

The Vampire's Heart

Spring 1997

Chapter 1 The Boy from Britain

I walked through the darkness, threading my way through the trees as a steady rain fell down upon me. There was only a slight chill in the air, but I shivered in my soaked shirt and wet jeans. I was cold. Even my boxers were wet and clung to my skin. I was miserable, but my physical discomfort was the least reason for it.

I sat cross-legged at the base of a giant oak and bowed my head as the rain dripped upon me from the branches and leaves above. My shoulders shuddered as I began to cry. My hot tears warmed my cheeks as they fell to mingle with the rain.

I was so tired of feeling lonely. I was so tired of being alone. There was not a single boy I could call a friend. More sobs welled up from my chest; another sign of my weakness. I was the shortest, skinniest, puniest boy in my entire class. I was pathetic. I was better off dead.

With trembling hands I withdrew the bottle from my pocket. I screwed off the lid and looked down at enough sleeping pills to put me asleep forever. I was tired of being friendless and alone. Thirteen years was enough. I was determined that this would be my last, lonely, miserable night.

I raised the bottle to my lips with an unsteady hand, but a loud hoot and the flap of wings startled me and I spilled the pills all over the ground. I looked up to see a tawny owl peered down at me from a branch above, eyes blinking.

"Thanks a lot. Look what you've done."

The owl didn't answer, she just looked at me and blinked. I knew her. She visited me often and I'd named her Angelica. I first came upon her early that spring. I was sitting under the very same oak tree I was now, writing in my journal, and there she was, as unafraid as if I were one of her kind. That didn't surprise me greatly, I had a way with animals. I was one of them and some would even come when I called. Since our first meeting, Angelica searched me out when I was in the forest. It was a rare time when she did not find me.

"Did you bring me any secrets tonight?" I asked her as she stared at me. "I'm sure you know plenty."

I almost felt as if she could answer. I'd learned early on there was little difference between fantasy and reality and I allowed them to mix freely when I was alone. It made me less afraid, and less lonely. Sometimes, I pretended I was with friends, especially when I was in the forest. We'd be exploring and they'd be just out of sight all around me. I felt a little safer then, even though it was only pretend. Tonight, however, there was nothing that could help me. I felt more alone than I ever had before. I was beyond help.

"Nothing, huh? It's just as well," I said. Angelica just sat there and kept blinking at me as

the rain fell down upon us both. She hooted loudly, just once, then stared at me again.

I looked at the muddy forest floor. Small, white pills were laying all over the fallen leaves. I grew angry.

“Just go away and leave me alone!” I yelled at Angelica, but she just kept staring at me, blinking every now and then. She could act so superior sometimes.

I searched the ground on hands and knees for the pills I’d spilled, scooping them back into the bottle, picking out bits of dead leaves. I was truly a loser. I couldn’t even do myself in properly.

As I picked up the pills, now one by one, I felt fright tingling up my spine. I didn’t know why, but fear seized me. A dog howled not far away, setting the hair on the back of my neck on end, and Angelica flying off in the night. I leaped to my feet and peered through the inky darkness, but saw nothing. Only silence filled my ears, but something was there. I could *feel* it. My heart thumped in my chest, beating wildly as if I’d just finished a long run.

I stood there in stillness, peering into the gloom, squinting to see through the rain. Slowly, a great, dark shape became discernable in the shadows. It grew nearer. It was unlike any dog I’d seen. It was black as night and moved with stealth and grace. I shook from head to foot in terror, but could not bring myself to take my eyes from it. As it drew ever closer I could see its eyes; steel blue, cold, and piercing. I could tell it was no dog at all. There was but one thing it could be—a wolf.

I didn’t stop to ponder on what such a creature was doing in the woods; wolves hadn’t existed in the wilds of Indiana for nearly two hundred years. I was in too great a terror. As I gaped at it, my hand turned and I dumped all my pills onto the ground once more. The wolf quickened its pace as it bore down upon me. I stood there rooted to the spot as if I had become an oak tree myself. I screwed my eyes shut as the wolf made a great lunge. This was it. This was how I would die. I knew I’d feel its paws upon my chest in a moment and then its teeth on my neck. But—nothing. It was gone.

