

OUR MISS ENGEL

A VAMPIRE STORY

LAUREN SCHAIHAG



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2 September, 1909

I received a letter today from the Ursuline Academy. It seems I have found a job.

When I informed my parents of my decision, my father said, "You watch those papist types, Clara. They're a funny lot." I don't know what he means by that. From her letters, the Reverend Mother seems perfectly kind.

13 September, 1909

We exchanged a few more correspondences before settling on 20 September as my first day of teaching, a Monday. I will take the train to Paola on Saturday morning and should arrive before noon, which will give me just over a day and a half to get settled in.

I myself went to a good Lutheran school, and have nothing but cherished memories of my teacher, Miss Taylor. When I finished my eighth grade primer, she hugged me fiercely and said, "Clara, you just make me so proud." She had tears in her eyes. I knew right then that I was going to become a teacher, like her. We are quite learned here in this part of the world, with a fine theatre and the Carnegie library. Also, Papa is something of an intellectual. He was a teacher back in Germany, so I suppose you could say it is in my blood. My brother and I were brought up to be diligent readers and encouraged to express ourselves through writing and discourse.

As I was studying to get my teacher's certificate, Papa was fond of telling me that many schools in America are based on the Prussian model of teaching. "The German people know something about education, Clara," he would say. "Don't ever forget that."

Behind my book, I would smile. "Yes, Papa."

I must confess my tastes run far more to novels than to the philosophical treatises Papa is always urging me to read. We find something of a compromise in poetry, thank the Muses! Like most of the men in the tri-state area, Papa is a miner. Joplin is known for blackjack and lead. Both my parents have worked very hard for everything we have. When they first came to this country, they spoke very little English. But as their English improved, so did their prospects. Mama worked as a seamstress for a time, and Papa worked his way up from shafting and drilling to become a foreman, and we moved out of our cabin by the mining camp into a proper house off Grey Avenue. They wanted my brother and me to sound like perfect Americans. That was easy enough, as I was born in Joplin. Gunther was born back in Frankfurt, but he was just a little thing when they brought him over, so doesn't really remember any German at all. I suppose that is just as well.

Anyhow, I am very excited about the position. My first school—my first pupils! I wonder what they will be like.

18 September, 1909

I was so excited last night, I could scarcely sleep. My trunk was packed and ready ages ago.

I was up at four getting dressed. Then I went around the house, saying my good-byes to the rooms I have lived in since I was three—to the rooms, and everything in them. Good-bye, parlor. Good-bye, settee. Good-bye, mantel clock. Mama will have to wind you now that I won't be here. Today, I will be taking my first train ride alone.

Mama, Papa and Gunther saw me off at the depot. As Mama waved, she dabbed at her eyes a few times with her handkerchief, but I know she is proud of me, as is Papa. They believe that everyone should have the opportunity to see a bit of the world while they're young. They also believe one should make their own way, and here I am, about to do both.

I was wearing my first traveling suit, a going-away gift from Mama, and I was feeling quite the sophisticate. I even made so bold as to smile at a handsome young baggage man who was assisting another passenger with their trunk and didn't he just light up! His smile was as bright as the buttons on my new jacket.

I felt such a thrill as the train started up and we pulled away from the depot. This is what I have often imagined life would be like—this rush of excitement, this point of departure, anticipation of journeys ahead. As we chugged along, I kept my eyes virtually glued to the window. Even though we're nearly into autumn, the humidity clings stubbornly on. In fact, I was starting to perspire in my many layers of clothing, so I opened the window to get some relief. When that was not sufficient, I removed my hat and gloves and gave a deep sigh of contentment as the breeze rushed over my face and hands. Nearly sticking my head out the window, I let the wind fill my lungs, whip across my cheeks. I was sure to be thoroughly mussed by the time we reached our destination, but it felt absolutely wonderful, almost like I was flying.

Riding northwest through Missouri and into Kansas was lovely, especially at this time of year. The sky was the purest blue, the hills and fields to either side of the track lulled into an extended greenness by the sweet promises of Indian summer, with no way of telling when a cold snap might hit. There were fields of corn and alfalfa, patches of sunflowers. Farmhouse gardens were deep with late-season vegetables: beans, cabbage, peas, pumpkins. There were apple and peach trees fragrant with fruit. I counted over a dozen hawks arcing overhead or perched on fence posts. We passed a number of oil pumps standing in fields like enormous grasshoppers, their pistons working with slow, ponderous motions. And, of course, plenty of livestock. It occurs to me that Paola is quite close to Kansas City. Kansas City is said to have many beautiful parks and streets, not to mention the river, and the stockyards. If I can, I believe I will make a trip up to see them on one of my days off.

When I got to the station in Paola, Mr. Cahill was waiting for me on the platform. Mr. Cahill is the convent groundskeeper, and looks every inch the old farmer that he is. At the moment, he was dressed in a work shirt, overalls, scuffed work boots, and an old straw hat. "You Miss Engel?" he asked.

"I am," I said, holding out my (re-gloved) hand to shake. "You must be Mr. Cahill."

His whiskered face broke into a broad grin, revealing tobacco-stained teeth. "Glad to meet ya. The girls are so excited about having a new teacher. Just wait'll they get a look at you. We ain't never had anybody so purdy as you up to the convent. Just look at the color in them cheeks!"

I put one hand to my face, self-consciously. "I may be a bit wind-burned."

"It's real becoming. I like a gal who ain't a-scared of a little fresh air and sunshine." He led me to a horse and buggy, where he loaded my things into the back, and then off we went, heading southeast, to where the Academy is situated on the edge of town.

Mr. Cahill chatted my ear off as we drove, giving me something of an impromptu tour of the town. We even detoured through the square, which is lined with handsome brick buildings, and has a bandstand in the center of it. Working gaslights have been installed around the main streets so it is well-lit at night, and I was excited to see that there is a library under construction. It is nearly done. He also showed me the bank and the courthouse, the general store, some other shops, and a café. Even though Paola is older than Joplin, I must say, things seem newer here. Perhaps it is because they are cleaner. A mining town full of all sorts of rough characters can't help but be a bit on the dingy side, and one must also consider that we have many saloons. Kansas has much stricter blue laws, and I imagine this to be a dry county.

It really wasn't far from the train station to the Academy grounds. I could have walked it, if it hadn't been for my luggage. The grounds themselves are modest, only about eight acres, but Mr. Cahill does them proud. The green lawns, the stone pathways, the gardens, the painted benches, a shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes, and a great deal of flowering trees, especially redbuds and dogwoods. As it was a Saturday, some of the girls were playing outside. They ranged in age from five to fourteen. Someone had drawn a hopscotch grid on one of the walkways and several of the girls were gathered around that. Others were skipping about in the fields, or awaiting their turn on a swing that dangled from the branches of a hickory. I wondered which of them would be my students. When they saw Mr. Cahill and me pull up in the buggy, many of them stopped and waved. As I climbed down, some of them even started to run up to me, but Mr. Cahill shouted at them in a way that managed to be both rough and good-natured, "Don't you even think about mobbing this poor woman, she just got here! Go on back to your playing." He pointed to the hopscotch grid. "And who did that? How many times have I told you not to be drawing on my sidewalks!" The girls ran off, giggling and shrieking.

I looked around. The buildings are all brick, the largest and grandest of which is the Motherhouse, with wide stone stairs, tall, white columns, and a balcony on the upper level. It is also the newest building, only five years old. The foyer is redolent of lemon oil. From the grounds, I gathered that this could be a very peaceful, tranquil place, even with gaggles of schoolgirls carrying on as they were out on the lawn. Once I stepped inside the Motherhouse, my first impression was one of overwhelming good cheer. The wide windows, the lofty ceilings, and the overall cleanliness convey a sense of rightness, of welcoming.

The Reverend Mother and some of the other sisters were waiting to greet me. They had Mr. Cahill take my things over to the convent. The Reverend Mother looked exactly as I had pictured her, a kindly older woman with faded blue eyes, and a face as weathered and soft as a well-used bar of soap, smelling of clean linens and starch. She did not shake my hand so much as clasp it gently between both of her own. They were warm and dry. "Hello, Miss Engel. We're so pleased you're here. I trust you had a good train ride?" Her voice was as soothing as her hands.

