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opening extract from

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written by

Amy Meredith

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A Dark Touch Novel
SHADOWS

Amy Meredith

RED FOX

With special thanks to Laura Burns and Melinda Metz

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To Cliff Bryant,
top of the Shoe Scale

Chapter One

The ghost slipped between the two pine trees, moving silently, not even leaving footprints in the pine needles on the ground. Then it stopped, as if it could smell something – something *living*.

Don't be scared, Eve Evergold told herself as her heart began to pound. *I'm strong and I'm brave. I'll get through this*, she thought. She wrapped her arms around herself, and tried to stay absolutely still. But that was impossible. She had to keep breathing, and that meant chest-up-and-down movement.

The ghost moved its head, a fraction at a time, sensing, searching. Its face – smooth, pure white and inhuman – was expressionless. The creature moved its head another fraction, and now it was staring right at Eve. Its eyes shone with a deep red fire. It felt as if those eyes seared everything they gazed at, including Eve's skin. If it kept looking at her, she was sure those eyes

would pull her straight to the burning centre of hell.

Eve turned towards Jess, her best friend practically since birth. Jess's face was twisted with terror as she stared at the ghost. The fire in its eyes brightened. Eve could hear crackling as it moved towards them. It was—

Jess screamed. Almost immediately handfuls of popcorn rained down on both of them. Jess got a few 'shhh's from other people in the theatre, but a lot more simply laughed.

No more horror movies for Jess and me, Eve promised herself. From now on, there will be nothing scary in my entire life!

'I can't believe I screamed. Out loud,' Jess complained as she and Eve stepped out onto the broad sidewalk in front of the movie theatre.

'Is there actually another way to scream? Like, in writing?' Eve teased as they started down Main Street. 'Anyway, I can believe it. You always freak at scary movies.'

'This one wasn't supposed to *be* scary,' Jess said. 'I heard it was going to be like a *Twilight* movie. And there wasn't even any kissing.'

'We deserve a treat after that,' Eve told her.

‘Shoes?’ Jess asked hopefully, gazing at the array of sling-back wedges in the window of the Jildor shoe boutique.

‘I don’t think we’re quite that traumatized,’ Eve said. ‘Also, I’ve almost reached the limit on my AmEx.’ Well, her parents’ AmEx. Parents who would not be happy if she went over the limit they set. The very generous limit, as they often reminded her. ‘I was thinking something more like—’

‘Ice cream,’ Jess finished for her.

‘Two scoops.’ As they strolled towards the ice-cream shop, Eve looked for the strings of white fairy lights that were twisted among the branches of the elm trees lining the street. They went on every day at dusk, but she guessed it wasn’t quite dark enough yet. Eve loved those little lights. And the elm trees. She loved Main Street – all two and a half blocks of it.

She’d missed Deepdene, the tiny, exclusive town in the Hamptons where she’d lived her whole life, even though summer in Kauai with her family and Jess had been awesome.

Eve and Jess walked through the yellow door of Big Ola’s Ice Cream Shop at the end of the block. As usual on a Friday evening, every table and booth was taken. In their little town, the ice-cream place was one of the

three possible teen hangouts – Java Nation and the pizza place being the other two.

Eve turned to Jess. ‘OK, who do we know?’

They both scanned the small room. ‘Pretty much everyone. My brother’s over there, with the other stooges,’ Jess commented.

‘Shanna and the crew are by the window.’ Eve gave them a wave.

‘You’re back!’ Katy Emory called from her seat next to Shanna. She gave them the ‘call me’ sign.

Jess moved closer to Eve and lowered her voice. ‘And I think – no, I’m sure – that’s the new minister’s kid, Luke Thompson, sitting by the postcard rack.’

‘Who?’ Eve asked.

‘I talked to Megan. Remember? It was about a week ago, that day you were getting the hot rock massage but I was too sunburned,’ Jess said. ‘Anyhow, Megan said that Luke has floppy blond hair that falls into his eyes all the time – which that guy totally does. Love it, by the way! And she said he’s going to be a freshman like you and me. I told you, she met him over the summer.’