I opened my eyes, somewhat amazed to find myself in one piece. I was quite whole, however, and there was no sign of the creature that had given me such terror. It was gone as quickly as it had come and left behind only questions.

The wood seemed more frightening than it had before. It had long been the one place I didn’t feel afraid, but something had entered it that did not belong there. It seemed as if something were lurking behind every tree and hiding in every shadow.

I stood there as the rain streamed down my face. I forgot about the pills lying in the mud. I forgot my misery and why I had come into the forest. I was too terrified to be lonely or depressed. I was too frightened to die.

I turned toward home and forced myself not to run. If I ran, I was almost certain something would chase me. Perhaps I was being foolish, but my surroundings felt dream-like. I was often chased in my dreams, and the terror of it was in the running. As long as I could keep from bolting, I’d be safe, but if I so much as jogged, the demons of my dreams would be after me. My feet ached to run, but I made them walk. I felt as if I were watched from every side.

My breath was coming hard and fast, even though I was only walking. I tried to calm myself and steady my breathing. I reminded myself that there was nothing in the darkness that was not there in the light. For some reason, the thought did not comfort me.

I screamed as I heard movement nearby. Quick as lightning, something sprang at me and knocked me to the ground. I scrambled to my feet all in a panic and bolted. I could run as fast as anything. My one talent was running, probably because I was forced to do it so very often.

It was not the wolf that pounced on me, but something quite as dangerous. I ran as if my life depended on it.

"Ah get him, Jay, you loser!"

"You were closer!"

I heard them nearly on my heels. I didn't dare to turn around. I knew they'd be on me in a second if I did. It was the neighbor boys, Clay and Jay. They were sixteen year old, sandy-haired twins, who lived for little more than making my life a living hell. They were bullies and I was their favorite punching bag. They were three years older, more than a foot taller, and far more muscular than I. Either one of them picking on me would not have been fair, but they nearly always traveled together. I had no idea what they were doing lurking around in the dark, but I was sure they were up to no good.

I didn't give it a great deal of thought. I was far too busy running for my life. I knew I'd be in for it if they caught me. Exactly what they did to me depended on their mood, but it was never fun. It could range anywhere from rubbing my face in the mud to giving me a black eye and a bloody nose. I wasn't going to experience any of it if I could help it.

The twins began to drop behind. Even with their longer legs I could outrun them. It was probably thanks to them that I could run so very fast. When the twins appeared, my only choices were to outrun them or get knocked around, and I much preferred to outdistance them. The night was a disappointment for the twins—I made it to the safety of my own yard. I could hear them huffing and puffing as they stood on the road glaring at me, but they didn't draw closer. They turned and walked on up the road to their own home.

I went straight to my room, pulled off all my wet clothes and climbed under the covers. My teeth were chattering, partly from the cold, but mostly from fear. I thought that wolf was going to kill me. When it leaped, I just knew it was going to pounce on me and rip me to shreds. I could still see those steel blues eyes staring at me. The fear of the wolf was still in my heart, even though I was safe in my little bed.

Oddly enough, the wolf I thought was going to slay me had kept me from killing myself. I was moments from downing an entire bottle of pills when it caused me to scatter them everywhere. When Angelica made me drop them, they mainly landed on the wet leaves, but when the wolf leaped, I threw them all over the place and most of them landed in the mud. They were ruined.

