraits and everything. I heard that George Bush’s family gave them like a million dollars to redo the parlor after he trashed it at some party back in the sixties.”

I wasn’t sure whom Anjali was talking to. Emma? I glanced at her.

Maybe, on a technicality, but Emma was only half listening. Deena was too involved to care, and anyway this was all old territory.

“Secret societies, you know,” Emma explained in a whisper.

So she had been listening. Emma misses nothing.

“I mean, they don’t, like, give everybody cars like that. That’s totally not true,” Anjali continued, not seeming to care if anyone was listening or not.

Sometimes I felt a little sorry for Anjali. She had come to St. Joan’s the previous year because her mom got a job at Mass General. They lived a bunch of places before that—Houston, Chicago, I forget where else. Her mom is a big deal medical researcher, and her dad’s a lawyer, the kind who wears a gigantic watch and leaves papers all over the dining table so no one can ever eat there. They are really, really intense. Anjali fell in with us right away, because she’s completely fun and hilarious and smart, but I’ve seen her in tears over an A-minus—on a physics problem set, thanks very much, not even a final.

“They give you *cars*?” Fabiana butted in.

“God,” Anjali said, rolling her eyes. “*No*. I just said they didn’t.”

I shared a look with Emma, and Emma smiled out of the side of her mouth.

“It’s just for networking, you know? That’s basically the whole point. Did you know that if you get into Skull and Bones, you’re basically automatically in the CIA?”

“Since when do you want to be in the CIA?” I asked her. “I thought you were going pre-med.”

“I *am*,” Anjali said. “I’m just saying.”

“She could be a doctor for the CIA,” Emma reasoned, and Deena laughed.

“She could reprogram enemy agents,” Deena said, grinning. “Then send them back behind the lines where they’ll be like a sleeper cell ready to activate when they hear the secret password.”

“And the secret word would be?” Emma asked.

“*Jason*,” I said, sending Emma and Deena into fits of giggles.

“You guys, shut up!” Anjali said, turning around and hitting my arm. “You are so gross.”

She was pretending to be upset, but she was smiling. Being the only one of us with a boyfriend came with the assumption that it was her privilege to let us tease her.

“*Jason* is so gross,” I clarified as Deena said, “Mmm-hmm,” and shot Anjali her *We keep telling you* look. That look is deadly.

The bell rang just as Father Molloy strode in, clapping his hands and saying, “All right, girls, let’s take it down a notch.”

Father Molloy is the kind of priest that my mother likes to call “Father Oh Well.” That’s such a Rowley family Irish name joke. Pathetic. Anyway, she says that because she thinks he’s cute, and I guess he sort of is except for he’s really old, like, forty. He perched with one knee up on the edge of the desk and frowned at the roll sheet. I don’t even know why he was bothering, since I don’t think we had any new girls this late in the year. We’d already had him for eighth-grade catechism anyway, most of us.

While he was distracted, Anjali pulled her phone out of her sweater pocket and slid it under the lid of her desk. There’s a pretty intense “no cell phones in class” policy at St. Joan’s, and Anjali is a prime offender. She can text without looking, which she swears is easy, though I’ve never been able to do it. They had taken at least two phones away from her in the previous semester that I know of, and when they take your phone away, they actually keep it. What I

couldn't believe was that Anjali's parents kept buying her new ones. My mother told me that if they ever took my phone away, I'd be buying the next one myself. Which is fine, except I don't have three hundred dollars just kicking around. I now texted during class only in the event of a dire emergency. Anjali, though, she's ridiculous. I peered over her shoulder to see what she was writing.

"You shouldn't text him back right away like that," I whispered.

"What?" Anjali whispered back.

Father Molloy had started down the roll sheet for attendance, and girls were responding when he called their names.

"Emma Blackburn?"

"Here," Emma said.

"Jennifer Crawford?"

"Here," said the girl with pink-streaked hair and heavy eyeliner sitting in the back of the room.