I replied, "I did, thank you."

The Reverend Mother introduced me to the Sisters Fredonia, Virginia, and Caroline. Sister Caroline was the youngest, and I guessed her age to be about forty-five. It's a good thing I have always gotten on well with my elders.

"But surely you will want to freshen up, dear," the Reverend Mother said. "Then we'll see about giving you a proper tour of the place."

I said, "That sounds wonderful, Reverend Mother. Thank you."

Sister Caroline took me to the convent house and showed me my room, which is somewhat separate from the sisters' living quarters, tucked in a sort of loft space, with a sloped ceiling, and a funny little window. It's more of a skylight than a window. The room is small and austere, with white-washed walls, and a narrow bed, (a cot really), with a new spring mattress and a quilt. There is a dresser with a pitcher and wash basin, and a mirror. There is a table next to the bed with an oil lamp, and a vase of fresh flowers, very thoughtful of the good sisters. The walls are bare but for a crucifix over the pillow. I like it very much.

Mr. Cahill had already brought my trunk up and set it at the foot of the bed, but unpacking would have to wait for now. I did as the Reverend Mother bade, giving my hands, arms, face and neck a vigorous washing in the basin. I unpinned my hair, combed it out, and re-pinned it. When I was presentable, I went back downstairs where the sisters were waiting.

They took me on a tour of the grounds. The chapel, dormitories, and recreation hall are located in the Motherhouse. I saw girls going in and out of the dormitory rooms, and several more in the recreation hall, where the preferred activities are studying, playing games, sewing, knitting, or reading. There are many outbuildings on the property, some of which I did not enter, such as the chaplain's house. The chaplain is Reverend Father Jean Ardens, a Benedictine. There are twelve sisters living and working here at the Academy. In addition to teaching here, some of them also teach at the Holy Trinity School in town. At the Academy, we have sixty students total, forty of whom are day students. Even though our tuition is modest, the sisters told me, we are often paid in trade, which is to say: chickens, vegetables, and whatever baked or canned goods the ladies of town see fit to send our way. After our tour, the sisters left me to get settled in. They had already eaten their noon meal, so one of them brought me a bit of lunch on a tray.

That evening, I had supper at the dining table. All twelve sisters were present. Their grace is easy enough to remember, but I said my own silently to myself, *Come, Lord Jesus, be our Guest, and let Thy gifts to us be blessed. Amen.* And, of course, I did not make the sign of the cross. They did not seem to mind. Just as I did not mind that they do not say a prayer after the meal, as I have been brought up to do: *O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endureth forever. Amen.*

As we ate, the sisters had a lot of questions for me. They wanted to hear all about my family, my upbringing, what Joplin was like, etc.

I inquired of them, "Is there a Lutheran church in town?"

"Yes, there is the Trinity Lutheran," the Reverend Mother answered. "And of course, you are welcome to join us for mass whenever you wish."

"Thank you," I said politely. "I'll bear that in mind."

It was not quite dark when we had finished eating. After supper, two of the sisters immediately leaped up and began to clear the table. I started to help, but the Reverend Mother asked me to join her in the parlor. Sister Wilma brought in some coffee and slices of cake for us. As the Reverend Mother poured the coffee, she said, "I know it's a bit early to tell how you'll be getting on. But I wonder, do you have any sense at all of whether or not you'll like it here?"

"Oh, yes," I said quickly, putting down my coffee cup. "I love it here. It's such a beautiful place."

At that, the Reverend Mother relaxed a great deal. I hadn't realized how tense she was up until that moment. "Good. That is very good to hear. I'm afraid I haven't been entirely forthcoming with you, Miss Engel. I hope that you will hear me out."

Now it was my turn to tense. "What is it?"

"You see, we would like it very much if you could take on a very special role here at the Academy. Specifically, we would like you to handle a group of students who are here under unusual circumstances."

"What sort of circumstances?"

"Well, we have five girls -- five wonderful little girls -- who suffer from a rare illness. It's so rare, in fact, that they are the only known extant cases. They were entrusted to our care because we were the only school in the country willing to accommodate their needs."

"What is the disease?"

The Reverend Mother shook her head. "There is no name for it, Miss Engel. It manifests primarily as extreme photophobia. The girls' eyes are painfully sensitive to light, as is their skin. Prolonged exposure to direct sunlight causes them excruciating physical discomfort and fatigue. Exposure to direct sunlight can even cause them to break out in lesions. The girls are also anemic, which necessitates some special dietary supplements."

"The poor things! And the Academy is equipped to deal with their situation?"

"We have made accommodations. Chiefly, we have given the girls rooms separate from the other students so they can sleep undisturbed during the day, and hold classes at night."

"Ah."

"In fact, the other students are not aware of our special class. We felt it was better. Children can be so cruel. They wouldn't understand."

"Then what are we to tell them about me? What do they think my capacity is here?" I asked.

"Why, that's easy enough. They think that you are here to be an assistant of sorts to me and the other sisters, and, when necessary, to Father Ardens."

"I see."

"You will help keep it that way, won't you? No need to upset anyone."

For a moment, neither of us said anything, but the Reverend Mother watched me closely as I absorbed this information. I supposed I could see her point about children being cruel, but shouldn't children have as normal an upbringing as possible?

"They are precious children," the Reverend Mother said. "They are as happy as their situation allows for them to be, and are, in every other respect, bright, normal young ladies. They deserve every chance at a proper education. They are simply in need of a caring individual, someone who is willing to be an instrument of God's mercy. I believe that you are that individual, Miss Engel."

At that point, there was a rustling sound from behind a drape, and as I glanced over my shoulder, I caught a glimpse of a little white face and a pair of big eyes, followed by the scampering of little feet. The Reverend Mother smiled and said, "Excuse me." She rose and disappeared into the adjoining room.

That clinched it. Any doubts I may have had, (although, to be perfectly honest, I can't recall what they might have been) instantly evaporated, and I couldn't help but smile.

When the Reverend Mother returned, she went on, "We would understand if this would prove difficult for you. Not just anyone could take to those sorts of hours. We hope very much that you'll stay on all the same."

I said it would be no trouble, no trouble at all.

19 September, 1909

I walked to town this morning for church. I like the minister, Pastor Weber. There was a picnic lunch on the lawn afterwards. Everyone is eager to enjoy the good weather while it lasts. There were sandwiches, cold chicken, salads, cakes, pies, and lemonade. I made a great number of acquaintances. Then I enjoyed a stroll around town—a bit more than a stroll, actually. I must have walked the whole length of town and back! It is such a fine place. The people are so friendly—many of them came right up, shook my hand, and said hello there, how do you do. I would like to write more, but I am quite sleepy. I will hold my first class tomorrow evening. It is strange to think of teaching at night, but I expect I will become accustomed to it. I should really try to stay up all night tonight, but I was up so early for services, my eyes are already closing. Oh, dear. How will I ever manage, shifting back and forth from a night schedule during the week to a day schedule on the weekends? Surely that cannot be healthy? Papa says a body can adjust to almost anything. I will adjust. Those poor little girls need me.

21 September, 1909

Last night was my first night of class. How strange it was. I rose and had supper with the sisters, then the Reverend Mother took me over to the Motherhouse. The girls basically have the third floor to themselves, with a private dormitory and classroom.

I went up the stairs first with an oil lamp. There are light fixtures on the landings, but it still helped to have the additional light, being that the Reverend Mother's eyesight is not what it

once was, though she seems quite spry in my estimation. She was hardly winded at all by the time we got to the top floor.

As we approached the door to the classroom, I couldn't help but think of bedtime stories, five fairy tale princesses locked away in their enchanted bower. The Reverend Mother started to turn the knob and we heard a great deal of shuffling about on the other side of the door, followed by whispers and giggles. One of them shushed the others, loudly and with great authority. The Reverend Mother shook her head and opened the door.

The room was utterly dark, and as I stepped over the threshold, somehow, my oil lamp guttered and went out. There was more giggling at that.

"Very well, girls," the Reverend Mother said firmly. "Let's get some light in here, please."

