



THE
HARVEST
DANCE

Jo Ramsey

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Chapter One

I didn't want to go to the dance.

I'd probably said those words two dozen times that Friday. Most of those had been to myself or my guides, the beings who worked with me and spoke to me mind to mind, or mind to consciousness as one of them had described it. The only human I'd complained to was Jonah, who'd probably become pretty tired of hearing me whine after listening to me for days.

The Harvest Dance was scheduled for that night, the second Friday in November, same as always. It was our school's substitute for Homecoming, the second biggest deal of the school year other than prom. All day I'd had to listen to people bragging about what they were going to wear or who they were going with. They all seemed really excited.

I wasn't excited and neither was Jonah. I didn't want to go. He didn't plan to go.

By the time my last class ended, my eyes didn't want to stay open. I kept yawning, and my stomach churned. Just the day before, Jonah and I had done an energy healing session on a woman who'd faked being a channel by pretending a higher being spoke through her. I'd done most of the healing work because she hadn't wanted Jonah to touch her. That probably explained the exhaustion. The churning stomach came from pure anxiety.

I didn't want to go to the dance.

When the final bell of the day rang, I trudged to my locker. Jonah stood there, waiting for me like he did every day. My heart and stomach felt a little lighter until I noticed who stood beside him.

Ken Gallant. My former next-door neighbor. Now my date for the Harvest Dance. And my boyfriend. Seeing him, my stomach churned harder than a farmer's wife making butter. He was the reason for all my anxiety over the past week or more, and part of me wished I dared to break the date.

I walked over to them with a pasted-on smile. "Hey, guys."

"Hi, Shanna," Ken said, returning my smile. Jonah smiled at me as well, but didn't speak. "Do you want a ride home?"

I looked at Jonah, begging him silently to help me find a way out of taking the ride. The last thing I wanted to do was spend extra time with Ken before the dance. I'd be spending hours with him that night. Right then, I wanted to be around Jonah. If anyone could calm me down, he could.

Jonah didn't always take my hints. He always recognized them. He just ignored them. He wanted me to learn to stand up for myself, and part of that meant speaking up instead of waiting for other people to figure out what I wanted. Most of the time, he acted like he

had no clue what I was thinking, despite his apparent ability to read my mind sometimes.

This time, something in the way I looked at him must have tipped him off that I really didn't know how to handle this on my own. "I hoped Shanna would walk with me," he said. "We needed to talk about something."

He wasn't lying. I really needed to talk to him about all the fears I had concerning the dance. Knowing Jonah, he'd known that without being told. Of course, all my complaining that I didn't want to go to the dance had probably been a big clue.

That didn't mean Ken would agree. "What do you need to talk about?" he asked, narrowing his eyes. I'd tried to smooth things over between him and Jonah, but they didn't get along. Or at least Ken didn't get along with Jonah. I doubted Jonah noticed Ken one way or the other.

"The dance." I surprised myself by answering, since I'd intended to let Jonah handle the argument.

"That's something you should talk to me about." Ken scowled. "Jonah, are you even going to the dance?"

"No." If Jonah noticed the death glare Ken gave him, he didn't let on.

"That's why I want to talk to him, because he isn't involved," I said. "Ken, come on."

I stopped myself there. I felt like I was asking Ken's permission to walk home with Jonah, and that ticked me off. Ken was my boyfriend, not my parent or my owner. I didn't need his permission for anything.

I just didn't want to start trouble with him only a few hours before the dance.

Ken folded his arms and turned his glare on me. Inside, I cringed. I forced myself not to show any fear. I didn't want him angry with me. On the other hand, even if he was angry, he wouldn't hurt me or anything. I didn't have to be afraid of him.

"You're lucky you're taking Shanna to the dance," Jonah said. "I bet she'll be the prettiest one there. And she'll be with you the whole time. I just want part of her afternoon."

Ken's glare let up a little. As he often tended to do, Jonah had said the right thing. Mostly. Apparently Ken didn't like Jonah calling me pretty. "She's my girlfriend."

That was about all I could take. I still hadn't totally decided how I felt about being his girlfriend. I knew I didn't want it to mean I had to do whatever he said. "Yes, I'm your girlfriend," I said. I tried not to let my anger seep into my voice. "And I won't be for long if you keep this up. I don't have to ask you if I can hang out with Jonah. I can because *I* say so. I need to talk to him, and I'm walking home with him so I can do that."

I opened my locker, mostly so I wouldn't have to see Ken's expression. "I'll see you tonight or not. I'm not riding home with you right now. Thanks for offering."

I yanked out the books I needed and slammed the locker shut, the whole time

avoiding looking at Ken. He didn't say anything, and I didn't know whether that meant he was ticked or just didn't know what to say. He wasn't used to hearing me sticking up for myself.

Neither was I, for that matter.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly after a few way-too-long moments during which I knelt and tried with one hand to cram my books into my backpack.

I chanced a glance at him. He actually looked apologetic. The glare had completely disappeared, and he gave me half a smile. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "I'm not trying to act like you need my permission. I just—" He shook his head. "I'll pick you up at six, okay? I'd like to take you out to dinner before the dance, if that's all right."