‘Oh yeah. Of course,’ Eve said. Jess’s next-door neighbour, Megan Christie, always got to meet new people first because her parents ran the best – and only – real estate agency in town. They were full-service,

even finding movers and hiring household help for the buyers of Deepdene's huge houses, which ranged from French country-style estates, complete with barns, to ultra-modern, all-glass-and-angles mansions right on the white-sand beach. And that meant that Megan was involved with newcomers from the very moment they set foot in town. It was a big deal in Deepdene, population 2,704, especially because some of those 2,704 included the very rich and very famous, in the categories of movie directors, pop stars, fashion designers, news anchors, celebrity spawn and other magazine-cover staples. Anyone who was anyone and lived in New York City also had a house in Deepdene or one of the other villages that made up the Hamptons, 120 miles away from Manhattan. As long as they had enough money, of course.

Eve was giving the cute new boy a stealthy from-under-the-eyelashes look. His hair looked so silky. It made her want to run her fingers through it.

'I still think Megan might have had a little thing going with Luke over the summer,' Jess said. She started to hum 'Son of a Preacher Man', a song from the CD her mother played almost every time she drove them anywhere.

'Of course she did,' Eve said again. Megan's ability to

flirt was legendary. So was the fact that she'd gotten breasts in fifth grade, before anyone else. Eve and Jess were a year younger than Megan, and they'd been deeply impressed. And deeply concerned about what – and when – their own bodies would pop out. Eve's had never popped quite as much as she'd hoped, but the guys didn't seem to mind that she was more on the sleek and slender side. Who knew – maybe she still had some popping in her future.

'Megan moves fast,' Jess agreed. 'But, when I spoke to her, it sounded like she was already done with him and interested in somebody else. She wouldn't say who. You know what a drama queen she is. She loves to hint and make you beg. But I didn't get time to find out any more. She said she was tired and going to bed, even though it was only nine o'clock – her time – when we were talking. She was practically falling asleep on the phone. She said she hadn't been sleeping a lot. Nightmares or something.' Jess gave another glance over at the guy who had to be Luke. 'Let's go sit with him,' she suggested.

Eve laughed. 'Why not? He's had to wait all summer to meet the glorious us. Poor deprived boy.' She led the way over to the table and slid into one of the empty chairs. 'You look bored, Luke. We decided you

need entertaining,' she told him, giving him a smile.

'I'm Jess. And she's Eve. Welcome to Deepdene,' Jess said, giving Eve a little shove with her butt. Eve moved over, letting Jess share her chair. Luke was at a table for two.

Eve moved an empty ice-cream dish out of the way with her elbow. Somebody had been sitting here with Luke. *Wonder who?* she thought. Not that it mattered.

'Thanks, but I've been here for a month. Where were you?' Luke asked.

'Kauai,' Eve and Jess answered together.

'Right. Hawaii. Rich people love to go beach-hopping,' Luke said, nodding. 'Even when they already live on top of a perfectly good beach right here in the Hamptons. I keep forgetting that, being poor myself.'

Jess immediately looked concerned, but Eve laughed. The guy was kidding – she could tell by the little smirk on his face. 'Poor?' she said sceptically.

'OK, no. But we definitely don't summer in Europe. Or, you know, Hawaii,' Luke said. 'Though maybe you two will invite me with you next year. I'm lots of fun, I promise.' He winked.

Eve was too surprised to answer, and she could see Jess's cheeks turning red. This boy was pretty flirtatious for a minister's kid!

‘So go ahead, ask,’ he said. ‘I know that’s why you came over.’

Eve and Jess looked at each other, baffled. He couldn’t know that Eve sort of wanted to curl her fingers into that silky blond hair of his. Could he?

‘What’s it like to be a minister’s kid?’ Luke prompted.

‘You don’t know that’s what we were thinking,’ Jess told him.

‘But we kind of were,’ Eve put in. ‘Specifically, are you the kind of minister’s kid who is extra, extra good?’ she joked. ‘Or are you one of those wild ones who will do anything to prove they are extra, extra bad?’ She had a feeling she knew the answer already.

‘Because it has to be one or the other, right?’ Luke laughed. ‘So using that logic, you’re spoiled. Because rich girls are always spoiled. And you spend every free second shopping or thinking about shopping. Because spoiled rich girls love to spend money,’ he added with a teasing smile.