I guess the wolf had saved my life. I'd gone into the woods to end it all, but now I wasn't so sure I was ready to die. Death was pretty final after all. If I did myself in, I couldn't undo it later if I decided it was a mistake. What was I thinking anyway? How could I do that to my parents, and to Kelly, my only real friend. That was the trouble when I got all depressed, upset, and lonely. I didn't think straight. It was like I wasn't even me. I'd never actually tried to kill myself before, but I'd come close. It was like I was out of my head when I was like that. Sometimes the pain in my life just became too much to handle and I snapped. That's what had happened tonight. I was so lonely that I just couldn't take it anymore.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. I was afraid, but not of the wolf this time, or the twins. I was afraid of myself. How long would it be before I lost it again? Maybe next time, I would kill myself. That thought is what scared me. I knew that when I got all upset that I might do it. And next time, I doubted that a wolf would be there to stop me. Something had to change. I couldn't let my life go on as it had. I desperately needed to end my loneliness.

I sighed. I was thirteen and I'd never been on a date. I guess it wasn't that unusual. Maybe I was a bit young for dating. But I had a fear that nothing would change as I got older. In three years, I'd be sixteen and still dateless. In ten years, I'd be twenty-three and still all by myself. I knew I was doomed. It would have been bad

enough if I liked girls, but I'd known for a while that I didn't. It was other boys that got me excited and that made things a thousand times more difficult.

Even if I had been looking for a girlfriend, none of the girls at school would've wanted me. I was small for my age, and thin... a little shrimp. There were boys in my class who already had muscles... and hair sprouting on their chest. I had neither. I looked like a little kid. I wasn't just a kid anymore, though. I wanted to date... to kiss a boy. Finding a girl would've been hard. Finding a boy was impossible. Even if I could tell by looking which ones were like me, which ones were—gay; I'd never have the courage to approach them. If I did, they'd just shoot me down. Who'd want a puny little boy when they could have someone with a man's body?

I sure couldn't approach a guy without knowing if he was gay or not. That was suicide. I got my ass kicked enough without anyone finding out I was gay. If that got out, my life would quickly become a living hell. I'd be dead meat. Every boy at school was bigger and stronger than me and they'd all have it in for me then. There's no way I could let 'em find out about me. The only way I could survive was to remain hidden. Mine was truly a lost cause. If I couldn't reveal myself, what chance did I have of finding someone? Yeah. I was doomed to be alone, at least as far as a boyfriend was concerned. Maybe I could at least find a friend. That'd be better than nothing... way better.

They got me the next day of course, the twins that is. There was no real escape from them. They bore down upon me in the hallway, each smashing into me as they passed. It was like being knocked about by two boulders. My books and papers went flying everywhere and the twins laughed as they moved on.

"Ohhhh, that wasn't nice at all," said Kelly.

"Who ever accused the twins of being nice?" I asked her crossly.

"I've seen them be nice."

"Yes—to *girls*. They are almost always nice to girls."

"Not to me."

"You're different."

"Well, thank you very much, Graham Granger," said Kelly putting her hands on her hips. If she hadn't looked so angry, I would have laughed. She looked comical standing there like that.

"I just mean you're too young, and they know you're my friend."

"Sometimes, I wish I were older," she said. "They are quite handsome, aren't they?"

I rolled my eyes.

"Evil is what they are," I said.

"Oh, Graham, how can you say that? No one is evil."

"Then they are about as close as you can get, and you're in love with them! Ha!"

"I am not in love with them. I just said I thought they were handsome."

"And that you wished you were older. What's that about, huh?"

Kelly quickly changed the subject. I let her. I wasn't in the mood to talk about the twins. As far as I was concerned, the less said about them, the better.

I smiled at Kelly as we walked to class. I couldn't do much but smile. It was hard getting a word in with Kelly most of the time. She liked to talk more than anyone I knew. Perhaps that's why she didn't have many friends. Perhaps they found her as annoying as I did sometimes. There

were times I wanted to scream *Please stop talking!* at her, but I didn't because I knew how it would hurt her feelings. Besides, I didn't want to lose her.

I frowned. I didn't have many friends either. Kelly was the only one really. There was Mrs. Barrett, who ran the school bookstore. Sometimes I hung out and looked at erasers and stuff while I talked to her. Then there was Eddie, the custodian. I didn't really talk to him much, but we always said "hi" when we passed each other in the halls. Mrs. Riley, who worked in the lunch line, was always nice to me too. She never failed to ask how I was doing and usually gave me a bigger serving of dessert than anyone else. None of them were really friends, though. I didn't have anyone my own age to hang out with—no one to go to the movies with me, or the mall, or anything like that.