"That's fine." I didn't really want him to spend anything more on me than he already had. He'd paid for the dance tickets, which had cost way more than I'd thought I was worth. But if he backed off about me hanging out with Jonah that afternoon, I'd try not to argue about going out to dinner.

"You can pick the place," he offered. "I want to make sure we go somewhere you'll be able to eat."

"Thanks." Since I'd decided to become a vegetarian several weeks earlier, right after I'd met Jonah, I'd discovered that a lot of restaurants didn't have many dishes without meat. I was glad Ken had taken that into account.

"All right," he said. "I'll see you at six." He gave me a hug that I couldn't return. I was using one hand to balance the books that currently lay on top of my backpack, since they hadn't yet gone into it, and my other arm was still in a cast from when my mother had broken it. "Have fun."

"Thanks," I said again.

He walked away. I sagged sideways against my locker and took a deep breath. "Are you okay?" Jonah asked.

Tears pricked my eyes, and I blinked them back. I didn't know if I was close to crying because of the confrontation with Ken or because Jonah was being nice to me again. Probably both. "Yeah, I'm okay. I just don't like arguing."

"I don't think anyone does." He held out one hand. I extended, as much as I could, my broken arm, and he took my hand and smiled. "I'm proud of you. I wouldn't have minded if you'd wanted to go with him. Since you didn't want to, you let him know what you did want. I'm proud of you for standing up for yourself."

"Me too, I guess." My books started to cascade to the floor, and I yanked my hand out of Jonah's to awkwardly catch them. "Sorry."

"For not wanting to drop your books?" His blue eyes twinkled. "Come on. I have the afternoon off. Want to come to my house, or should we go to yours?"

“The Thomasons’ house,” I corrected. I hadn’t lived with my foster family long enough to consider their house my home.

“Your house,” he said firmly. “Why don’t we go there? Then you won’t have to hurry home to get ready for the dance.”

“I don’t want to go to the dance,” I grumbled.

He helped me fit the books into my bag and then lifted the bag onto my good shoulder. We headed down the hall to the main door. “You are going.”

I shook my head, but answered, “Yeah, I’m going.”

Jonah hadn’t visited the Thomasons’ house before. Most of the time, I went to his house when we spent time together outside school. He’d been to my house once, back when we’d first become friends. My mother had insisted on meeting him. I’d been embarrassed by the mess in the house, and he hadn’t even seemed to notice. At least the Thomasons’ was clean. One of the few good things about my mother breaking my arm was that I didn’t have to live in a disaster zone anymore.

I worried what the Thomasons might say about my bringing Jonah over, since at that time of day they probably wouldn’t be home yet. If I’d brought anyone, especially a boy, to my house when my mother wasn’t home, her yelling at me would have been best-case scenario. I didn’t think the Thomasons would mind. They seemed pretty relaxed about that kind of thing. I just didn’t know for sure.

“Why don’t you want to go to the dance?” Jonah asked as we walked up the street.

I shot him a look. We’d had this conversation a few times already. “You know.”

“I want you to say it,” he said.

I sighed. He’d heard my reasons enough times before. I didn’t understand why I had to go through them again. I knew Jonah well enough to know he wouldn’t let up until I actually repeated them, though. “I don’t know why Ken asked me to the dance. What if he expects something in exchange? What if I fall flat on my face on the dance floor? What if—” All the fears I’d had since Ken had first asked me flooded into my brain and I couldn’t speak.

Jonah held up a hand. “Stop. Take one at a time. Why did Ken ask you to the dance?”

“Because he likes me.” I knew that was the right answer, even if I didn’t quite believe it.

“Right.” Jonah held out his hand again. “Give me your backpack.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Because your shoulder probably hurts. Carrying so much weight unevenly isn’t good for your spine.” He snapped his fingers. “Hand it over.”

I blinked at him. Jonah almost never gave me orders. He had a point about the

weight, though. The backpack, containing three textbooks and a few notebooks, wasn't exactly light. I carefully slipped it off my shoulder. Jonah caught the strap and held it while I pulled my arm free. Since he had his own pack on his back, he carried mine against his chest, holding it with both arms. Without another word, he started walking again.

I was so surprised I took a couple seconds to realize he was moving. Then I noticed and caught up with him. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." He paused and glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "Tell me what just happened."

"I'm pretty sure you were there." I should have figured he had a reason for taking my backpack beyond the obvious. "You told me to let you carry my backpack, so I gave it to you."

"Why did you give me your backpack?"

I rolled my eyes. I hoped he'd make his point quickly, because I really didn't want to keep answering the same questions over and over. "Because you told me to, and because you were right about how heavy it is."

"Did you expect me to want something from you?" He hefted my backpack. "I'm doing something nice for you, and this is really heavy."

Now I understood. I just didn't see how it applied to my fears about the dance. Jonah was nothing like Ken. "You never expect anything from me," I said. "You do a lot for me, and you've never asked me for anything."

"So you've learned from experience that I don't want anything from you in exchange for the things I do." He smiled. "And you're right, I don't. Our friendship means that we do things for each other without asking anything in return."