I leaned in closer so Anjali could hear me. "You should at least wait five minutes. Or, heck, wait 'til fifth period. Then he'll appreciate it."

Deena had her eyes fixed straight ahead, but I could tell she was listening.

"What for? I like him. If I text back quickly, I hear from him sooner," Anjali said out of the side of her mouth.

"But, Anj," I said, leaning forward on my elbows hard enough to tip the desk. "You've got to—"

"Critical commentary, Miss Rowley?"

Crap.

"No, Father Molloy."

He dropped the roll sheet on the desk and folded his arms. I'd seen him give other girls that look before, but I didn't think he'd ever given it to me.

"I'm sorry, but I think only half the room caught what you were saying," he said. "Would you mind repeating it?"

"I'm sorry? I wasn't saying anything."

“Fair enough. Perhaps Miss Seaver in speech and debate didn’t cover projection. Stand up, if you will.”

Double crap.

“Chop chop,” said Father Molloy.

I stood up, a whole roomful of girls whispering a decibel above silence, rows of wide-blinking eyes staring at me with pity and, in a few faces, delight. So far this year I was perfect: attendance, lateness, everything going seamlessly. I had two early decision deferrals to think about, and another dozen applications had gone out last week. Plus the thing with Fabiana. I needed to get out of this without it going down in writing. I tried to smile around the room, but the effort made my cheeks hurt.

The priest cast an appraising eye up and down me, with a flicker of mirth in his eyes that let me know we were both in on the joke.

“Perv,” I thought I heard Deena mutter.

“Miss Rowley. As this is your senior year, and you’ve been a student at St. Joan’s since the Bush administration, I feel certain you are aware of the dress code?”

I cleared my throat. “The dress code?” I echoed.

“Next year you’ll be at whatever university will be fortunate enough to have you, and you will be free to wear as few scraps of handkerchief as you see fit. But at St. Joan’s, we still stubbornly insist that our students wear actual clothing. That skirt is—six inches, I believe? Seven?—above the knee. Roll it down, please.”

Eight, actually. Okay, maybe more like nine. I reached to my waistband and tugged to bring it back down to regulation length. All around me, girls with rolled waistbands shifted in their seats, some pulling down the ends of their cardigans to cover the evidence. I didn’t see why he’d want to call me out on some BS skirt-rolling. Everybody does it. They start doing it in middle school.

“Thank you. Now then,” he said. “Would you mind repeating your comment to Miss Gupta just now? The suspense is killing us.”

Anjali squeaked and pressed her lips together, since I'm sure she was afraid I'd rat her out about the phone. I opened my mouth to speak, not really clear about what was going to come out, when the door to advisory clicked open and I was momentarily spared while we all dropped everything to watch Clara Rutherford come into class.

The first thing to know about Clara is that I like her. I really do. And she likes me too. We're not *not* friends or anything like that. That was the crazy thing about Clara—pretty much everybody liked her. She was so nice that I kind of wished I could hate her, if for no other reason than that she was definitely nicer than me. But as much as I may have wanted to, I couldn't quite hate her. I don't think I'd ever seen her get mad or lose her temper at anyone. She wasn't friendly, exactly. There were plenty of girls at St. Joan's who thought that being friendly to everyone, even people they hated, would make them popular. Instead they just came off as insincere, and fewer people wound up liking them than if they'd just acted normal.

That wasn't Clara's style. Instead she had this air about her, as though there was always a red velvet carpet rolling out under her feet. She did okay in classes, but not so well that anyone would resent her, or feel like she was so much smarter than them that it was annoying. She played field hockey well enough that everyone wanted to have her on their team, but not so well that anyone would find a reason to high-stick her in the face. She even managed to look cute in the field hockey skirts, which really killed me, because I had a serious complex about my knees. Her hair was just the right length, with just the right amount of wave, and with a reddish-nut hue that glowed. Clara didn't even have to straighten her hair, which I could admit envying about her. Mine springs straight out in dark corkscrews all over my head, so that half my childhood was spent with my mother ripping a hairbrush through thick snarls, saying I looked like the teenage bride of Frankenstein. It wasn't until last year that I finally figured out the stuff to use to get them to fall in spirals.