I liked Kelly, but it would have been nice to have a guy as a friend. I wasn't one of the "cool" boys at school, so it was difficult. I was small for my age. I was puny and I knew it. I wasn't picked last for teams without reason. I couldn't quite manage to get the basketball up to the basket. I couldn't knock a baseball very far at all. Most of the time I couldn't even hit the ball with the bat. I should have been good at soccer, because I was such a good runner, but I couldn't quite manage to control the ball. I was completely useless for football, except maybe as the water boy. It made me an outcast.

The truth was, there wasn't much I wanted more than a friend, another boy I could talk to about guy stuff. Kelly was a good friend, but there are just certain things you can't say to a girl. Kelly also had no interest at all in horror movies, monsters, and other guy things that I wanted to talk about. I made the mistake of showing her one of my monster magazines once and she told me it was "sick". Hearing her say that made my chest feel funny. I could tell she thought I was stupid for being interested in anything like that.

"I do think she'd look better if her hair were shorter," said Kelly.

I realized I'd drifted off and had no idea what she was talking about. From what little I caught at the end, I think it was a good thing. The doorway to English loomed before us, so I was spared further discussion of whoever's hair.

At lunch, my eyes locked on a boy I'd never seen before. He stood out for two reasons. First, he was sitting all to himself, and second, he didn't look quite like anyone I'd ever seen before. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but there was something very different about him.

I wasn't the only one who noticed him. The girls sitting with Kelly had already picked him out.

"I heard he's from England. Tess heard him speak and said he has the most beautiful British accent."

"And what dreamy eyes," said Shelly.

I had to fight hard not to roll my eyes. I did it too often as it was. Kelly often punched me in the shoulder for it. I couldn't help it sometimes. One disadvantage of having a girl for a best friend was that I usually had to sit with girls. It's not that I had anything against them; it's just that listening to them talk sometimes made me want to hurl. I had to silently agree with Shelly, however... his eyes were dreamy.

I was relieved when Bry Hartnett sat near and said, "You can't be talking about the British freak."

Bry was captain of the football team. He was a jock with a major attitude. His motto was

"If it's not happening to me, it doesn't matter." He could be a real jerk and at times I despised him. At other times I dreamed about him. Something drew me to him, despite his attitude, or perhaps because of it. He was so confident and self-assured. He was sixteen or seventeen, but he seemed all grown up to me. He probably even shaved.

I was glad Bry had arrived. The conversation would definitely be more interesting and I could feast my eyes upon him as he sat there. I never missed an opportunity to look him over. He looked so good in his class jacket. And, he had muscles. Yum.

Bry did not amuse Shelly at all. She shot a wicked glare at him, but he only smiled. He didn't care what she thought. He had dozens of girls like her after him and he knew it. He was *Mr. Popularity* at school and loved (or at least envied) by all.

Some of the girls were as unhappy with Bry as Shelly, others looked at him adoringly. I sat there with mixed emotions. Part of me felt like gazing at Bry adoringly too, although I just knew he'd kick my ass for it if he caught me. Another part of me was jealous of those girls. At least they had a chance with him, especially if they were willing to put out. I didn't know anything for sure, but I'd heard that Bry had had lots of girls. If I was a girl... I didn't let myself go further. I didn't want to be a girl. I was so small and slim that some people treated me like I was one and I didn't like it.

An argument broke out among the girls as to the new boy's best features. I kind of liked listening to them, but it only increased my jealousy. It made me more uncomfortable, too. I could hardly stand sitting there. Before I knew what I was doing, I had stood, picked up my tray, and walked toward the boy sitting alone.

I'm not quite sure what made me do it, but I had an overpowering desire to escape from the table of yakking girls and an overwhelming pity for the boy sitting all by himself. I knew what it was like to be an outsider. It's not as if no one would talk to me or anything, but I was so small that I think people often just didn't realize I was there.