There were footsteps and the sound of a match being struck. A candle that stood on the teacher's desk at the front of the room was lit, the match brought to a set of tiny pursed lips to be blown out. The little girl was about seven years old, dressed in a dark pinafore and stockings. In the semi-darkness, I couldn't make out her hair or eye color, but I was able to perceive that she was very pretty, though even in the candlelight, (or perhaps because of it), she looked very white, white and somehow translucent, like a paper lantern. It gave off a peculiar luminescence. There were half-circles under her eyes as dark as bruises, and you could see the tracery of veins at her temples. She smiled at me.

I said, "Hello."

Her smile widened. "Hello." Her eyes went from me to the nun. "Hello, Reverend Mother."

The Reverend Mother nodded. "Finish up and take your seat, please."

The little girl did as she was told, going around the room and lighting other candles and oil lamps, ending with the one I had in my hand. She walked right up to me without a hint of shyness or self-consciousness and pointed to it. I held it steady as she re-lit the wick. Up close, I could see that she had straight, ash-blond hair and gray eyes. Then the girl took her seat with the other four, who watched the proceedings with great interest and a sort of anticipation that seemed unusual to me, but then, one had to admit, these were unusual circumstances. Standing there in a classroom lit by candles and oil lamps, with the crescent moon smiling in through the window at us was like something out of a dream.

The five girls were all very different from each other, each remarkably pretty in her own way, though they all have that sickly pale luster to their skin, the same shadows beneath their eyes. Now they all sat up straight in their chairs, hands folded on their desks, and turned expectantly to the Reverend Mother and me, on their best behavior.

The Reverend Mother said, "Girls, this is your new teacher, Miss Clara Engel."

"Hello, Miss Engel," they chorused.

"Hello, class," I responded pleasantly.

The Reverend Mother called each of their names. They stood up, and, at her behest, told me a bit about themselves, which I thought was an excellent way for us all to get acquainted.

The first was Leticia Hamilton, or Letty for short, age eight. She is the oldest, with green eyes

and the most beautiful golden ringlets. Her favorite thing in the world is to wear pretty dresses. The other girls laughed. "Well, it's true," Letty pouted. "I just like to look my best, is all."

"That will do, Letty," the Reverend Mother shook her head. "It seems we will have to have another talk about vanity."

The next girl she introduced was Frances McCready, also age eight, with red hair and freckles that stood out like spots on a mackerel, shockingly vivid against the whiteness of her skin. Yet she had quick brown eyes and an easy confidence that I liked very much. She said, "I like to be outside. I like to run and climb and ride horses." Her voice was low and husky for a girl's.

One of the other girls rolled her eyes. "That's four things, Frankie."

"Well, maybe if I were as boring as the rest of you, I could keep to just one thing," she returned.

Anne-Marie Flaherty was the girl who had lit the candles. She is, indeed, seven years old, with ash blond hair, a lighter dusting of freckles, and a very grave manner. She did not smile as she stood. "I like to read, ma'am."

Tess Cavanaugh is six years old, and, quite simply, the most beautiful child I have ever set eyes on. She looks like a perfect little doll, with sleek black hair held back with a bit of purple ribbon. Her eyes are so blue they appear almost violet, framed by the longest, darkest lashes I have ever seen. She stood and said in a sweet little voice, "I like animals, miss."

Finally, the last girl, Eva Barton, is five years old. She is also a very striking child, with rich chestnut hair and deep brown eyes. Like Anne-Marie, she did not smile as she said, "I like games." She did not sit down immediately afterwards, but gazed levelly at me and said, "Now you."

"Pardon?"

"We've told you about ourselves," she said patiently. "Now you tell us something."

"Well, I suppose that is fair," I agreed. "As Reverend Mother said, my name is Clara Engel. I come from Joplin, Missouri. And I like many of the same things the rest of you like." I smiled at Letty. "My mother was a seamstress, so I like pretty clothes. I have an older brother who used to play with me a lot, so I like being out of doors. My father was a teacher, so I like to read. I love animals. And I enjoy playing games, though I'm not much good at most of them."

All the girls smiled except little Eva, who peered at me skeptically. But she took her seat, like the others. Clapping my hands together, I turned to the Reverend Mother. "Well, I think we're off to a very good start. Shall I take it from here?"

The nun inclined her head at that and took her leave.

25 September, 1909

This week has positively flown by. There is so much to write about, so much to think about, I am actually having trouble separating my thoughts. I am grateful to have been given this

situation, with only five students to whom I can utterly devote my attention, though teaching at night is every bit as strange as one might imagine. Sometimes, as I am giving lessons, I am seized with the queerest feeling, as if there were no one else in the wide world but the girls and me. I look around the room and my heart just goes out to those poor children, who have no choice but to sit in a dismal, candlelit room, night after night.

I am coming to learn all of their dispositions. It was immediately clear to me upon our first meeting that they are all very strong personalities, which makes their company most enjoyable in many respects. I imagine it stems from the fact that they are virtually sequestered in that attic-like space. That sort of isolation lends itself to exaggerating what is already present. Teaching them has posed some difficulties, I confess, and I expect I will run into more as time goes on. Of course, they squabble amongst themselves, like sisters. It seems to me the girls rather gang up on Letty a great deal of the time. For all that she is the oldest, Letty is easily cowed. She is not as quick-witted as the others, and is often unaware that the joke is on her, in fact. But she is very sweet, and despite what the Reverend Mother says, I do not see vanity in her, but a genuine love of beautiful things. I brought up some flowers I had cut from the convent garden, and Letty was simply overjoyed. I imagine she cries easily, though she has not cried yet. Anne-Marie always leaps to her defense. So far, I have not had to intervene, but I imagine at some point, I will.

I have learned Anne-Marie is something of an artist. She has a notepad filled with pencil sketches, most of which are copied out of books. She is very shy about showing them to me, however, but the few pages I have glimpsed are quite remarkable. Tess can sing like an angel. And then there is Frankie. Poor dear, it must be hardest on her to be cooped up all the time. I asked the Reverend Mother if I can take the girls out for short recesses on the grounds. Fresh air is still fresh air, even if it is at night. She said it was out of the question as they are liable to wake the other children. Such a shame! But that just means we have to be a little more inventive when it comes to finding ways for the girls to get up and stretch their limbs. It doesn't do for young bodies to be so sedentary. So I have started to lead them in some very basic isometrics that can be performed in-doors, jumping jacks, touching their toes, skipping, marching around the room, that sort of thing. They seem to enjoy it, even Eva, who at first seemed to think it was beneath her dignity. In fact, when I first suggested it, she just gaped at me. "I am *not* going to stomp around the room like some sort of a—"

"I think it'll be fun," Anne-Marie interrupted, tugging at her hand. "Come on, Eva!"

As the others chimed in, Eva had no choice but to give in. She sighed, "Oh, all right."

And before you could say Jack Robinson, she was running and skipping right alongside the rest of them, waving scarves or a toy tambourine that I found downstairs. When they finish their exercises, their eyes are bright, and their cheeks even have a little bit of color. As for fresh air, I take them out on the balcony for story hour. Already, the air is quite brisk at night, but we bring candles and blankets and bundle up together, and it is quite cozy under the stars. The girls gather around as I read to them, or we take turns reading. They are all quite remarkable readers. I had suggested we read some of the tales of Beatrix Potter, or perhaps L. Frank Baum, but they requested *Jane Eyre*.

I do not mean to imply that the girls have not been well taken care of. Quite the contrary. Aside from being so frightfully pale, they seem quite healthy, sturdy even. We break for a

meal at midnight. I escort them down to the dining hall where Sister Fredonia attends them, and I dash back over to the convent house for my own 'luncheon.' As for their studies, they are attentive, grasp the lessons easily, and complete their assignments. I never have to deduct marks for sloppiness or poor penmanship. Again, I believe their life has uniquely predisposed them to studiousness—they are unable to play as other children do, so reading and schoolwork are rather ideal pastimes, and they seem to have retained a great deal of knowledge. All in all, the Reverend Mother is correct. They seem as happy as it possible to be in their situation.