‘He’s got us,’ Eve said to Jess. It *had* taken quite a bit of shopping to get close to her parent-set monthly AmEx limit. Maybe even a little too much. Those earrings she’d bought at the airport weren’t exactly essential. But the flight back home had been delayed, and she and Jess had used the time to make the round of the gift shops.

‘He does,’ Jess agreed. She grinned at Luke. ‘We love to shop, and we’re very good at it!’

‘I’ve got to go,’ Luke said. He leaned closer to Eve. ‘But to answer your question, I wouldn’t say I’m extra, extra bad.’ He reached out and tugged gently on one of her long dark ringlets. ‘But I wouldn’t say I’m an angel either.’

With that, he stood up, dropped a five on the table, and walked off.

‘Oh my God, he played with your hair! I think he likes you more than me.’ Jess gave an exaggerated pout.

‘I thought your heart was lost to Seth Schneider,’ Eve said, pretending to be shocked. Jess had been into Seth since for ever, but he never seemed to notice.

‘Well . . .’ Jess shrugged.

‘Anyway, he’s clearly in lu-u-u-urve with me!’ Eve joked. Although, no joke, when he’d touched her hair she’d felt it down to her toes. ‘Come on, let’s get cones to go, and walk around.’ Suddenly she was having a hard time sitting still.

They started towards the counter. Eve managed to bump into one of the café tables – things like that happened to her all the time – and she stumbled. She leaned down to steady the table – luckily nothing had spilled – straightening up just in time to see Luke

giving Shanna Poplin's hair a gentle tug. He'd said he was leaving, but he hadn't gotten very far. Only halfway across the room.

Jess followed Eve's gaze. 'Hmm. Looks like he's in lu-u-u-urve with Shanna too. I think our preacher's kid might be a little bit of a player,' she said.

Eve used both hands to shove her thick, curly hair away from her face. Yikes. Seeing Luke do the hair-thing to Shanna about a minute after he'd done it to her kind of stung. Which was ridiculous. She'd spent all of five minutes with the guy.

'He's as much of a flirt as Megan,' Eve said. 'But I think he needs to work on his moves. He's pulled out the hair-touch twice in about a minute and a half.' The very effective, feel-it-to-the-toes hair-touch. Well, at least she'd seen the true Luke. Now she knew not to take any of his *playing* seriously.

Jess ordered their ice creams – Swiss orange chip for her, coconut chocolate chip for Eve. 'So what do you think, now that we've seen him up close?' she asked softly. 'I say Choo all the way.'

'I don't know if I'd go as far as a Choo,' Eve said thoughtfully. After all, Jimmy Choo was the highest ranking on the shoe scale – Eve and Jess's system for classifying boy hotness – and Luke needed to have

some points knocked off for the limited variety of his so-called moves. ‘But he’s definitely a Blahnik,’ she had to admit.

‘And a Balenciaga bag!’ Jess added with a grin. ‘So what about the other new boy in town that Megan mentioned?’

‘Oh yes – Mal, wasn’t it?’ Eve exclaimed. ‘The one who’s moved into the rock god’s house.’

‘Rock god’s *mansion*, you mean,’ Jess corrected. The Razor place – people still called it by the rock god’s name – was huge even by Deepdene standards, which was saying something. And the grounds were almost endless – a large pond, sunken tennis courts, formal gardens, sprawling meadows, all behind a high green privacy hedge. It was surprising that it had been empty so long, almost ten years. Property – any property – in the Hamptons was almost always immediately snapped up.

But the Razor place had a history. Before the rock star killed himself – right in the house – there’d been some kind of software genius living there. One of the Kennedys for a while. And way back when Eve’s grandmother was growing up, a famous director had lived in the mansion. All of them had moved out after less than a year. Jess said it was because the place was haunted. And she wasn’t the only one.

But Eve didn't believe in ghosts, at least not now that she wasn't sitting in a dark movie theatre. She was more interested in flesh-and-blood-and-muscle guys. 'Two new boys in one year. That's got to be a record,' she said thoughtfully.