Trust Jonah to make a lesson out of doing something nice. I didn't necessarily agree that our friendship was enough return for all the things he'd done for me. He'd helped me with more than I'd ever be able to thank him for. If it hadn't been for him, I would still have been living with my mother, being yelled at and worse. When she'd broken my arm, Jonah had been the one who'd persuaded me to report it. He'd gone with me to the school nurse, had insisted on being allowed to go to the emergency room with me, and had stayed there until he'd been sure I was safe.

He'd pretty much given me a whole new life. There wasn't much I could do that would compare to that.

"Okay, I understand that," I said. "That's you, though."

"I hope that someday you'll trust other people," he said quietly. "I'm honored that I've earned your trust. I just wish I wasn't the only one."

"I trust Mark." My foster brother reminded me of Jonah in a lot of ways.

“That’s good,” he said. “You don’t trust Ken?”

I didn’t answer right away. Obviously I didn’t trust Ken. At least not enough to be completely happy dating him. Which made me stop and wonder why I was dating him in the first place. I’d known him for years, and he’d never given me any reason not to trust him. I just didn’t, for the same reason I didn’t trust anyone else. Going out with someone when I wouldn’t let myself trust him didn’t make much sense.

I should have been happy with him. Ken was popular, an athlete, and a junior. Any other freshman girl would have been thrilled to have him for a boyfriend, and he’d picked me.

“I need to relax,” I said. “I need to let myself be happy.”

“Happiness is hard when you aren’t used to it,” Jonah said. “You deserve to be happy, and I hope you realize that.”

“I do. I guess.”

He shook his head and gave me a tolerant smile. “You’ll get there.”

Chapter Two

We reached the Thomasons' house. I hesitated at the bottom of the front steps. No one else seemed to be home yet. I knew Mark had stayed at school to help decorate the gym for the dance. My foster sister Claire was in elementary school and hadn't even finished her day yet. No cars were in the driveway, which meant my foster parents weren't there.

While I stood there debating with myself about whether I really should bring Jonah into an empty house, Phil's car pulled into the driveway. Relieved that I didn't really have to make a decision after all, I unlocked the front door and led Jonah inside. "Sorry we had to stand out there," I said.

"No problem. Time is an illusion."

I grinned. He always said that.

We went into the kitchen. Phil had just entered through the back door, carrying a stack of books and papers. "How long were you two waiting out there?" he asked, setting the pile on the table.

"Not long," I replied.

"Just a couple minutes," Jonah added. He set our backpacks on the floor beside the table.

"Okay." Phil smiled at me. I shrank back a little, caught myself, and reminded myself I didn't have to be afraid of him. "For future reference, Shanna, you're allowed to have friends here even if we aren't home. We trust you."

My face warmed. I hated that I was so obvious about being afraid. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." He looked at the stack and sighed. "I have way too much to do tonight. I'm going to go change first." He went upstairs.

Jonah looked at me. After a couple seconds, I realized he was waiting for me to say something. The problem was, I had no idea what to say. We always went to his house, where he made the decisions and took control of the conversations. Now I was the host, and I didn't know what to do.

Jonah usually offers you something to eat or drink, said Mason, the spirit guide who'd been with me since I was three or four. I'd always thought of him as an imaginary friend until Jonah had taught me about guides.

Thank you. He was absolutely right. Giving Jonah some kind of snack would be easy. I looked at Jonah. "Do you want something to eat or drink?"

"Yes, that would be nice," he said. "Let's figure out what you have here that's vegan."

I wasn't sure if we had anything, and I felt guilty for not planning ahead. Then again, I

hadn't known Jonah would be coming over, so I hadn't known I'd need something vegan. I didn't have to feel guilty for something I'd had no way to know about.

We searched through the cupboards and fridge and finally decided on orange juice and apples. It seemed like a strange combination, but at least it didn't involve any animal products.

We sat at the table. "Are you still worried?" Jonah asked.

"Yeah." We'd only been in the house a few minutes. I hadn't had time to stop worrying. Not that I was likely to stop no matter how much time passed. The only thing that would put an end to my worrying was the end of the dance.

"You'll be fine," he assured me.

"Sure." I wished I believed him.

We stayed at the table even after we finished our snacks, talking about school and our guides. We carefully avoided two topics: the dance and the healing session we'd done the day before. The woman we'd worked with hated me. She blamed me for her losing her job as a substitute teacher at my high school. Of course, if she hadn't hit a student, she wouldn't have lost the job. She'd seen it as my fault because I'd been the one to report her. Persuading her to let me help her hadn't been easy. If I hadn't worked with her, though, the Universe would have been vaporized.

Compared to going to the dance with Ken, that had been a cakewalk.

While we sat there talking about school and guides and anything other than the dance, Claire and Mark came home and went into the living room to watch TV. Laura arrived shortly after that.

And then it was time for me to start getting ready for the dance.

I thought Jonah would leave when I said I had to go to my room to change. He didn't. "I'll stay until Ken shows up," he said. "I want to see how you look in your dress."

I blushed and turned away quickly so he wouldn't notice. Part of me didn't want to know what he'd think of my dress and how I looked.