I am planning to talk to Mr. Cahill about bringing some animals up for Tess—a rabbit would be perfect, or a songbird. I think the class should have its own pet. The girls could take turns caring for it. I will continue to try and think of other ways to engage them, to bring the world to them. They are so bright, so eager. Eva, strangely, is the most inscrutable. She is the youngest, the smallest, but the most self-possessed. I must come up with a way to draw her out.

Meanwhile, I forgot to mention—I did not wake up today until two in the afternoon. I had hoped to get up earlier and go into town, but I just slept right on, despite the light pouring in through the skylight. (I hang a cloth over it during the week when I absolutely must sleep during the day, but I didn't today, hoping that the daylight would rouse me.) Tomorrow, I shall have to set an alarm if I intend to make it to church.

26 September, 1909

The alarm clock did the trick. I was yawning at breakfast this morning, but I made it. After church, I ran into Mr. Cahill in town, and asked him about the rabbit. He acted very uneasy, and said that I must talk to the Reverend Mother about it. It was very odd.

So I did, this evening at supper. I was quite taken aback when she said no. She said that the girls are very delicate, and that animals bring germs. Oh dear, now I am concerned about the flowers. Letty will be absolutely heartbroken if I take them away. I noticed the other night that Anne-Marie kept looking longingly at them as well, and I just know she was thinking of her sketch pad. Perhaps I should just leave them until they start to wilt and simply not replace them? All the same, I would feel just dreadful if any of the girls took sick.

Something else happened today. As I was returning from town, I saw a family leaving Holy Trinity. They appeared to be a farm family, but very well-to-do. They had a fine wagon that seated all of them comfortably. It was drawn by a pair of beautiful chestnut horses. Well, naturally, I stood there gaping like a fool. The family has several children, one of which is a girl about my age. She saw me and smiled. The older boy looked to be about nineteen or twenty, regarding me with a milder but no less curious expression.

I moved to the side of the road, and the man driving the horses pulled up on the reins. "Afternoon," he called out. "You must be the new assistant."

I nodded. "Yes, sir. That's me."

He is a burly, older man with graying black hair, a beard, and laughing blue eyes. He touched the brim of his hat. "I'm Gus Shaw. This here's my wife, Rebecca."

Mrs. Shaw was a plump, pretty lady, round and brown as a fritter. She wore a beautiful crepe bonnet hat decorated with pink blossoms, her thick dark hair rolled in a bun at the nape of her neck. A little dark-haired boy sat in her lap, and she smiled at me over his head. She said, "The sisters speak very highly of you."

They introduced me to their children. They have six all told, four boys and the two girls. The daughter my age is named Georgina. The young man is Theo. The rest are Matthew, James, Andrew, and Katherine.

Mr. Shaw offered to give me a ride back to the Academy.

I demurred, "It's really not that far."

"Oh, get on up here," he growled. "Any friend of the sisters is a friend of ours."

Theo stood and held his hand out to help me up, and they drove me back to the convent house, delivering me right up to the doorstep. They stayed for a while, passing the time, chatting with the sisters, watching the little ones play and chase each other around the grounds. Mrs. Shaw talked about her orchard and promised to bring us a few jars of her best apple butter.

I have been so busy, I haven't had time to feel much homesickness, but spending time with the Shaws this afternoon has made me miss Mama, Papa and Gunther so terribly. As soon as I got back to my room, I wrote a letter to them, telling them all about the girls, about the sisters and the Academy, about Paola. I'm sure they are anxious to hear from me, as I am from them.

This feeling is so poignant, so bittersweet. On one hand, I am so glad to be here, so glad to have met the Shaws, who are such a lovely family. But this nice family has inspired such an ache in me. All the same, I hope to see them again.

3 October, 1909

I am settling into a routine of sorts. I rise every afternoon at 3:30, dress, eat a very light meal, and prepare lessons. I eat supper with the sisters at six. We start class promptly at seven with the Lord's Prayer, and the girls say a Hail Mary. We have history and geography lessons first, then exercise, and arithmetic. I do not even bother with the first grade primers, as Eva and Tess are well beyond that. We break at midnight. Then, after another brief exercise session, class resumes, and we do grammar, spelling, and reading. We finish at 2:30, and then the girls have free time to do as they wish, so long as they are quiet.

I have noticed that the girls, despite their vastly different temperaments, have certain striking similarities of manner. At first, I assumed that because they suffered the same ailment, their confinement has affected them in the same way. Eva and Anne-Marie, of course, have a natural inclination to be serious. But even Tess who can be a bit dreamy and Frankie who can be very rambunctious are equally capable of lapsing into a solemnity that, I think, is rather uncommon in little girls. Their sense of humor is bizarre. As we read *Jane Eyre*, they laughed hysterically to hear that Thornfield Hall was ruined, and Mr. Rochester burned. Regular children's games seem to bore them. Adult games hold their attention for a time—chess, Halma, Monopoly, whist, that sort of thing. But they vastly prefer games they have made up on their own, games with rules which only they understand. One of them involves a deck of

cards that they call, 'Fives.' Eva will hold up a card and exclaim triumphantly, "Five of clubs!" And the others groan. Another game they play is called, 'Grimoire,' in which they draw a series of dots on a piece of paper. Two players take turns drawing a single line until the paper is covered in strange designs. I can't make heads nor tails of it, couldn't even tell you what the purpose of that game is. But I will tell you this: I have opted to leave the flowers in the classroom.

The other night, at supper, I asked the Reverend Mother, "Where are their parents?"

She said, "They are our wards."

Mystified, I asked, "They are orphans? All of them?"

She put her fork down. "Well, you must understand what a tremendous strain it can be, caring for a child with such unusual physical debilities."

"You mean that their parents abandoned them because they are sick?"

"I think that is simplifying the matter. People have reasons for behaving as they do. It is not for us to judge."

I just can't understand it. I would never give up my child—not ever. I said as much to the Reverend Mother, who just smiled and said, "I believe you." I suppose if I were so old, and had taken care of so many people as the Reverend Mother has, I could be so detached. But I do not and I am not.

4 October, 1909

This afternoon, I was in my room with my sewing box, trying to repair a torn pocket on my dark blue skirt. I will never be the seamstress my mother is. Papa jokes that when it comes to seams, I take after him—my hands would do better holding a pickaxe and a stick of dynamite than a needle and thread. My fingers seemed even clumsier than usual, and I was just about to give up when Sister Caroline knocked on the door.

She came in, smiling rather shyly. "You have a visitor."

"I have?" I asked, and my heart leapt, thinking that perhaps Mama and Papa had taken the train to see me.

Looking for all the world like she was just twenty years old again herself, Sister Caroline leaned forward and whispered, "It's Theo Shaw."

I was so surprised, I didn't know what to think. I went downstairs, and there he was in the parlor, standing next to the fireplace. When I came into the room, he stood up, very tall and straight. "Miss Engel," he said, hat in hand.

"Mr. Shaw," I said. "How nice to see you again."

"I'm sorry to come unannounced. Mama asked me to bring those jars of apple butter she promised."

I nodded. "Well, that was kind of her."

He smiled. "Mama knew I'd be wanting an excuse to come around here more often. I suppose it'll be a pie next."

I laughed. I covered my mouth with both hands, trying to keep it in, but I don't remember when I've been so delighted. When I'd recovered my wherewithal, I invited him to sit. The two of us faced each other across the low table. At first, I just gazed at him, and he looked right back. There was no denying that Theo Shaw is one of the finest-looking young men anywhere. He is clean-shaven, with a shock of black hair, and eyes as bright and blue as an acetylene torch. He was still dressed in his Sunday finery. I, on the other hand, had already changed back into one of my plainer skirts and blouses after church, and nervously, I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

Sister Fredonia rescued me at that moment by bringing in coffee and cake from the kitchen. Say what you will about Catholics, but the nuns were excellent hostesses, graciously knowing when to participate in the conversation and when not, and under their watchful eyes, Theo Shaw and I had our visit. It turns out that he is twenty-one, four years older than I. He told me all about his family's farm outside of town. They have 150 acres. There are crops and livestock, his mother's orchards with apple, peach and cherry trees. Some years ago, they'd struck oil on the property, so they had several pumps. He stays very busy assisting his father, though he did go away for two years to study agriculture at the university in Lawrence. When he had to take his leave, we shook hands again. His hands are beautiful, long-fingered, strong and clean, but rough, rougher than you'd expect on someone so young and pretty. But of course, he'd grown up roping cattle and baling hay, he would have his share of calluses. He held my hand for a heartbeat or two longer than the good sisters may have deemed completely proper, and for just a second, it seemed he leaned in, very near to me. Not quite close enough to kiss, but still close enough. I could see him draw in a deep breath, catching my scent. He drew it in, closed his eyes. Nothing like that has ever happened to me before, and I felt my own breath stop, my face flush scarlet. The Reverend Mother cleared her throat.