'I can't believe our luck,' Jess agreed as she paid for the cones. 'And right in time for high school!'

'We've seen one new boy. What are the stats on the other one?' Eve asked. She led the way out of Ola's, noting that Luke was still loitering around Shanna's table.

'Our age. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Cute. That's all Megan could tell me,' Jess replied. 'Like I said, she couldn't stop yawning. It was ridiculous. I wanted to force-feed her a litre of Pepsi Max.'

Eve paused in front of the Madewell boutique. 'The denim bar! I missed this place,' she said. 'Every pair of my favourite jeans comes from here.'

'The consultants understand your butt better than you do yourself,' Jess agreed.

'I want to get a pair with custom embroidery. I'm thinking of—' Eve paused, suddenly becoming aware of little prickles dancing up the back of her neck – the kind of prickles she always got when somebody was watching her. She could almost feel the staring eyes on

her back. *Could it be Luke?* Her bad, bad, too-romantic brain just went there.

Luke equals player, Eve reminded herself. *You do not want to crush on Luke. You don't want to, and you aren't going to. Don't even bother to look.*

But she couldn't help herself. She had to know.

Eve glanced over her shoulder. No Luke. But somebody else was staring at her.

A guy she'd never seen before. He stood across the street, leaning against the wrought-iron fence that enclosed the park, one foot crossed over the other. And he was just . . . staring. When he realized she'd caught him, he looked away. But then looked back, and a slow, sexy half-smile spread across his face. Just for Eve. Like the two of them shared a secret.

The fairy lights in the elm trees clicked on. Like magic. Like something out of a movie. A non-horror movie.

Eve dragged her gaze away from him, every nerve-ending in her body tingling. That had to be the other new boy. Mal. But Megan had been wrong. He wasn't cute.

Mal was smouldering.

Chapter Two

Eve adjusted the dragonfly clip holding back her curly hair. The sapphire Swarovski crystals on the wings almost exactly matched her eyes.

‘You’re going to be late, Eve! And I don’t have time to drive you. I have an eight-thirty,’ her mother called. An eight-thirty as in an eight-thirty surgery. Her mom was a cardiac surgeon.

‘OK, OK, I’m leaving!’ Eve grabbed her fringed Hobo bag and turned away from the mirror. Continuing her klutzy streak, which had really only developed in the last year or two – her mom said it was probably because she was growing and her body was still getting used to its new dimensions – she tripped over the mound of clothes behind her. There was another mound on the bed and more clothes draped over her desk chair. She had tried on just about every outfit combo that was mathematically possible. And texted

pics of most of them to Jess for a second opinion. The first day of school was always a fashion show, and Eve suspected the first day of high school would be even more so.

She grabbed a pen and scribbled a note to Donna, the housekeeper, saying she would put everything away herself. She stuck the note to the corkboard on her door and hurried down the grand curved stairway to the foyer.

She made a quick stop at the kitchen for a wild berry smoothie, then walked the two blocks to the corner where she met Jess. For a moment Jess took in Eve's outfit in silence.

'I know, I know, we decided I should wear the skinny jeans and the flowy top,' Eve said, knowing Jess was curious as to why she had deviated from the first-day clothing strategy they'd devised together. 'I changed my mind at the last second.'

'Mm-hmm,' Jess said, falling into step with Eve as they headed towards school. 'And was there any particular reason you decided on the T-shirt of Lu-u-u-urve?' Jess dragged out the word 'love' so long that she had to take a big breath in the middle.

'I liked how it went with the Peasant Skirt of Effortless Chic,' Eve replied. Which was true. The skirt

she'd bought yesterday, squeaking under the AmEx limit, was the perfect colour to complement the tee. But it was also true – and Jess knew it – that Eve always wore her funky tee with the gramophones on it when she wanted to look especially good for a guy. The T-shirt just *fitted*. It got attention without looking like it was trying to get attention. Which was why it had been christened the T-shirt of Love.

'Ri-i-i-ight,' Jess answered, drawing out the word almost as long as she had 'love'.

Why did Jess have to know her so well? 'Fine. I thought I'd start high-school life with a little love mojo,' Eve admitted.