I still couldn't believe I was bold enough to approach him. It wasn't like me at all. The boy was cute, however, and I liked him, even though I didn't know him. I wanted a friend, maybe even a boyfriend, and so I kept going until I was standing in front of him. Having the courage to go so far made me feel like I'd just swam the English Channel.

"Mind if I sit?" I asked.

The boy looked at me. His expression was curious, neither inviting nor unfriendly. I got the feeling he'd rather not have me there, but he didn't protest. I sat down across from him with my tray.

"I'm Graham."

"Josiah," he said in a clipped tone. It was as if he wanted to make the word as short as possible to avoid speaking to me. I could detect the British accent that the girls were going on about. I could see what they meant. It was sexy.

I got a good look at Josiah while I was sitting so close. His hair was jet black, as black as it could possibly be, and his eyes were blue. His pale skin made his hair look that much darker close up. His features were finely drawn and yet he exuded an aura of strength. He was cute, and even beautiful in a mysterious, powerful sort of way. Even though he was wearing a long-sleeved shirt I could tell he had a slim, solid build, not the bulging muscular football type, like Bry, but compact and firm. The sight of him made me breathe just a little harder.

"You new here?"

"Yes."

"It's tough being new, hard to make friends and all that," I said.

"Yes." He said it as if he didn't really care. Josiah was certainly a queer boy. I sighed. If only he *was* queer.

An uneasy silence followed. I observed Josiah as I picked at my green beans. He kept his arms close against his body. It was like he was trying to take up as little space as possible to avoid detection. He didn't appear nervous in the least, but he carefully avoided eye contact with anyone who walked by. Several girls were trying to catch his eye, but it wasn't happening. Some guys were eyeing him too, although not with dreamy looks on their faces. Josiah ignored them completely. It was almost as if he were all alone, even though he was surrounded by others.

I wanted to strike up a conversation with him, but it wasn't easy, especially with his one-word answers to my questions. I wasn't exactly the outgoing type myself. Okay, I wasn't the outgoing type at all, and that made it harder still. It was difficult for me to carry any conversation. I usually listened more than talked.

"I have to go," said Josiah and quickly departed after only a few minutes.

That was it. All I got out of him was six words. There was something that intrigued me about him. He didn't seem eager to make friends, but I had a feeling he needed one, and badly. In those brief moments when I'd glimpsed his eyes I read a certain yearning there. It wasn't a sexual yearning, like I'm sure often showed in my own, but a deep, yet simple yearning that seemed to call out *Save me*. Yeah, there was no doubt Josiah needed a buddy. I needed one too. I was more than tired of being virtually friendless. I knew I could be a good friend. Josiah needed a friend, I just knew it, and that friend was going to be me. It was out of character for me to be so determined about something, but it seemed the day for that. It wasn't like me, but I was resolute nonetheless.

I walked home after school. I lived far enough out of town that I could have taken the school bus, but the twins rode it and it was worth any effort to avoid even a few minutes with them. It was difficult for them to beat on me with the bus driver watching, but they were nearly as good at verbal abuse as they were physical. I didn't enjoy all the names they'd come up with it to hurl at me, like *girly-boy*, *runt*, *pansy*, and *stick boy*. They loved to point out that I was small and weak. Riding on the bus was *not* fun. Besides, it wasn't a long walk home and I rather enjoyed it. I loved being in the forest and I nearly always cut through it when returning from school. I felt at peace there.

I didn't go straight home. Instead, I walked to my favorite oak tree, the one where I'd discovered Angelica. I slipped off my backpack and pulled out my journal. I spent a lot of time alone in the woods, sitting under that tree. That's where I did my best thinking, and all my writing in my journal—most of it anyway.

Most of the time, I just sat under my tree and thought, while I enjoyed the peace of the forest. Thinking allowed me to organize my thoughts and make them make sense. When I had them down in my mind, I wrote them in my journal. It was filled with my thoughts and feelings. It held all my secrets.