Part of me wished I'd be wearing the dress for him instead of Ken.

"I'll be down in a bit," I mumbled. I hurried up to my room.

Laura followed me. We'd already planned that she would help me with my dress and hair. I was kind of surprised that she wanted to help. My mother would have told me to deal with everything myself.

Then again, my mother would never have bought me a dress for a dance. She probably wouldn't have even let me go to a dance.

"I'll wait in the hall," Laura said when I went into my room. "Just let me know if you need my help."

I already knew I would. When I'd tried on the dress at the store, I hadn't been able to close the zipper, which was in the back. Even without a broken arm, I wouldn't have been able to. My arms just didn't bend that way. "I'll let you know," I said.

She smiled. "You're pretty nervous, huh?"

"Yeah." I swallowed hard and tried to pretend my stomach wasn't tying itself in knots.

"You'll be fine." She put her hand on the doorknob. "I'm right out here. Let me know when you're ready."

She closed the door. I went to my closet and took out the dress. It was dark blue, not quite navy, because Ken had said he thought I'd look good in blue. The top of the dress was sleeveless satin, and the skirt had lighter blue lace over the satin. It had cost way too much, and I'd tried to talk Laura out of buying it. Obviously she hadn't listened.

I changed out of the jeans and sweater I'd worn to school and put on the dress. It fit perfectly, or at least it would when Laura zipped it for me. I opened the door. "I'm ready."

Laura's face lit up. "You already look lovely. Let's get you zipped up and then I'll help you with your hair and makeup."

I never wore makeup and didn't really want to tonight. But I didn't argue, just turned around so she could zip the dress.

A while later, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror staring at a reflection I barely recognized. Laura had put up my hair, which I usually just wore down around my shoulders. Now most of it was twisted at the back of my head. Laura had left some strands hanging down to frame my face, and she'd curled those strands.

I'd never seen myself wearing makeup. Letting Laura apply it hadn't been easy. I hated to be touched, and seeing a hand coming toward my face reminded me too much of all the times my mother had hit me. I'd finally managed to calm myself enough to let Laura do what she wanted to do, and now I wore blue eyeshadow, along with eyeliner and mascara. Dark pink blush shaded my cheeks, and my lipstick matched it.

I looked at least seventeen. And pretty.

"Very nice," Laura said from behind me. "Do you like it?"

I nodded, even though I wasn't completely sure. I'd never looked like this before, and I didn't know if being pretty would turn out to be a good thing. I was afraid I might give Ken the wrong idea.

Laura glanced at her watch. "What time is Ken picking you up?"

"Six." My chest tightened. I didn't know what time it was, but I knew it had to be close to time for Ken to arrive. Which meant I was running out of time to figure a way out of going.

"Come downstairs," she said. "He should be here pretty soon."

“Laura?” I turned to face her. “Did you ever go to a dance? I mean with a date?”

She smiled. “Once or twice.”

“Were you scared?” I squeaked out the last word and hoped she’d say yes. I didn’t want to be the only one who’d ever felt like this.

“Once, yes. That guy was kind of a creep. The second time I was fine, because I’d known my date for quite a while.” She paused. “You don’t have to go, you know. You can always save the dress for something else, and I’m sure Ken would understand.”

The idea appealed to me. I could take off the dress, wash off the makeup, and spend the evening watching TV with Laura, Phil, and Claire. If anything interesting happened at the dance, Mark would fill me in. Maybe Jonah would stay at the house longer and have supper with us or something, if Laura and I could figure out a vegan meal.

If I didn’t go, all the time Laura had just spent on my hair and makeup would have been wasted. Not to mention the money she’d spent on the dress. And Ken definitely wouldn’t understand.

And if you don’t go, they win. Simon was the light guide who worked with me. A little higher in energetic vibration than Mason, and sometimes a little more forthcoming with wisdom. Even if I didn’t always understand what he was talking about.

Who wins? I asked.

Everyone who’s hurt you. You aren’t afraid because that’s your natural state of being. You’re afraid because of all the things that have happened to you.

He was right. All the times Mom had yelled or hit. The times that I barely remembered and didn’t want to, when an adult man had made the child me do things that nauseated me just to think about. The time in sixth grade when two eighth grade boys had tried to make me do similar things, and then had told everyone I’d done them when I hadn’t.

Maybe I would have been nervous about the dance anyway. If none of those things had happened, I wouldn’t have been completely terrified.

I refused to let them win. I was stronger than that, even if I doubted myself sometimes.

“I’m going,” I said to Laura.

“Good.” She sounded pleased, and I was glad I’d made the decision. “Then let’s go downstairs.”

I picked up the shoes that I’d set on the back of the toilet. I didn’t quite dare trying to walk downstairs in them. They only had a one-inch heel, but that was an inch higher than I’d ever worn, and I was a little wobbly. Falling down the stairs would have given me a good excuse to stay home, but it also wouldn’t have done my broken arm—or any of my other body parts—much good.

Carrying the shoes, I followed Laura. I was glad she went ahead of me. I didn't know what everyone would think of the way I looked. This way, I could hide behind Laura.