'I knew it!' Jess exclaimed. 'Who's the mojo for? Has to be one of the new boys, obviously, but which one?' She tapped her lips with two fingers and frowned, her patented silly *I'm thinking* look.

'Well, not the player,' Eve said. 'I don't need any of that.'

'Oh, but he touched your hair,' Jess reminded her.

'He practically made the rounds in Ola's, putting his fingers all over girls' heads,' Eve said.

'It's settled then,' Jess said. 'I get Luke, since you don't want him. And that means you get Mal.'

Eve laughed. 'Don't they get a say in that? And I

think we'll have some competition from, you know, every other girl in school.'

'Not a problem. If the guys were seniors or something, maybe. But they're freshmen, just like us. And I'm a cheerleader, remember? Or at least I'm sure I will be once we have try-outs.' Jess had been a cheerleader all three years of middle school. 'And more than that, I'm a blonde cheerleader. And I'm peppy. I'm a completely lovable package.'

'Plus – you're so modest,' Eve added.

'I know.' Jess slipped her arm through Eve's. 'And you. Those curls. Those eyes. That creamy skin. You look like you stepped out of some pre-Raphaelite painting. Except your hair is dark, which is even better.' Jess had gone to Europe over winter break last year, and her parents had put every conceivable museum on the itinerary.

Eve and Jess stopped in front of the high school. Both of them gazed at it in silence for a moment. 'Remember when we used to play "high-school girls" back when we were about five?' asked Eve.

'My high-school-girl name was Roberta. I thought that was the coolest name back then. Somebody must have been putting something in my chocolate milk,' Jess answered.

‘Well, we’re finally here,’ Eve said.

‘Let’s go conquer.’ And they walked across the quad and through the big front doors. Then Jess made a left and Eve went right. Their lockers weren’t together because they had different homerooms. Eve stowed her iPhone – cellphones weren’t allowed in class – and attached a magnetic mirror to the inside of the locker door. That was essential for hair and make-up checks. Then she pulled her schedule out of her purse and verified the location of her homeroom. She found it with no problem, and – bonus! – without knocking anything over, or tripping, or displaying any other klutzy behaviour. So far, so good.

She was only the second person there. Even the teacher wasn’t in the room yet; Ms Reiber was probably off directing traffic in one of the hallways. The person who’d beaten her there? Mal.

Thank you, T of Lu-u-u-urve, Eve thought as Mal gave her that *we’ve got a secret* half-smile she’d seen on Main Street. She smiled back. A small *maybe I will, maybe I won’t* kind of smile. She hoped it made her look as mysterious as Mal. And besides, she hadn’t been able to come up with just the right casual comment. Usually she was good at that. But he was so new-boy. She was used to having years of history with

every guy in Deepdene's small school. She wasn't entirely sure how to talk to somebody brand new. And the way Mal looked at her – it was kind of intense, even in the few seconds his gaze had lasted. She felt as if he'd sucked the words right out of her.

Should she sit next to him? Across the room? Eve decided on something in between, taking a desk that was two rows over from Mal, and a little further forward. As soon as her butt hit the chair, she wondered if she'd made a mistake. She could feel him looking at her, the way she had on Main Street. At least, she *thought* she could feel it. She glanced over her shoulder and caught him in the middle of looking away.

'So, um, you're new, right?' Eve asked. Yes, she'd come up with something that brilliant all by herself in less than a minute. She was going to have to do some remedial reading in *Cosmo* about how to talk to boys. Asap.

'Right,' Mal said. That's all. Just 'right'.

'I'm Eve,' she told him. 'Eve Evergold.'

'Mal,' said the big talker.

'Mal, as in Malcolm?' Eve asked, to keep the conversation going.

Mal just raised one dark eyebrow, as if he were shrugging.

‘OK, not Malcolm,’ Eve said.

Mal raised both eyebrows.

‘If you won’t say, it must be something embarrassing,’ Eve guessed.

‘Oh, really? I never heard that theory before,’ Mal said, with just a hint of snarkasm – Eve and Jess’s word for snark mixed with sarcasm.

At least that had gotten more than a word out of him. Eve thought for a moment. What other names started with ‘Mal’ anyway? Or ended with it? Sometimes names were shortened that way too.