Hastily, we let go of each other's hands. The Reverend Mother and I saw him to the door. He departed with the understanding that he would return next Sunday to visit with me again.

I don't know how I made it back up to my room, but somehow I did. As soon as I reached the bed, it seemed that my legs just gave out from under me. I am so warm, my skin feels damp inside my clothes, the material of my blouse clinging at the small of my back and under my arms, the nape of my neck hot under my hair. I keep seeing the way his expression changed, the slight flaring of his nostrils, the dilation of the pupils in those blue, blue eyes just before he closed them. I had never seen anything so . . . so naked, so primal. My hand is shaking as I write this. I should stop.

5 October, 1909

I woke up around noon today feeling groggy and generally out of sorts, when I realized that my sheets and my nightgown were spotted with blood. My flows are often quite heavy on the first day, but it hasn't been this bad in some time. I got out of bed stiffly, my stomach and lower back seized with cramp, my fingers swollen. No wonder I'd had such trouble with sewing yesterday—my fingers felt thick because they *are* thick. I cleaned up, changed my nightgown, changed my sheets, and tried to go back to sleep, but it was no use. Even thinking of Theo

Shaw's acetylene eyes did little to assuage my mood.

About an hour later, one of the sisters slipped an envelope under my door. She probably thought I was still asleep and did not wish to disturb me. If only that were the case!

But I was greatly cheered to see it was a letter from Mama, bearing good news. Gunther has finally mustered up the courage to start courting Mary Sullivan. The very idea makes me giggle. Mary Sullivan—imagine! She was always such a goose, and Gunther is as serious as they come, even more serious than Papa, who, in his own quiet fashion, is given to teasing. I can't imagine an odder pair. All the same, isn't it funny that both Gunther and I are courting at the same time?

Mama also said that she is very well, though Papa has developed a bad cough. Poor Papa, going into cooler weather always seems to tax his respiration. Working so long in the mines is ruinous to the lungs. He will get better as he adjusts to the brisker temperatures, he always does. All in all, it sounds like things are going along, just as they always have back home. I am greatly comforted by this notion.

This evening, the girls were quiet, almost subdued. But when we went out onto the balcony for our reading hour, Letty leaned against me, pressing her nose into the curve of my neck, while Tess actually climbed up into my lap. I didn't mind, I was grateful for the warmth. But I was surprised when Eva slipped her hand in mine. We had finished both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. The girls had clamored for Hardy, but I felt that some of his topics were unsuitable, so we settled on *David Copperfield*. That one should last us a while.

10 October, 1909

This time, I was ready for Theo Shaw's visit. After church, I had already determined I would keep on my Sunday dress. As he promised, he brought pies from his mother, one apple and one cherry. How we all laughed over that! Then he invited me to go for a walk. I looked to the Reverend Mother for approval. She said, "Keep to the paths."

Outside, the flower beds were a glory of color, chrysanthemums and marigolds, coleus and flowering kale. The redbuds were at their fiercest before surrendering their blooms to the coming season. I tilted my head back and looked up into the clear autumn sky. In my days at the Academy, I have developed an especial appreciation for blue skies and sunshine.

I also spent a lot of time looking at him.

"What do you do here?" Mr. Shaw asked.

I said, "I assist the nuns and Father Ardens."

He laughed. "Yes, but what do you *do*?"

"Well, I . . ." I paused. I was not prepared for that question. "I . . . help keep records. I do the sisters' correspondence. Keep the books. That sort of thing." As I said it, I got a funny feeling. I am not in the habit of lying. I have no wish to lie to him, in particular, and as we were talking, I wanted very much to tell him about teaching—how much I loved it, how much I loved the girls.

It was on the tip of my tongue to say all this, but he interrupted my train of thought, asking, "How come they didn't bring in a sister from another convent?"

Well, that was another good question. Mr. Shaw was full of them. "I don't know. They posted the position in *The Joplin Globe* and I applied for it."

I guess that was answer enough, because the conversation turned to other subjects. But I was uneasy about it afterwards. I still am.

At one point, as we walked around the Motherhouse, I thought I saw a bit of movement at one of the windows, up on the third floor. I frowned.

Following my gaze, Mr. Shaw asked, "What is it?"

I just shook my head.

We stayed out till it was nearly sunset, talking of many things. He told me that he is coming to run things more and more on his father's farm, that when the time comes, the farm will belong to him. He said that both his mother and his sister, Georgina, have taken quite a shine to me, and would like me to come for lunch next Sunday. I happily agreed. When we passed by the hickory tree, he persuaded me to let him push me on the swing. In no time, I was laughing and shrieking, just like an Academy girl myself.

11 October, 1909

Last night was the first bad night I've had with the girls. They were sullen and disrespectful all night. They had not done their assignments from Friday, and refused to participate in lessons, even Anne-Marie and Tess. If I called on them to come up to the blackboard, they just stayed at their desks and would not look at me. When it was time to exercise, the five of them simply stood with their hands at their sides.

"This is stupid," Eva said loudly.

I said, "Very well. All of you may go back to your seats."

I thought perhaps things would be better after lunch, but if anything, they were worse. Letty came back crying because Frankie had put jelly in her hair. I excused her to go wash it out. Meanwhile, a very stern-faced Sister Fredonia informed me that, for punishment, Frankie had been obliged to stay behind in the kitchen to scrub pots and pans.

I turned to the remaining three. "What has gotten into all of you?"

"We're bored," Eva pronounced. "We put up with it at first because you were the new, young teacher. But you're not new anymore. You're about as interesting as old Sister Josephine, which is to say, not at all."

"Oh, you want boring?" I asked, livid. "I'll show you boring!" I made them all go back to their desks and turn away from each other, so there would be no danger of them whispering. Then I made them put their heads down for the rest of the day. When Letty came back, she wailed that it was not fair that she should be punished—she was the one who'd been humiliated with a sticky head.

“Shut up,” Eva told her meanly.

“*You* shut up,” Letty almost shouted back.

“Be quiet, both of you,” I snapped. To Letty, I said, “You haven’t been acting any better than anyone else here today. Now sit down, this instant!”

She stuck out her lower lip, but did as she was told. I sat at the front, so upset I was shaking. I tried to go over my lessons for the next day, but I could scarcely concentrate. I kept looking up and glaring around at all of them. Eventually, Frankie wandered in, the front of her dress soaking wet from standing at the sink. She went over and joined the others, sighing as she put her head down.

It was a very long two and a half hours.

16 October, 1909

Every single night this week, the girls have been acting just horrid. I’ve tried everything that I know to do—I’ve given them lines to copy out, I’ve taken away reading time, I’ve made them miss lunch. All to no avail. Eva, of course, is the ringleader. I don’t understand how someone so little can ride herd over the others like that, especially the older girls. And poor Tess and Anne-Marie are just caught in the middle. Mercy, what a business!

I’ve talked it over with the sisters. They say, “Spare the rod, spoil the child,” and I know Mama and Papa would agree, but I don’t know if I could bring myself to spank them, ever. I just wish I knew what was making them act this way in the first place. If I even so much as try to give lessons now, Frankie immediately pretends to be asleep and starts snoring loudly, which sends Letty into a giggling fit. They made Tess sneak up the other day and put a tack in my seat. When I demanded to know who did it, she burst into tears and ran from the room rather than confess whose idea it was, poor thing. As if I didn’t know. It’s bad enough that they misbehave. It just infuriates me that they goad sweet little Tess into joining in.