Mark stood at the foot of the stairs in the navy blue suit, white shirt, and light blue tie he'd chosen to wear to the dance. His brown hair, which was usually kind of messy, had been neatly combed.

His eyes widened when he saw me, and he grinned. "You look great, Shanna."

I smiled back, ignoring the carnivorous butterflies trying to gnaw a hole in my stomach. "Thank you. So do you."

"I heard Ken's taking you to dinner." He grinned, showing the little dimple by the right corner of his mouth. "By some coincidence, Hannah and I happen to be going to the same restaurant. Ken wasn't too happy about the idea of us riding there with you, so Phil's going to drive Hannah and me. We'll meet you there."

A few of the butterflies gave up and died. I would still be alone with Ken on the way to the restaurant. After that Mark and his date would be with us. That would make the night a lot easier.

The sounds of the local evening news and Claire's complaints about having to watch it floated out of the living room. Phil told Claire to stop whining, and Jonah laughed. I couldn't believe Jonah had actually stuck around for the entire time I'd taken to get ready. He'd said he would, but I'd figured he would be bored after a while.

Some of the butterflies came back. Jonah would see me looking like this, in the dress and makeup and fancy hair. Mark and Laura seemed to think I looked okay. I was kind of worried about Jonah's opinion.

I couldn't avoid him forever. I put on my shoes and walked carefully toward the living room. With each step, I grew a little more confident about my ability to walk without falling. Just a little.

Laura and Mark walked in front of me and blocked me at the living room doorway. Laura cleared her throat, and the TV shut off. Through the gap between her and Mark, I saw the three in the living room turn to look at her.

"Mark, you look great!" Phil said.

"Yeah, you clean up pretty good," Claire said.

Laura and Phil laughed. "At least I clean up," Mark said. Claire stuck out her tongue.

"Mark isn't the only one who looks good," Laura said.

She and Mark stepped into the room, leaving me standing in the doorway. My face heated as everyone stared at me.

Jonah stood up from his seat on the couch. The smile on his face lit the whole room, and I wished again that he was the one taking me to the dance. Not that he ever would go to something like the Harvest Dance. Especially not with me. We were just friends, and

that was probably all we'd ever be.

He seemed pretty happy about how I looked. "You're beautiful, Shanna," he said.

"Thanks," I mumbled, staring at the floor. I didn't know how to respond to a statement like that from him. With Jonah, I never really knew what he was feeling.

From the way he looked at me, I thought maybe he also wished he was going to the dance with me.

I pushed that thought away before he realized I was thinking it.

"You do look very nice, Shanna," Phil said.

"Like a princess!" Claire exclaimed.

"So she's a princess, and I just clean up good?" Mark teased. "I see how you are."

I wanted to run back upstairs. I couldn't stand having everyone's attention on me. The butterflies returned full force and my gut clenched so bad I thought I might throw up. But I refused to run. Ken would be there soon, and I wouldn't let my fear take over again. I took a couple deep breaths and felt a little better.

I smiled at Claire. "Thank you."

Phil went into the den and returned with his digital camera. I hated having my picture taken, but I didn't see much choice. Of course Phil and Laura would want to remember this. Mark would too. And maybe eventually I would. Right then, I just wanted it over with.

Jonah gave me a reassuring smile. "Years from now, you'll be able to see what you looked like the night of your first dance."

"Yeah." Years from then I probably wouldn't want to see myself at fourteen.

Phil took a picture of me standing beside Mark, then one standing beside Laura. Then he decided he wanted a picture of me with Jonah. That made me blush again, and I opened my mouth to try to talk him out of it. Before I had a chance to say a word, Jonah was next to me. "You really do look beautiful."

"Thanks." The compliment sent my heart floating up through my chest. He actually liked how I looked. I still felt weird about the dress, hair, and makeup, but at least I didn't have to worry about his opinion anymore.

I hesitated, not sure how to stand with him even though I'd already had my picture taken with two other people. With Jonah, it was different. My mind fed me an image of him in a suit like Mark's, walking into the school gym with me.

I needed to stop thinking that way. Seriously.

He moved a little closer to me. "Is it all right if I put my arm around you?" he whispered. He never touched me without asking first.

Phil had the camera ready to take the picture. I didn't have time to explain to Jonah that his touch would make me more nervous than I already was, or that having him see me in that dress, with my hair up and my makeup, confused me. I couldn't figure out how I felt about it. Since I didn't have time to explain any of that, I just nodded.

He put his arm around my shoulders, and warmth settled over me like a blanket, along with a serenity I hadn't expected. I often felt that way with Jonah, but I'd been so worried about the dance and the woman we'd had to do the healing session for that I hadn't felt it in several days.

Phil snapped the picture, and then I had a break while he took pictures of Mark with Laura and Claire. I sat carefully on the couch so I wouldn't wrinkle my dress. Jonah sat next to me. "You're going to be fine tonight," he said.

"How do you know?" I muttered.

He tapped his forehead and grinned. "A little birdie told me."

He meant Tethys, the being of light who acted as one of his guides. She knew a lot, so if she said I'd be okay, I probably would be. It just would have been nice to have someone tell me that directly.