‘I’m always jealous of people with nicknames,’ Eve said. ‘Having a one-syllable name will do that to you. I don’t have any options. Jess, my best friend, calls me Evie sometimes, but that’s it.’

‘Who said it was a nickname?’ Mal asked. He didn’t smile-smile. But his voice was smiling. And his dark chocolate eyes. He should definitely talk more. His voice matched him somehow. It was low and husky. Sexy. Yeah, that was the word for it.

‘It’s obviously a nickname.’ Eve still couldn’t think of what it was a nickname *for*, though. ‘I’ll find out eventually.’

‘We’ll see,’ he answered, but the right side of his mouth tilted up in that sexy half-smile again. Eve was

already starting to love that smile. Before she could find a way to make him do it again, Ben Flood and Alexander Neemy came in. Loudly. Followed by five others and the teacher.

The people kept on coming, distracting her from Mal, and the bell rang a few minutes later. Ms Reiber gave a first-day-of-school speech that was exactly like the one Eve had heard on the first day of every year of middle school. Boring. She'd hoped that in high school they wouldn't find it necessary to talk about the importance of good attendance and how to evacuate in case of a fire – which presumably you knew by the time you were this old. Finally Ms Reiber started calling out names. She'd decided to seat the class alphabetically. Alphabetically, like they did in kindergarten. Eve rolled her eyes. You should get to sit where you wanted in homeroom at least. It wasn't even a real class.

Except – *thank you again, T of Love* – Eve ended up in the desk behind Mal. Close enough to get a whiff of the musky wood-smoke scent of him. Close enough to reach out and touch the line on the back of his neck where his short black hair ended. If she wanted to, which she didn't, because that would be weird.

Instead she leaned as close to him as she could. 'I *will* find out,' she promised.

* * *

After her first class, history, Eve swung by her locker to drop off the textbook the teacher had handed out. It was too heavy to lug around all day. And she wanted to check her lip gloss. Sometimes she nibbled on her lower lip when she was thinking, and she was sure she'd consumed the lip gloss she'd put on before school.

Yep. She had. Eve shook her head at her reflection, then pulled out a tube of Cotton Candy Lip Glaze.

'Hey, Eve. Cool that we got assigned to do the history paper together, huh?' Luke asked just as she started to apply the glaze.

Eve jumped in surprise – she hadn't even heard him coming. She peered round the open locker door at him. They must have a different definition of 'cool' in Santa Cruz, California. She'd found out that was where Luke was from once they'd been paired up in history. She'd also found out his opinion of her favourite bag. He'd bugged her until she'd told him how much it had cost, then he'd declared it obscene to pay that kind of money just for something to carry your junk around in. He'd probably been kidding – the way he'd been kidding when he called her spoiled. Kidding in that way that is only half teasing and half what you really

think. She and Jess needed to come up with a word for *that*.

‘I guess. Though I’m not sure you really want a - partner with such deeply offensive accessory choices,’ Eve said.

Luke gave a snort of laughter. ‘I’m sure you have many fine qualities to compensate for your love of shopping. And you’re cute too. So that helps.’

‘Gee. Thanks. I feel so much better now,’ Eve drawled. At least working with him on the report would give her a chance to show him that she had some brains under all her long curly hair. And that she did occasionally use those brains to think about things that couldn’t be bought with a credit card. She wasn’t as shallow as he seemed to think. She wasn’t shallow at all. A love of purses did not a shallow person make.

Did it?

‘So what do you have next?’ Luke asked. Across the hall, Katy Emory was looking at Eve like she was the luckiest girl in the world to be talking to Luke. Would it matter to Katy if she knew Luke was probably the biggest flirt in the entire school?

Eve returned to her lip-gloss application. ‘Biology. Ms Whittier,’ she said, not bothering to look at Luke.

‘Cool. Me too. Can I borrow that?’ He reached

around her and plucked her lip glaze out of her fingers. She still held the wand. He held out his hand for it.

‘What? No,’ Eve said.

‘Come on, it’s my first day. I want to make a good impression. And clearly biology can’t be understood without lipstick,’ Luke joked.

‘Funny.’ Eve grabbed the lip glaze back. ‘This stuff is really good for you.’