It was like Clara Rutherford belonged to some other species, one that didn't sweat or smell or have anything go seriously wrong in its life. Her family, as far as I knew, was wealthy, and happy, and healthy, with a chocolate-haired mother who manned booths at school fund-raisers and a squash-playing father who actually came to some of her field hockey games. She had a brother who was in Emma's brother's class, as unblemished and likeable as she was, who played lacrosse and did student council and threw one memorable party after graduation where there may have been some drinking, but no one got in any serious trouble, and everyone just had a good time. Clara had it all figured out.

Of course, not everybody liked Clara. When a girl's on a pedestal, there's nothing some people would like better than to shove her off it, just to know what kind of noise she'd make when she shattered.

Emma's face didn't change when Clara came in. Instead her gray eyes seemed to glimmer, like light on the inside of an oyster shell.

But I saw Deena's smile slip. I thought she was a little jealous of Clara, which I didn't understand, because Deena was so funny and talented and it's not like she wasn't popular too. But she had heard that Clara was also applying to Tufts, and now Deena was paranoid that Clara would take her spot. Most of the colleges we were all looking at had quotas for the kids they'd take from the top private schools. It was going to be a tense three months in advisory if both of them were waiting to hear from Tufts.

And then there was Jennifer Crawford, with the pink hair. When Clara walked in, Jennifer's lip curled like she was looking at a roadkill fox. Disgust and loathing.

Jennifer had issues.

So Clara walked in, and it was like we all paused for a moment of silence to appreciate that she'd decided to join us.

Our eyes tracked Clara as she moved to her seat, followed closely by her two Clara-clones. All three of them were wearing low ponytails

tied with thin black ribbon. I could feel us all register this information, could almost hear the click of the data being recorded in every girl's head, and wondered how many low-ribboned ponytails we'd see at assembly after lunch. A lot, I was guessing.

"Miss Rowley?"

I jumped, shaken out of staring at Clara Rutherford, who had settled in the seat at the front of the room nearest the window.

"Your comments to Miss Gupta. We're on the edge of our seats."

I glanced down at Anjali, who was sliding her phone up the inside sleeve of her sweater where it would be safe.

"I'm sorry, Father Molloy," I said, looking straight ahead. "But I wasn't saying anything. I just dropped my pen, and leaned over to pick it up. It probably looked like I was talking."

The priest rolled his eyes heavenward and sighed. We both knew I was full of it. I almost respected him more for knowing how full of it I was.

"Have it your way," he said, waving a dismissive hand.

I dropped into my seat, hunching my shoulders to make myself smaller behind Anjali. I just needed a break from being looked at for one second.

"Okay. I'm afraid we've got some stuff to discuss today, so listen up," Father Molloy said.

Groans of annoyance rumbled through the classroom, and Deena and I shared an irritated look. Her hand twitched on her physics textbook, and my own hands were itching to double-check my calc problem set. Usually advisory was the prime time for cramming for tests or finishing up work from the previous night. I was pretty sure of my work, but I couldn't recheck it too many times. Anyway, there was never any actual advising that took place in advisory.

"I'm sure a lot of you have questions and concerns," he began. "And we're going to do everything that we can to address them. But the important thing at this juncture is for me to emphasize that the

school cares about you all. At this time there is no reason for any of you to be worried. No reason whatsoever.”

“What is he talking about?” Deena whispered in my ear.

“Hell if I know,” I said.

I brought a pencil up and held it between my upper lip and my nose, and spaced out a little. Deena inspected her fingernails. Anjali had edged her phone into her palm and was texting again while pretending to absorb every word Father Molloy was saying.