We have been telling you! Mason said, exasperated.

I didn't answer him.

The doorbell rang, and I jumped. Ken had to be the one at the door, and I wasn't sure I dared to answer.

"I'll get it." Laura winked at me. "Girls don't answer the door for their own dates."

Chapter Three

She headed to the front door. I reached for Jonah's hand, and he squeezed mine and whispered, "You're going to be fine. You can call me tomorrow morning and tell me all about it."

"Okay." I doubted anything would happen worth telling him about. The thought of being able to talk to him the next day did calm me a little, though.

Laura returned, followed by Ken. He wore a dark grey suit with a white shirt and a tie that matched my dress, and he carried a small white box. I gulped and stood.

He stopped, eyes wide, and just stared at me. Just when I was about to lose my nerve and run into the other room, he smiled. "I knew you'd look great, but you're even more gorgeous than I thought you'd be."

"Thank you." I paused for a few seconds while I tried to figure out what else to say. "You look really good, too."

"Thanks." He held up the box. "A wrist corsage. I figured one that had to be pinned on would be kind of uncomfortable for you."

The corsage itself wouldn't have been uncomfortable. Having to pin it on or have someone else do it definitely would have freaked me out. I was glad he'd realized that. I just didn't think he should have bought me a corsage at all, since he'd already spent plenty of money on me. "You didn't have—"

"Yes, he did," Jonah and Laura said at the same time.

Ken frowned at Jonah, then turned his attention back to me. "Yes, I did."

He opened the box and held it out to me. Inside lay a white wristband with tiny dark blue, light blue, and white flowers arranged in a cluster at one part of the band. "It's beautiful," I said.

He took it out of the box and set the box on the coffee table. "Give me your wrist, please."

I held out my left hand, and he slipped the corsage onto my wrist. I was too aware that everyone, including Jonah, was watching. I didn't look at any of them.

"There," Ken said. "Ready to go?"

"Let me see your flowers, Shanna," Claire said.

Relieved at the chance to delay leaving, I turned around and held out my wrist so she could see. She smiled and murmured happily about the flowers. For her, this was some kind of fairy tale thing. For me, it had the makings of a horror story.

I had the feeling Ken was becoming kind of impatient, and I felt a little guilty for keeping him waiting. Not guilty enough to hurry, though.

I finally couldn't put it off any longer. I turned back to Ken with a pasted-on smile. "I'm ready."

"Good." The "about time" rang through his tone, even though he didn't say it. Inside, I cringed. I'd already ticked him off, and we hadn't even left yet. Then he smiled. Some look in his eyes, one I couldn't quite describe, reassured me. It was the same way Jonah smiled at me. "I can't wait to show everyone how beautiful you are," he said.

"It's going to be fun." I doubted it would be, but anything was possible.

"Hannah and I'll see you guys at the restaurant," Mark said.

Laura gave me a hug. I tensed; I hadn't gotten used to the way people in that family hugged all the time. "You'll be fine," she whispered, then let me go.

Phil and Claire both said goodbye to me, and then I looked at Jonah. He stood back, smiling at me. He knew Ken would be ticked off if he tried to hug me or anything. I didn't care what Ken thought. Those butterflies were back, and a hug from Jonah would make them go away. So I walked up to him and hugged him.

He tightened his arms around me for a moment and whispered, "Thank you."

I relaxed against him for just long enough to let that serene feeling return. Then I broke out of the hug and turned to Ken. He quickly wiped the scowl off his face and smiled again. "Let's get moving."

We went out to his car, a slightly rusty four-door that might have been older than I was. He opened the passenger door and gestured into the car. My face warmed again. I really needed to work on that blushing thing.

"You're holding the door for me?" I said.

He grinned. "I'm being a gentleman. Get in, Shanna. You deserve to have a great night."

I carefully lowered myself into the car and arranged my dress so it wouldn't be caught in the door. Ken closed the door and got into the driver's seat. He reached for my hand across the center console. "I can't believe how beautiful you look."

I wanted to believe him. I really did. For a few seconds, I wrestled with whether I could trust what he'd said.

Then something inside snapped. I was tired of always thinking bad things about myself. Tired of letting my mother and everyone who'd ever hurt me or put me down have control of my thoughts. I didn't know if the feeling would last, but right then, I refused to let anyone or anything else have control over me anymore.

My dress was beautiful, and I'd seen myself in the mirror. Maybe I really was beautiful too.

I smiled at Ken. "Thank you."

We drove to a Chinese restaurant in the center of town. Dim, reddish chandelier bulbs lit the place. The golden chandeliers hung at random points around the large room. Red cloths covered the tables, and red carpet on the floor cushioned each step. I'd never been to a place so fancy, and I shrank in on myself. With my luck I'd spill stuff on my dress or knock over one of the small, round tables.

No, I said to myself. I'm not going to be intimidated. I can handle this.

Yes, my Ganatram, you can, replied Shiva, the being of light who occasionally spoke to me. He wasn't one of my guides as far as I knew, but he acted like one sometimes.