18 October, 1909

Oh, dear, where is the time going? I have been so preoccupied with the girls, I’ve barely given thought to anything else. I had lunch yesterday with the Shaws, and it was a grand time. They have basically issued me a standing invitation to visit them every Sunday and share a meal with them. The Shaws are such a warm, boisterous bunch. One afternoon with them made me forget all about this trouble with the girls, at least for a while. The farm is every bit as beautiful as Theo described, and Mrs. Shaw’s cooking is delicious (as her pies have attested). There was roast chicken, corn, potatoes, hot rolls, all sorts of things. I really enjoyed visiting with Mrs. Shaw and Georgina. Theo has invited me to the town Hallowe’en festival. There will be music, dancing, games, and old Mrs. Victor apparently can read tea leaves. Georgina has promised to sew me a mask. But best of all, every time I looked up, there was Theo, gazing at me. Every time our eyes met, he would smile.

Mama and I write each other regularly. I told her I have made friends, but I’m uncertain as to whether I’m quite ready to tell her about Theo. I think she and Papa would disapprove—it’s all

very sudden, after all, and the Shaws are Catholic. How is it possible to be so happy and so miserable at the same time? And when did I become so full of secrets?

20 October, 1909

I'm so upset. The girls are not sleeping, but have taken to carrying on and making noise in their rooms during the day. They were overheard by some of the daytime students. The Reverend Mother called me into her office at the Motherhouse to have a serious discussion about their behavior. Sitting heavily down in the chair behind her desk, she looked at me with such disappointment. She said that if things do not improve immediately, we may have to seek other arrangements.

"Other arrangements?" I echoed, already feeling tears spring to my eyes.

"It's not your fault, child," the Reverend Mother said, not unkindly. "Those girls would be a handful for anyone. I should have found someone with a bit more experience--"

"No, please," I begged. "Let me try again." Well, she agreed. But that evening, I went up to find the girls' dormitory room covered in feathers. They had ripped apart their pillows and quilts. I nearly burst into tears all over again, right there on the spot.

"Do you want me to be sent away?" I asked them. "Is that what you're trying to do?"

"No, no!" Tess started to cry and ran to me, burying her face in the front of my skirt.

"No, Miss Engel," Anne-Marie mumbled.

"No, Miss Engel," Letty echoed.

Beside them, Eva and Frankie eyed me coldly, white feathers still clinging to their hair. "We promise, we'll be very good from now on," Frankie said in such a way, I couldn't tell if she was lying or not. I gave her a hard look.

Eva took a step towards me, adding, "But you have to promise you'll do something for us."

"I don't *have* to do anything," I said just as coldly, standing my ground. What would Papa say if he saw me bargaining with this little titmouse, too small to even see over the top of the table?

"Forget about those silly primer books," Eva said. "We know all those things already. The times tables and long division, the capital of Belgium is Brussels and whatnot. Teach us something we really want to know."

I looked at her warily. "Like what?"

She smiled—what I suspect was the first genuine smile I'd ever received from her. It was amazingly sweet and charming. "Tell us about yourself. Tell us about Joplin, and the train ride, and all of the wonderful things you can do that we cannot. Tell us about *life*. If you do that, I promise, we will be as good as gold."

Frankie was watching my face closely. "Does that sound like fair shakes to you, Miss Engel?"

I asked, "What about your school work?"

Eva laughed airily. "Well, if it makes you feel better, I suppose we can keep doing it. But you needn't lecture us. We'll just submit the papers for you to grade and be done with it."

I thought it over, and said at last, "One week. If I am not satisfied that you can work through the primers without proper instruction, then we stop and go back to the way things were before."

Eva and Frankie laughed delightedly. "Deal!" they said. Letty grabbed Frankie's hands and danced her around the room in a little jig. Even Anne-Marie looked cheered at the prospect of these new lessons, and Tess raised her head to look hopefully up at me. I wiped the tears from her face.

23 October, 1909

The new lessons have commenced. I am concerned that the state of affairs has degenerated to such a point that I do not regard this situation as all that strange.

As Eva asked, we began with my telling the girls about my life back in Joplin, about the town and the mines, and what life was like for me growing up there. My very ordinary experiences are positively exotic to them. They are very interested to hear about my family, especially my mother. It seems they cannot remember theirs. As I spoke, I looked around at their rapt little faces, and feel my heart break afresh for these poor orphans. They even asked me to speak a word or two of German. Of course, I was never a native speaker, so I only know very basic words like, *gutan tag* and *danke*. I told them about my school and Miss Taylor, about the girls I chummed around with, about my church. Every time I think I have told them every single detail I can possibly recall, one of them will ask a question, forcing me to dredge up some additional feature, examine things from an angle I had never considered before. Even something that might seem as inconsequential as the type of ruffle on a skirt, or what kind of glaze my mother put on a ham. I am coming to view my own life in a whole new light. I feel closer to the girls than ever. We arrange the desks in a loose semi-circle around my chair, and I simply talk to them. In a way, it makes me feel like one of them, as if they really were my own little sisters.

So far, they have kept their word. The girls are conducting themselves like perfect little ladies. There have been no further disturbances to the day class, no disturbances of any kind.

I will say, this has considerably freed up my time. There is now no lesson planning to be done. They turn their papers into me once a week, in one fell swoop. I grade them, and of course, they are always perfect, or near-perfect. Cleaning and cooking and such are not a part of my duties at the convent, so aside from writing letters to my mother, I find I have a great deal of spare time on my hands.

Late this afternoon, Theo surprised me by pulling up in his father's buggy and wagon, his face ruddy, his eyes bright. "Caught us a pair of coons," he called, by way of greeting. "Mama's cooking 'em up special. Care to join us?"

"Would I!" I called back. I dashed back inside to grab my coat and tell the Reverend Mother

where I was going. Then off we went. It wasn't until we'd left the Academy grounds and turned out onto the road that I realized we were alone together. He reached out and took my hand easily, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Both of us were wearing gloves, of course, but all the same, I couldn't shake the sensation that we were being watched. It made me jumpy, and I kept turning my head, looking all around. Theo, misinterpreting my behavior, started to draw back.

"No, it's all right," I said, gripping his fingers tighter.

After supper, we took a walk around the farm. I had seen most of it, in bits and pieces—the barn and outbuildings, the fields, the pasture. I had petted their many dogs and barn cats, the goats and cows. Now, I not only held his hand, I took his arm, pressed close to his side. The sun was nearly down, and a couple of times, in the orchard, I thought I saw a flash of white in the trees. Perhaps it was just a bird, but it looked too big. I walked quickly to the trunk of that tree, looking up into the branches. Saw nothing.

For what little remained of the evening, I was preoccupied. It's not impossible for one of the girls to be following me, nor is it impossible for them to have walked to the Shaw farm from the convent. I have every confidence in their ability to be clever. More importantly, they are developing an unhealthy interest in my life. But they are lonely little girls. Round and round I went, arguing with myself. If my suspicions were correct, how to address it?

31 October, 1909

A Sunday Hallowe'en. I finally went to mass this morning at Holy Trinity. The sisters were thrilled. Theo had asked me to go, so I sat with the Shaws. It was just like everyone says—kneel, sit, stand. Well, of course, I didn't know when to do what, so I just remained seated the whole time. Everyone was very polite about it—I'm sure they all knew I was just visiting. But I like the church very much. It is very pretty, with the stained glass windows, and all the statues, and the little side altars and candles. When the part came for everyone to go up and take communion, I was left alone in the pew, and I looked around a little more. There was the rear balcony, where Anne-Marie told me the girls sit when they attend evening mass on Saturdays. While the others were still taking communion, I got up and went over to one of those little side areas, where the candles were. As I lit five of them, I caught myself whispering, "Five of clubs."

I don't know why, but that filled me with a type of superstitious fear, and I hurried back to the pew, where Theo was waiting. Georgina was already kneeling on the rail. They both looked at me, puzzled. I just smiled and sank back down beside them.