Luke raised his eyebrows. They disappeared under his floppy blond hair. He didn’t have expressive dark brows like Mal.

‘It has green tea antioxidants,’ Eve continued. ‘And macadamia extract and aloe vera for healing.’

‘Oh. That’s different then,’ Luke said. ‘Carry on.’

He stood there and watched while she finished reapplying the lip gloss. What was he waiting for?

When she shut her locker and started down the hall to class, Luke fell into step beside her. ‘That stuff smells like vanilla,’ he commented. ‘Does it taste like vanilla too?’

Eve shot him a hard glance. *Flirting again. Like he does with everyone*, she reminded herself. *No crushing on the player*. She felt like ripping off the T-shirt of Love, just to be on the safe side. But stripping down to

her bra, with its lace and pearls, in front of him might give him the wrong impression.

‘Tell me when your birthday is and I’ll buy you a tube,’ Eve answered. ‘Then you’ll know.’

Eve stood in the quad at the end of the day, waiting for Jess so they could walk home together. A single leaf, yellow with deep, dark red around the tips, drifted down from one of the maples. That was just wrong. It was too early for the autumn leaf change to have started. Eve hated fall: just when the leaves had taken on these incredible, blazing colours, they died. It depressed her. Winter was different. Snow and icicles gave the bare trees a sparkling, shimmering new life.

Without knowing exactly why, Eve picked up the sad, lonely little leaf and put it in her pocket just as Jess hurried over. ‘Let’s stop off at Megan’s. She wasn’t at school. I want to make sure she’s OK,’ Jess told Eve. ‘Come with?’

‘Sure,’ Eve answered. ‘Have you talked to her since we’ve been back?’

‘We texted Saturday night,’ Jess said. ‘I told her we’d seen The Luke in The Flesh. She was still really tired, but she didn’t say anything about maybe having to skip school.’

‘She’d have to have been really tired to miss the first day,’ Eve commented. ‘That’s serious.’

‘Well, she’s a sophomore. Maybe it’s not such a big deal once you’re used to high school,’ Jess said.

Eve made a face, and Jess laughed. The first day of school was *always* a big deal, and they both knew it.

‘Maybe she has mono,’ Eve suggested.

‘The kissing disease? It’s possible,’ Jess agreed. ‘Megan does a lot of kissing.’

Eve giggled. Megan was a lively redhead, and that made her popular with boys. Well, that and her wild side. Megan was all about fun, fun, fun.

How much fun, fun, fun did she and Luke have before some other guy caught Megan’s attention? Eve wondered. Wait. Why was she even thinking about Luke?

‘Jess, am I shallow?’ Eve burst out.

‘What? Where did that come from?’ Jess asked.

‘I don’t know. I was just thinking. I do really like to shop. And I like make-up. And purses. I enjoy my purses. And I spend a ton of time thinking about my hair . . .’

‘What you’re saying is that you’re a girl,’ Jess replied as they turned onto Medway Lane, the street where Jess’s family and Megan’s both lived.

‘But, no. Think about it,’ Eve insisted. ‘What do I do that has any substance? I mean, you have cheerleading, which is actually a true sport. And you take flute lessons—’

‘Which I suck at,’ Jess interrupted.

‘You helped renovate slums in India,’ Eve said.

‘I told you, that was total luxury vacation volunteering. My parents just wanted to feel good about themselves while staying in five-star hotels,’ Jess said. She led the way up the long stone walkway to Megan’s Mediterranean-style house, then knocked on the door.

‘I don’t even do luxury volunteering,’ Eve said thoughtfully. ‘Maybe I *am* shallow.’

But Jess wasn’t listening. ‘I bet Megan is waiting to pounce on us and ask us a million questions,’ she said. ‘Can you imagine missing the first day?’

But no one answered. Jess knocked again, louder.

Eve heard the sound of soft, shuffling footsteps inside the house. *Like someone walking through a big pile of dry, dead leaves*, Eve thought, touching the pocket where she’d put the first fall leaf. After a few moments the Christies’ front door swung open. Eve bit her bottom lip to keep back a little exclamation of shock.

Megan looked wrecked. There were dark circles