Ken took my hand, startling me so much I yanked away. As soon as I realized what I'd done, I smiled an apology. "I didn't know you were going to do that."

"It's okay. I should have warned you." He reached for my hand again, and this time I let him take it.

A small Chinese woman, shorter than I was, wearing a pink dress with embroidered white cherry blossoms showed us to a table and gave us each a menu. I opened mine and gasped when I saw the prices. I couldn't let Ken spend that much on my meal.

Then I reminded myself that he'd wanted to take me out to eat. He'd probably already known how much things would cost, and I was worth whatever he spent.

When the waiter in his white shirt and black pants came to take our order, I still ordered the least expensive non-meat item I found.

We were still waiting for our food when Mark and Hannah walked in. Hannah was one of the popular kids, like Mark and Ken. She usually treated me pretty well, which I figured was mostly because I was Mark's foster sister. She looked absolutely gorgeous in a lavender one-strap dress that came down to her knees. The top scooped down way lower than I ever would have dared to wear. On her it looked great. Her light brown skin shone against the dress. A twist similar to mine held her black hair, and clips that matched her dress held her hair in place.

I suddenly felt blah and ugly.

"Hi, guys." Mark brought Hannah to our table and frowned when he realized we only had two chairs. "I thought the plan was to eat together."

Ken waved toward the table beside ours. "Sit there."

The hostess bustled over and scolded Mark and Hannah for not waiting to be seated. Then she told them to sit at the table beside ours.

When the waiter returned, he figured out the four of us were together and moved Mark and Hannah's table closer to Ken's and mine. He took Mark's and Hannah's orders and asked if Ken and I minded waiting until their food was done before we received ours. I didn't mind and said so. Ken didn't look happy, but agreed with me.

While we waited and then ate, I listened to Mark and Ken talking about football and

basketball. Hannah was a cheerleader, so she had plenty to add about both sports. I didn't pay much attention to any kind of sports, even though I probably should have since my boyfriend played them. I didn't have anything to add to the conversation. They tried to include me anyway, which I appreciated.

We finished eating, and Mark and Ken paid for our meals. I started to tense as we walked out of the restaurant, then remembered Mark and Hannah would be riding to the dance with us. I didn't have to be alone with Ken for the rest of the night, which would make this whole thing a lot easier.

Ken held my car door open for me again. Hannah jabbed her elbow into Mark's side. "See? Some guys are gentlemen. Shanna, you're really lucky."

I smiled. "Yeah, I guess I am." I got into the car, and Ken closed my door. I leaned back. Maybe it was luck. Maybe Jonah had been right all those times he'd told me I could create my own reality. Either way, tonight was turning out a lot better than I'd expected.

We arrived at school just after eight o'clock. The parking lot was mostly empty. Some people hadn't shown up yet, and some had apparently found other transportation, as proven by the two limos that headed up the circular drive to the school's main door as Ken parked his car.

"Seriously, a limo?" Hannah said scornfully. "This isn't prom. Some people just go overboard."

Ken shut off the engine. "Stay right there," he told me, patting my hand.

He and Mark got out of the car. Hannah didn't move. "If your date can hold your door, mine can do the same for me."

I grinned. "I hope Mark takes the hint."

He did, and gave Hannah a kiss before he closed her door. Ken opened my door and took my hand to help me out of the car. I was grateful for that. I'd gotten used to my shoes, but now, with my nerves shooting up again, I stumbled trying to get up from the car seat. Ken put his arm around me, steadying me. For once, it felt nice.

We headed toward the school. "Are you okay, Shanna?" Ken asked.

"Yeah." I smiled up at him. "Yeah, I'm fine."

I wasn't, of course. The butterflies were chewing holes in my stomach again. But I refused to acknowledge them. If I ignored them long enough, they would go away.

Red and gold crepe paper, our school colors, hung from the beams in the gym. Balloon bouquets in the same colors were tied to the bleachers. A banner over the doorway welcomed everyone to that year's Harvest Dance. The lights were dim and music throbbed through the room.

I shrank against Ken. All the girls who'd shown up so far looked way better than I did.

"None of these girls look as pretty as you," Ken said, his mouth so close to my ear that

I could feel his warm breath.

I didn't answer. I didn't have anything to say except "thank you," and I'd already said that plenty of times that night.

We walked further into the gym. The music was so loud I wanted to put my hands over my ears. In a way, the volume was a good thing. It was too loud for conversation.

Mark immediately led Hannah onto the dance floor, and they joined the moving bodies there. I leaned against the bleachers and pretended I didn't see the hand Ken held out to me. I'd never been to a dance, and I didn't know how to move to the music. I was pretty sure I'd end up making a fool of myself.

"I want to dance with you sometime tonight." He leaned close to me so I could hear him.

"Not yet." I didn't dare to tell him I couldn't dance. I didn't want to give him a reason to regret bringing me here.

"Okay." He leaned beside me. "You're kind of nervous, huh?"

"Yeah." There wasn't any point in denying that. No matter how hard I tried to ignore the butterflies, they were kind of winning.

"Don't be." He twined his fingers with mine and smiled. "I'm glad to be here with you. If you aren't comfortable dancing, we won't dance. No issue."