After services, there was such a lot to do. We went back to the farm and had lunch, then I helped Georgina and Mrs. Shaw finish a batch of little spice cakes to take to the festival. They called them soul cakes. Georgina sang a little Hallowe'en song I'd never heard before:

*"A soul, a soul, a soul-cake!
Please good missus, a soul-cake!
An apple, a pear, a plum, or a cherry,
Any good thing to make us all merry.*

*One for Peter, two for Paul
And three for Him who made us all!"*

When it got dark, we went back to town, where the festival was in full swing. There was a band playing, and games, and a cakewalk. A dance area had been set up, with poles and a canopy, strung with orange paper lanterns to form a sort of lighted pavilion. A bonfire was lit. The townspeople had outdone themselves, decorating the lamp posts with garlands of Indian corn tied with ribbons, and jack-o-lanterns on the steps of the bandstand. As she'd promised, Georgina made me a beautiful mask, sewn with feathers and sequins. She'd made one for Theo, too, a black mask with gold piping and a long sash in the back that I thought, with his black hair, made him look a bit roguish, like a pirate.

The Schiermans had come up from Louisburg with barrels of cider that they served hot. There was hot cocoa. Mrs. Berger passed out big bags of caramel corn, and of course, Mrs. Shaw laid out her soul cakes, scenting the night with cinnamon and cloves. Tubs were set up to bob for apples. Mrs. Victor had set up a gypsy-like tent where she was reading tea leaves. I had my fortune read. She said that I would marry a tall, dark handsome man before spring, making me blush all over.

Everyone looked so glamorous, dancing, laughing, having a wonderful time. I saw Mr. Cahill. Since he mostly worked during the weekdays, I'd hardly seen him since I'd arrived. I waved to him and he nodded, but then I lost him in the crowd before I could go over and speak to him properly. Children running about, thrilled to be allowed out so late. It was such a beautiful, perfect night. The sky was as black as Theo's mask with a dotting of stars like the starting flecks on a Grimoire sheet. That thought made me shiver, and Theo drew me close, spun me around the dance floor. In between songs, he pulled me away from the lights of the party, into one of the alleys between storefronts. Pushing me back against the brick wall, he took off my mask, then his own. And then he kissed me.

I will never forget this night, for as long as I live. I don't know how long we stayed there, kissing, but we were interrupted by the sound of giggling. Five little girls dashed by. They, too, were wearing masks. I looked and looked after them, but I couldn't tell if they were my girls or not.

Theo looked after them as well, and laughed. Turning back to me, he lowered his dark head and placed one last, gentle kiss on my throat, pausing to inhale deeply my scent, though how he could discern it through the light sheen of sweat from all the dancing, and the wood smoke from the bonfire, I'll never know. Then he re-fastened both our masks, and hand-in-hand we made our way back to the pavilion, and danced together until dawn.

1 November, 1909

It was a holy day, so the good sisters and the Academy students spent most of the day in chapel. When they returned for supper this evening, they had some rather distressing news. It seems that someone killed one of the Shaws' dairy cows last night. Somehow, it had been drained of all its blood. They'd found several small puncture wounds all over its body.

"It must have been some sort of a gruesome prank," said Sister Virginia. "It was Hallowe'en,

after all.”

Nobody said much after that, or ate much. After we cleared away the dinner plates, I started to make my way over to the Motherhouse, but I had to stop for a moment on one of the benches, feeling sick to my stomach. The thought of all that blood. Who would do such a thing? I wanted desperately to go to Theo, but I was due to teach ‘class’ any minute. I bent over double, resting my head on my knees.

When I finally did make my way to the third floor, Eva looked up expectantly.

“Tell us about Theo,” she said.

3 November, 1909

The girls have really developed a morbid interest in sexual matters. In addition to pestering me about Theo, they keep asking me very personal and frankly disturbing questions.

I didn’t sleep well at all this morning, and, like last month, I woke up to blood on my sheets. But, unlike last month, once I got everything cleaned up, I collapsed back onto the mattress and slept like the dead.

When I got to class, both Letty and Tess ran towards me. Letty got to me first, wrapping her arms around my middle and squeezing so that I cried out, while Tess fastened herself to my leg.

“Girls!” I said. “Please, take your seats.”

“What’s the matter, Miss Engel?” Anne-Marie asked worriedly. “Are you unwell?”

“I am a bit under the weather,” I replied wearily, dropping into my own chair.

Of course, they wanted to know what I meant by that. It’s as if they know, but they want to force me to say it. I am usually not a squeamish person, but the very idea of uttering it aloud made me nauseous. When I tried to steer the conversation to other topics, Eva looked angry. “You are not holding up your end of the bargain, Miss Engel.”

I did not like the threat in her voice. “Of course I am,” I said. “But I am unwell at present, so I’m afraid discussions of . . . bodily functions . . . would best be held at another time.”

To my surprise, Anne-Marie said, “I beg your pardon, Miss Engel, but I do hope you will bring it up. For if you do not tell us such things, who will?”

I had to concede her point, but still I said, very firmly, “Not tonight.”

20 November, 1909

The weather has gotten cold so quickly. The fields have all turned to browns and grays. Ever since Hallowe’en, Theo kisses me every chance he gets. As I go about the Academy, the Reverend Mother keeps giving me these little knowing looks, but so far, she has not said anything. I’ve told Mama a little in my letters, but certainly not everything. For example, I

have not brought up the fact that I now attend mass every Sunday.

Last night, I was on my way to the convent house for my midnight lunch, when Theo appeared out of the darkness.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked.

“I might ask you the same thing,” I said, honestly shocked.

“I’m here to see you.”

That threw me momentarily. Then, I said teasingly, “What, you were going to throw stones at my window?”

He kicked at the grass in an adorable fashion. “Something like that, yeah.”

We stared at each other for a moment. Then I grabbed his arm and tugged him into the shadowed seclusion of a copse of trees. Our lips came together desperately, his hands stroking my back, moving down over my hips. I leaned my head back, looking up through the branches at the night sky, allowing him to kiss his way along my neck in that way that I love.

“So what *are* you doing out here?” he asked, his breath hot against me.

“Oh,” I closed my eyes. “I’m . . . Well, I’m working.”

“Working? At this time of night?”

“I . . .” It was on the tip of my tongue to say that there was something I’d forgotten to do at the Motherhouse, but what could possibly be so urgent that it would necessitate me coming out in the dead of night? Then a fresh lie came, so smoothly and easily it astonished even me. “Some of the girls took sick.”

“Oh,” he said sympathetically. “Are they all right?”

“I’m sure they will be. But I don’t have much time.”

He played with a strand of my hair. “How much time?”

As he kissed me again, he pressed me back against the tree, harder than he’d ever done before, and once again, I astonished myself when I responded. Of course, you hear of girls who do such things. I just never thought I would be one of them. But I also never knew that this could feel so good, the heat of him, the hardness of him. He unbuttoned the front of my blouse and stole inside, touching my bare skin, and I gasped. He paused. Then, when I did not ask him to stop, he kept going. “Clara,” he whispered my name, “Clara.”

Then I caught some movement out of the corner of my eye, and I started, gasping again. He heard the fright in that sound, and his head jerked up.

Standing but a few feet away, crouched as if she had just dropped down out of the tree limbs, was Anne-Marie, staring at us with the most peculiar expression—a combination of curiosity, envy, disgust, and rage.

Clutching my coat together, I demanded, “What are you doing here? What are you doing out here?” She shook her head, unable to speak, and I grabbed her wrist. “Answer me!”

“Oh, here now,” Theo said, touching my shoulder. “There’s no need—”

With a sudden, violent motion, she twisted away from me and was gone, darting over the lawn towards the Motherhouse quicker than I could ever have imagined.

21 November, 1909

I cannot believe it. I just cannot. During the day today, one of the girls hid in a linen closet and leaped out, badly frightening one of the day students. The little girl who was frightened kept insisting that a monster jumped out at her—even bit her. “Look!” she pulled down the collar of her blouse for evidence, where, indeed, there was little fairy circle of bite marks at the curve where her neck met her shoulder.

The Reverend Mother did not even wait till this evening, but came directly to wake me up, then we went and confronted the girls in their dormitory. They had all been asleep—or were pretending to be asleep. I have never seen the Reverend Mother so angry. She shouted, she stormed, and all the girls cowered except for Eva, who looked up at her impassively.