“St. Joan’s prides itself on being a place where the students come first,” he droned on. “We know it’s unnerving, and so I want to encourage anyone who wants to speak to a teacher in private not to hesitate. You can come talk to me, or if you’d feel more comfortable, maybe with a woman, for instance, we can connect you with someone.”

The class was starting to get fidgety, but he wasn’t ready to let us off the hook yet. “Are there any questions?” Father Molloy said, folding his arms over his chest and looking at us.

I inclined my head over to Emma, about to ask if she had any idea what he meant, but she didn’t seem to be listening. She was staring at the front corner of the room, her cheeks flushed a splotchy pink, and gripping her pen so hard, her knuckles were turning white.

My gaze swiveled, following Emma’s stare over the heads of my classmates to the hallowed corner where Clara Rutherford sat, her desk practically bearing a little RESERVED card written in calligraphy.

And that was the first time that I saw Clara Rutherford twitch.

CHAPTER 2

DANVERS, MASSACHUSETTS

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2012

*T*witch is not the right word. It's the word the media would start to use when things really got going, when they needed a word that wasn't too sensational, because everyone was afraid that sensationalizing what was happening would just make it worse. But *twitch* does not even begin to describe what happened to Clara Rutherford that morning.

Her face seized up, as though an invisible person standing next to her had hooked his fingers in her mouth, trying to peel the skin from her skull. Her hands clenched closed, flew up to her chest, and vibrated under her chin. By the time Father Molloy got to her, her legs had started shaking so violently that she rattled off her chair and fell to the floor, flopping and gasping like a fish.

"Colleen, get the nurse," Father Molloy commanded, sounding surprisingly calm.

Half the classroom was standing up, staring down at Clara. We couldn't believe it was happening. We wouldn't have been able to believe it anyway, but it was somehow even more wrong that it was

happening to Clara. Her feet kicked like someone getting electroshock. Seeing her perfection split apart like that made us panicky.

“Now, Colleen!” the priest said, raising his voice.

He knelt beside her, cradling her head, with his thumb in her mouth to keep her tongue depressed. The last thing I saw before I fled for the door was Clara’s front teeth biting down on Father Molloy’s thumb. She was making horrible gagging, gurgling sounds, as though she were drowning.

I sprinted down the upper school hallway, my footfalls echoing on the flagstones, running past the vacant student center, skidding on the rug outside the upper school dean’s office, ignoring the administrative assistant who stood up and hollered, “Walk, Colleen!”

I rounded the corner from the upper school hallway to the old wing, my shadow stretching long down the hall, so distorted I felt like I was falling into it. I could feel my heartbeat in my throat as I ran down the corridor that used to house the convent bedrooms, all of them so long locked that the doors were rusted shut. At the very end of the hallway one door stood open, with warm light spilling out. I landed at the nurse’s office, panting for breath on the doorjamb. Inside, half behind a white partition, the nurse was pulling a thermometer out of the mouth of a green-faced eighth grader.

The school nurse would be famous within the week, but on this Wednesday I have to confess that I didn’t remember her name. She was new, and young—so young, I found it weird to address her with a title. She looked like she could be in my class.

When she saw me, she stood up immediately and said, “What’s the matter?”

“You’ve got to come! Room 709. Hurry!”

By the time we burst back into the classroom, Clara was sitting up, her hair disheveled, breathing heavily and looking around with wide, baffled eyes. Father Molloy stood up when he saw us and pulled the nurse aside. They conferred for an urgent minute by the door while I

crouched next to Clara. She looked up at me, her eyes shining with confusion. She moved her mouth, but nothing came out.

“Don’t worry,” I said, touching her arm. “I brought the nurse. You’re going to be okay.”

She nodded, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Colleen,” the nurse said, placing her hand on my back. “Will you return to your desk, please?”

I hesitated.

“Girls, I know you’re all worried, but we need to give her some air. Back to your desks, please,” the nurse insisted.

I felt someone helping me to my feet and back to my desk. Slowly I lowered into my seat, still watching Clara. She was looking around on the floor, as if she were afraid she’d dropped something but didn’t know what.