His words warmed me. He was willing to just stand there for the whole dance because he wanted me to be comfortable.

That gave me motivation not to ruin his night just because I was scared. After everything I'd been through, a dance was nothing. It didn't matter if I made a fool out of myself. I wanted Ken to have fun.

I wanted to have fun.

"I'll dance with you," I said. "Let me just watch for a few minutes first, okay? I've never danced before. I want to make sure I know what I'm doing."

"It's easy." He nodded toward the dance floor. One girl slipped and almost fell, and the guy she was dancing with caught her. They both looked like they were laughing. After that, I felt a little better. I wasn't the only clumsy one there.

Everyone seemed to be just moving to the music, not doing any particular steps or anything. Some moved on the beat; some didn't. No one cared, as far as I could see. They just enjoyed themselves.

I was about to tell Ken that I was ready to give dancing a try when the music changed to a slow song. Some people left the dance floor. Others, including some who'd just arrived, took their places. They put their arms around their partners, and some couples danced so close together I had to look away. I definitely couldn't dance with Ken to a song like this.

He stepped away from the bleachers, tugging my hand. "Come on. Slow dancing's easier."

Not for me. Ken didn't know as much about me as Jonah, but he knew enough that he should have understood slow dancing would be harder for me than dancing fast.

He frowned. "Are you sure you even want to be here? I can take you home if you'd prefer."

Don't get mad at me. I cringed and looked down at the floor. I was so afraid he'd be angry that I couldn't say anything out loud.

"I'm not mad," he said, stepping close to me again. "I just want us to have fun tonight. Let go for once, please? Let's just enjoy this."

He's right, Mason said. *You need to relax and have fun. You decided you would. Stick with that decision. You deserve it.*

He was right. I did.

I nodded to Ken. "Let's do it."

His smile made the choice worth it. We walked out onto the floor, and I tried to ignore the fact that my legs were shaking.

Then Ken put his arms around my waist. I jumped, then relaxed. This was Ken. He'd hugged and kissed me before. I didn't have any problem with him touching me.

"Put your hand on my shoulder," he said as quietly as he could.

I rested my left hand on his shoulder. He kept some distance between us so he wouldn't bump my broken arm, and we started swaying to the music. Dancing wasn't too bad. I liked having Ken's arms around me, and since everyone else was busy dancing too, they didn't even look at us. Which meant I didn't have to worry about what they thought.

That first dance with Ken opened something for me. I wasn't afraid anymore. I could dance. I could actually move my body to music. And dancing with my boyfriend felt nice.

For the rest of the night, we danced to most of the songs. Sometimes by ourselves; sometimes with a group made up mostly of friends of his. Most of them were juniors, who, surprisingly, didn't seem to care that I was just a freshman. They'd all been pretty nice to me lately anyway, but now they seemed to actually like me.

Even Kaylie Sturbridge, the most popular girl and biggest you-know-what in eleventh grade, took me aside and said, "You look really nice tonight, Shanna. I just wanted you to know that. You should put your hair up and wear makeup more often."

I wasn't sure how to take a compliment from her, since she almost never gave them, so I just mumbled, "Thanks. You look nice too."

"Thank you." Her smile looked almost genuine as she went back to dancing.

By the time the dance ended, I didn't want to leave. I hadn't ever had that much fun,

and I didn't want it to end.

Ken and I said goodbye to a bunch of people and went to his car, followed by Mark and Hannah. We were all pretty tired, so once we were settled in the car, we didn't talk much.

We took Hannah home first. While Mark walked her to her door, Ken asked me, "Did you have a good time?"

I gave him a giddy grin. "Yeah, I did. I really did."

"Good." He leaned over the center console and kissed me. Not one of the little peck kisses I'd gotten used to from him. This was a real kiss, and my mind gibbered at what it might mean.

Then the back door opened, and Ken quickly moved back to his side of the car. "Hope I didn't interrupt anything," Mark teased as he slid into the back seat.

"You didn't." I leaned against my seat and wrestled with the desire to wipe my mouth. I'd kind of liked the kiss, but it had weirded me out, too.

We didn't live far from Hannah. When Ken stopped in front of the house, Mark got out first. "Don't take too long saying goodbye," he said before he closed his door. His tone made a joke out of the words, but he walked to the door and stood there looking at the car.

"I'm glad you had fun," Ken said. "I did, too." He took my hand. "I love you."

Startled, I stammered, "I—I love you too."

He kissed me again, this time one of the typical kisses. "Good night."

"Good night." I squeezed his hand and got out of the car.

Inside, Laura and Phil had waited up with plenty of questions about the dance. I kicked off my shoes, sat in one of the armchairs, and let Mark do most of the talking. I didn't want to say anything. I just wanted to sit there and replay the night in my mind.

The dance had been my first real date with my first boyfriend. Despite the near-panic I'd dealt with, I'd ended up having a great time. For a while, I'd forgotten my fear and all the negative thoughts that filled my brain. I'd been like any other girl at a dance.

That gave me hope. After everything I'd been through, maybe I'd actually be able to live my life.