I thought about Bry. He was *gorgeous*. It almost didn't seem possible that he could be so handsome. If that wasn't enough; there was his body. He had broad shoulders and big, bulging biceps. I spent a lot of time imagining what he looked like without a shirt. It made me breathe funny. Sometimes, I sat under my tree and fantasized about wrestling with Bry. Almost always, he took his shirt off in my fantasies. I loved imagining what his chest looked like. I knew it must be muscular. He probably had hard abs too.

For a while, my thoughts had disturbed me. I knew I was supposed to be thinking about girls instead of boys, but then Mom had *the* talk with me, the talk about sex. I was expecting that talk to come from Dad, but he didn't want to touch it. I even asked Mom why he wasn't talking to me

about it, but she got all nervous and made me promise not to tell him she'd talked to me about it. She seemed afraid. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Dad wasn't an ideal father. He wasn't bad or anything, but he yelled sometimes. We got on well, mostly, but I know he wanted me to be a big football stud like Bry, and that wasn't going to happen. I knew I was a disappointment to him.

Most of the talk embarrassed the hell out of me and Mom both, but I learned some things that really helped. One thing I learned is that boys my ages often had a kind of hero worship for boys like Bry. Some boys even experimented sexually with other boys, even though they ended up dating girls. And then there was what Mom told me about Uncle Rob. Uncle Rob was in his thirties and wasn't married. I've never thought much about it, but I'd never so much as heard about him dating a girl. Mom told me why and warned me to *never* mention it to Dad. Uncle Rob was gay. It kind of shocked me, but it made things easier. Uncle Rob was my favorite uncle and was the coolest guy I knew. If he was gay, then it must be okay. I knew my Mom and her brother were close. Mom didn't seem to care if Rob was gay or not. I had the feeling that if I told Mom I was gay, that she'd be okay with it. That was a big weight off my shoulders because I was becoming pretty sure I was gay. I wasn't so sure about Dad. He hated Uncle Rob and I'd never been able to figure out why. Dad also seemed to want to keep me away from my uncle. Maybe it was because he was gay. Maybe he thought Uncle Rob would make me gay too, or something. That was a pretty stupid idea, but it seemed to fit with my dad's way of thinking. Uncle Rob lived really far away, so I didn't get to see him much. I was beginning to wish he were closer so we could talk about a few things.

I wondered about some of the things Mom said. I also wondered why she brought up the subject of being gay. Did she suspect me? Was there something about me that was tipping her off? She never came right out and asked me, but there was something in her eyes... an unspoken question—*Are you like Uncle Rob?*

I thought about the hero worship thing. I think my feelings for Bry were more than that. There was definitely some hero worship there—Bry was tall and built and athletic and handsome. There was more to it, though. Sometimes I caught myself looking at his butt and at the bulge in his jeans. I didn't really know quite what I wanted to do with Bry, but I think it was sexual. In my fantasies, we just wrestled, but I sure liked rubbing up against his sexy body. When I'd thought about him for a while, I got excited, it made me hard. The first time I ever masturbated, I was thinking about Bry. I was a virgin, but I knew he excited me.

Josiah, the new boy, excited me too, but not in quite the same way as Bry. I was drawn to Bry because of his cocky attitude and his muscles. I was drawn to Josiah because he was dark and mysterious. He didn't have a muscular body like Bry, but there was something about him that was irresistibly sexy. It wasn't really Josiah's looks that attracted me. Rather, it was my need for a friend. Josiah seemed so sad and lonely. I thought maybe he needed a friend too. Then again, he was kind of cute. He'd probably make a good boyfriend. Maybe he'd be sweet and kind. I didn't think I was ready for a boyfriend, but who knew?