“That was crazy!” Anjali whispered.

“Oh my God, do you think she’s going to be okay?” Deena said.

None of us could even pretend we weren’t staring. The nurse leaned over Clara, shining a penlight into each of her eyes, taking her pulse, listening to her heart.

“Oh, she’ll be fine,” Emma said with a wave of her hand.

“Does she have epilepsy or something?” I asked. “Does this, like, happen all the time, do you think?”

I couldn’t imagine Clara having something seriously wrong with her. We’d all have known about it if she did. St. Joan’s was a small school. Everyone knew everyone else’s business. We knew who was diabetic, and whose mom drank too much. We knew who had a gluten allergy, and who just said she did to hide her eating disorder. We knew who cut. We knew about everyone’s tattoos, and we thought they should probably have gone into Boston to get them instead, ’cause the lines were already blurry. We knew within the week when one of us lost her virginity. Sometimes we knew within the hour.

“I don’t think so,” Anjali said.

“Maybe epilepsy doesn’t come on until you’re finished growing,” Deena theorized. “What if it’s like schizophrenia or something, like one of those things that happen for the first time when you’re an adult?”

“You think she has schizophrenia?” I asked. I tried not to sound horrified, but I failed.

“No,” Anjali said slowly. “That’s not what schizophrenia looks like.”

“Whatever,” Emma said.

Her nails drummed once, twice, three times on the top of her desk.

Father Molloy hovered at the front of the classroom, with an expression on his face that I couldn’t read. When the nurse beckoned to him, he seemed to be shaking a thought off before he could concentrate on what she was saying.

Laurel Hocking, that was the nurse’s name. I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten, especially considering what happened later.

Clara’s two minions, Elizabeth and the Other Jennifer, which is what everyone called her to distinguish her from Jennifer Crawford, were huddled together at their desks behind Clara. They obviously had no idea what was going on. If Clara had seizures, they’d have known about it. Then again, maybe Clara was kind of aloof from her best friends, too. Elizabeth was pretty cool, she did field hockey and debate, but the Other Jennifer didn’t have much going on. She was not especially bright, and most people assumed she had gotten into St. Joan’s only because both her mother and her grandmother went there. I mean, she was nice and everything, and she was pretty, but she was just kind of blah. Maybe Clara just hung out with them because she could dictate the terms.

Nurse Hocking was stroking Clara’s hair, and I heard her say, “We’ll just make you an appointment, to be sure.”

“It’s definitely not schizophrenia,” Anjali said, looking at her phone, which was still expertly concealed between her hand and the end of her sweater sleeve. “That’s a mental disorder, and has to do with how she perceives reality. It doesn’t cause seizures, just weird behavior.”

“Huh,” Deena said. “I hope she’s going to be okay.”

The bell rang, drowning out what Emma said, which I think was something like “Faker.”

“What?” I said, looking at Emma.

“Huh?” Emma answered.

“What did you say just now?”

“I didn’t say anything,” Emma said, gathering her books.

She wasn’t looking at me.

“Okay, girls,” Father Molloy interrupted, addressing the whole room of migrating students. “I want you all to remember what we talked about. And if any of you need to speak with me privately, I’ll be in office hours after lunch. You’re always welcome to drop by. Mary, Queen of Knowledge, be with you all.”

“But we didn’t talk about anything,” Deena muttered.

I hesitated when we reached the door, looking over my shoulder. Clara was still sitting on the floor, her legs splayed out like a kid. The nurse bent over her, offering a sip of water. Elizabeth and the Other Jennifer huddled nearby, as if they hadn’t even heard the bell. Father Molloy stood with his arms folded over his chest, frowning.

“Come on,” Emma said, plucking at my sleeve. “Or we’ll be late.”

“Yeah,” I said, allowing Emma to pull me away.

As the door to advisory closed, I caught Clara’s eye.

I don’t think I’d ever seen anyone look so afraid.