“The little girl thought it was a monster!” the Reverend Mother cried. “Just you wait. When I’m through with you, none of you will sit down for a week!”

“The girls are very sorry, Reverend Mother,” I said calmly. “We’ll see to it that it won’t happen again.”

I got the Reverend Mother to agree to not spank the girls, and that I would handle it. She could not disagree that there had been great progress over the past few weeks. I persuaded her she must regard this as some minor backsliding.

When the Reverend Mother had gone, I turned to the girls. “You are little monsters,” I said coldly. “Every one of you.”

At that, Anne-Marie’s little face crumpled, and she launched herself straight at me. “WE ARE NOT MONSTERS!” she screamed, her tiny fists flailing and hitting at me. “Take it back! Take it back! Take it back!”

As we struggled, her notepad fell off her bed and spilled open. Everything stopped.

There were drawings in there. Drawings of things that no little girl should know anything about. Drawings of Theo and me.

I picked it up and slowly turned the pages. “Were you spying on us, Anne-Marie?” I whispered, holding it out. “You’ve been spying on us this whole time?”

Sniffing, she rubbed her eye with her fist. “Yes.”

“But *why*?” I asked. “Surely you know that that’s very wrong.”

“I couldn’t help it,” she said.

Frankie spoke up, her voice flat. “We know what’s happening. You’re going to marry him and forget all about us.”

At that, Anne-Marie sobbed harder, soon joined by Letty and Tess. I stood there stupidly, still holding the drawing pad. All this time, I had thought that Eva was the spy, the snoop, the watcher in the trees. And here it was-- it had been Anne-Marie all along.

I sat down on the floor, and one by one, they all crept up to me like kittens and held on. I held them back. "I'm not leaving you," I vowed. "Never, ever, ever."

26 November, 1909

Things had started to return to an even keel—or, at least, I thought they had. We have gone back to more regular lessons. After a long talk with the girls, we agreed that some of our conversations have been unwholesome. The compromise was that I do not restrict any of their reading material, and I always allow them to choose the book for story hour. Which has meant not only Hardy, but Thackeray, James, Whitman, and even Wilde. The girls have been good about it, though, tempering the more scandalous works with the occasional Dickens and Shakespeare.

I had Thanksgiving dinner with the Shaws. It made me unexpectedly homesick, and I'm sorry to say, I ran from the dining room, weeping. Theo found me sitting in the parlor, trying to compose myself. When he knelt in front of me, I expected he just intended to comfort me. But he proposed instead. He even had a little gold ring for me. I slipped it on, but for only a moment. Then I put it away. We have agreed not to tell anyone yet, not even his family.

When I got back to the Academy later that evening, I saw the little faces at the window, waiting for me.

27 November, 1909

Last night, I was reading in bed when the doorknob turned. I looked up, startled, as Tess came slinking into my room.

"This is my private time, Tess," I said gently. She did not even pause but climbed right up into bed with me. "You're barefoot!" I gasped. "You'll catch your death like that."

She got under the blankets and snuggled close, putting her icy little feet on mine, asking, "You're not really going to marry him, are you?"

I said, "Yes, I am."

"The others are right. You are going to leave us."

"I don't have to."

"But you will. You'll go off and have babies of your own, and you'll forget all about us."

I hugged her tightly. "We both know that's not true. I could never forget you, darling. Never." She did not look convinced, but said nothing further. I asked, "Would you like to stay here with me tonight?"

She nodded, and leaning over, I put my book on the bedside table and blew out the lamp.

Then I settled back. Holding her tightly, we both slept.

11 December, 1909

I have become so accustomed to the night, sometimes I have trouble sleeping on the weekends. Theo is impatient to tell everyone that we are engaged, pointing out that it isn't as if we are not acting engaged. Of course, he's right. The only answer I can give is that I am not ready yet.

After supper last night, we got bundled up so he could drive me back to the Academy. We've already had one snowfall, so the world was already blanketed, white and perfect. As we drove back, flakes started to fall again, large, crystalline, magic, out of an indigo sky. He pulled off into a field, and the two of us walked a ways into the woods. He spread his coat down carefully at the base of a tree for us to lie down, but somehow, it must have gotten bunched up beneath us. When we were through, there were droplets of blood in the snow.

12 December, 1909

I don't know how it's possible that a single body, a mortal vessel, can go through so much in a twenty-four hour span of time. Yesterday, at this hour, I was virgin. I was engaged. Now I am neither.

When they told me, I was numb. I went and sat with his family for a time. They let me see the body.

This morning, they found him behind the barn. He had gone out in the twilight hours to see to the animals. There were tiny puncture marks all over him.

When I returned to the Academy, the Reverend Mother was waiting for me on the third floor. The girls were huddled around her, her hands resting on their heads. I sat down at my desk. Took the gold engagement ring out of my pocket. As I fiddled with it, the Reverend Mother told me the tale. But I was only half-listening. All I could see was blood in the snow.

"Ten years ago, an orphan train rolled through Paola, with many dying children and adults. At first, we thought it was typhus. The symptoms were all there-- sensitivity to light, pain, stupor. They had strange rashes all over their bodies. Or, at least, what we thought were rashes. It turns out, they were bites. We brought them back here, to the Academy. We had the room, we had the beds. We tried nursing them back to health, but all of the adults died, and most of the children. All except for five girls. They slowly seemed to get better, but they were . . . different. When we realized what they were, the good sisters couldn't bring themselves to . . . to just do away with them. They were just children, after all. We had to believe it was all to some higher purpose. We had to feed them. Animals, mostly. Mr. Cahill does the hunting. Deer, rabbits, coyotes, foxes, wild cats when he can get them. He tries to capture them live. The fresher the better. The children themselves catch mice and rats. We've found that they don't much care for birds. But we couldn't let them out, you see. It wouldn't have done for them to be seen, tearing into a kill. Who would understand? Their last teacher was Sister Josephine. She was there at the beginning, when the train came. As her time drew near, she

asked that she be given to them. Said it seemed like a shame to go to waste, all that blood, and them in such need. You'll notice we've mostly kept young women away, young women like you, who still bleed. The smell of the blood makes them hungry. And they're always so hungry as it is. But then it came time to find a new school teacher, and we thought it best to look outside the order. Someone who's recently been in the world, who can teach them new things, tell them new stories. And you did just that, Miss Engel. They love you, and you love them. They were five, six, seven and eight years old when they became what they are, back in 1899. So they were born between the years 1891 and 1894. Your same age, Miss Engel, but not your age. They are ageless. They walk in the grace of God."

"And now what?" I asked, my voice hoarse from weeping.

"Well, that is entirely up to you, Miss Engel."

Eva spoke, "We can't stay here anymore."

I looked at her steadily. "Well, I guess we have that in common, don't we?"

"We're sorry," Tess cried. "But he was going to take you away! And you're our Miss Engel—ours!"

"She's not yet," Frankie, ever the practical one, pointed out. "But you could be."

I nodded and rose from my chair, leaving the ring on the desk.

The Reverend Mother smiled. "Then you will do what I could not. Had I been twenty, even ten years younger . . ."

She looked lovingly on as the girls encircled me, their eyes growing brighter, their teeth sharper. She was still talking, her voice sounding very far away in my ears when they started to tear into me, into my wrists, my throat. "It will take three days. You will be very ill. But we'll look after you. I knew from the moment I saw you that you were a good girl."

16 December, 1909

The six of us are on the platform in the snow, waiting for the next train west. It may be slow-going, since we can only travel at night, but we will be in San Francisco for Christmas. The very idea takes my breath away. We'll all be together. I am one of them now. Their blood flows through me. They will teach me to play Grimoire and Fives. I will teach them about the world—really teach them this time. There is nothing I wouldn't do for them. I will show them what it means to be a woman, what it means to be with a man.

I am wearing the ring on a fine gold chain around my neck.

First, San Francisco, and then—who knows where my girls and I may go?

Anywhere we want.

About the Author

Lauren Scharhag is the author of *Imperial-13*, *The Ice Dragon* and *The Winter Prince*, and (with Coyote Kishpaugh) *The Order of the Four Sons* series.

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