I wrote my feelings down in my journal. I was glad I knew that Mom was cool with her brother being gay. It made me feel like she'd accept me if I told her I was gay too. I wasn't completely sure if I was, but the evidence was mounting. I didn't really care for girls and when I thought of guys like Bry... Mmmmmm. I was glad I knew about Uncle Rob, too. It made me feel better about myself. If I did turn out to be gay, and I thought I probably would, then knowing Uncle Rob was gay would make me feel better. I could probably even talk to him about stuff on the phone.

I'd been sitting under my tree for over an hour. I knew it was time to go. My parents didn't mind if I was a little late. They knew I liked to mess around in the woods and they always encourage

me to be outdoors—like maybe it would build me up and I wouldn't be so puny. They'd get worried if I was too late, though, so I had to watch how much time I spent under my tree.

Just as I was getting ready to leave, Angelica landed on a branch above me. I was a little surprised. I saw her often in the woods, but it was usually later in the evening, or at night.

"There you are," I said. "I was just leaving, but I'm glad you came to say *hi*."

Angelica looked at me and slightly bowed her head. I smiled at her and went on my way.

I walked in to find the house quiet—no surprise there. My dad had his nose stuck in the newspaper in the living room. He said "Hello, Graham", as I passed with barely a pause in his reading. Dad had his face hidden behind a paper so often that I wasn't quite sure what he looked like. My mother pinched my cheeks as I walked through the kitchen and picked up a cookie. I hated having my cheeks pinched, but it wasn't so bad a price to pay for the cookies my mom always kept on hand. There was always a big plate of them on the table that never seemed to empty: chocolate chip, oatmeal with pecans, and chewy coconut.

I made the mistake of pausing too long and Mom pinched my cheeks again and added a "You are such a cute little boy". I rolled my eyes and ducked away before she could have another go at my cheeks. For some reason, all the females of my family, aunts, cousins, and all, felt compelled to pinch my cheeks. I think it had something to do with me being small. I was thirteen, but they often seemed to think I was five. It infuriated me.

My parents weren't bad as parents go, but sometimes they seemed like they'd just stepped out from some old black and white sitcom. Dad never seemed to do anything except go to work and read the paper and Mom was forever baking something. I had more than a sneaking suspicion that they weren't my real parents. I'd always felt that way, but then again they had been my parents for as long as I could remember. The thing that really made me suspicious is that Dad had jet-black hair and black eyes, while my hair was so light blond it was practically white and my eyes were blue. Mom had auburn hair and brown eyes. I had no brothers or sisters, so I had no one for comparison, but I didn't see how my blond hair could come from black and auburn. Perhaps it had something to do with recessive genes or something—we'd studied genes in school—Mendel's peas and stuff like that. I didn't even have any blond uncles or aunts either, so that made me suspect I wasn't one of them at all—not that the thought bothered me. It would've been a relief to find out I was adopted or something.

I escaped from further cheek pinching, but before I could even make it to the stairs, my dad called out to me.

"Graham, I found an ad here you might want to see."

I turned on my heel and headed for the living room. I'd been trying to find an afternoon or weekend job to earn a little money. I was thirteen and was beginning to think about the day I could drive. Three years was an exceptionally long time, but cars were expensive. If I wanted to have any chance at all of getting one, even a lousy used junker, I needed to start saving for it as soon as possible. So far I'd had no luck. My only prospect was a job flipping burgers at minimum wage and even that glamorous career seemed beyond my reach. No one wanted me. They all seemed to think I was a little kid. Sometimes I felt like that whole world was stacked against me because of my age. It was age discrimination, pure and simple, but no one cared.

Dad handed me a section of the paper. I could tell he really wanted me to find a job because

normally no one touched the paper but him. He acted like it was made of gold or something.

I looked down the column of ads until my eyes lit on the one dad had pointed out. "Wanted: Boy to do yard work and run errands. Good pay, hours negotiable. Must be dependable. Apply in-person at 825 West County Road."

It sounded like just what I was looking for. What's more, it wasn't far from home. I memorized the address and gave Dad back his paper. He carefully put the section back in its place, like a fussy librarian putting a book back on the shelf. I smiled; I might have just found a job at last.