

CHAPTER SAMPLER

THE CURSE OF

HEARTWOOD ACADEMY

Will Allie survive
the test?



MARTY CHAN

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**HEARTWOOD
ACADEMY**

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orca soundings

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Chapter One

“My new school is a horror movie” was the last thing I expected to see on my bingo card. Heartwood Academy was supposed to be one of the country’s best boarding schools, with students coming from around the world. But my first thought about the place was, Where does the *head* vampire live? The old, ivy-covered brick buildings reminded me of the creepy castles in the classic horror films my grandpa watched.

I stood on the lush green lawn and stared at a three-story L-shaped building. A redbrick tower rose from the roof where the two sections met. As I gazed at the white-trimmed windows and the ugly winged statues on top of the steep roof, a shudder ran through my entire body. *Did my parents even see this place before they signed me up?* My brothers and sister didn't have to attend boarding school. Why had I been singled out for this punishment? Mom claimed I had a talent that only Heartwood Academy could bring out, but I figured this was code for *I can't handle my daughter. Someone take her off my hands.*

"This is where all your classes will be held," our tour guide announced to the group of kids standing next to me.

Pru Cotton was her name. She was a senior student and a one-person welcoming committee. She wore the Heartwood uniform—a forest-green

jacket and skirt. The school crest was stitched on her jacket pocket—three clasped hands against the backdrop of a heart. Her blond hair bounced with natural curls. She was so different than me. I was more of a slob with my ragged jeans and T-shirt. I wondered if I could get curly hair like hers, but I had the same hair as my Chinese dad. Straight, stiff and black. Well, I probably had more of it than he did.

“The third floor is where you’ll find the offices. Your classes will be on the main and second floors,” Pru said. She pointed to the shorter section of the L shape. “And that’s where you’ll find the cafeteria and gym. Any questions?”

“Why is this place so creepy?” I asked.

Pru cracked a smug grin. “What’s your name?”

“Allie. Allie Lau,” I answered, tapping the name tag on my chest.

“So, Allie, do you find Heartwood Academy unsettling?”

I nodded, as did most of the kids around me.

I could see Pru loved this. She breathed in, letting silence fall. Then she leaned forward and whispered, “The founder of the school was Claude Dubois. He made a fortune in construction, and he had no plans to spend any of it on something like a school. His money and all that came with it was meant for his family yet to be. He and his wife, Margaret, were expecting their first child. But fate had other plans. Margaret Dubois died giving birth to a daughter. They say that the child lived only as long as a few heartbeats, then joined her mother in the hereafter. Shattered, Claude wanted to honor his wife, so he turned his estate into Heartwood Academy.”

I shrugged. “Why a school?”

Pru eyed me up and down. “You’re a curious cat, Allie. Good question. Some say Margaret Dubois was a teacher, and Claude wanted to honor her memory with a school. But I heard she was into

the dark arts and talked to spirits from the beyond. Claude wanted to erase that part of her life with Heartwood.”

“Really?” a boy in the back asked.

Pru nodded. “After Margaret died, Claude hoped the students would fill the empty spot left by his wife’s and daughter’s deaths. But something else filled Claude’s heart. A spirit Margaret may have contacted when she was carrying their child.”

Pru paused and surveyed our reactions.

What a drama queen.

She continued, “Claude couldn’t bear to live without his family. His broken heart couldn’t be fixed no matter how many students walked the Heartwood halls.”

Pru pointed to the tower rising from the third-floor roof.

“They say that despair took Claude to the top of the school. He leapt off to join his wife and child

in the hereafter. But there are a few who believe he didn't take his own life. They believe that whatever spirit Margaret contacted caused the deaths of all three Dubois. Some think that spirit is still here."

She let her last statement hang in the air as she glanced at the forest next to the school grounds. The kids around me shuffled their feet nervously, glancing around the buildings.

"Let's continue our tour," Pru said.

We headed along the cobblestone path toward another set of buildings situated near the forest that butted up against the school grounds. I was used to living in a city where you'd only find trees in fenced-off parks. Maybe the odd tree on a sidewalk, but definitely not a forest growing right next to all the buildings. Add in Pru's story about the Dubois family, and this had the makings of a horror movie. The only thing we needed to make it complete was a gruesome discovery.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Pru shrieked. “What is that?”

She pointed to the edge of the woods.

Chapter Two

Pru rushed to the trees, and we followed. She stopped at the edge of the woods and looked down at a lump on the ground. A dead raccoon. Its cold, unblinking eyes stared up. They bothered me more than the animal's twisted body. Its head was bent at an odd angle to its neck. Tufts of fur had been yanked out. Dried blood was splattered across the edges of the hole in its chest. The raccoon's tiny claws reached upward as if begging for mercy.

Though the body was half-rotted, the only smell came from the pine trees around us. Strange, I thought. This thing should be ripe by now.

My fellow students stood beside me, staring at the grim sight. As I scanned the pale faces of my schoolmates, I wondered if we shared the same question: Is this really our first day of boarding school?

“This was the ghoul’s work,” Pru said. She paused for dramatic effect and scanned the pale faces of the students standing around the body.

“Who’s the ghoul?” I asked.

A few of the other new students muttered the same question.

Pru held up a finger to silence us.

She was acting like she ran the place, but she was a student like the rest of us. She had no right to boss us around just because she had been here longer.

“Well? Are you going to tell us?” I asked.

Pru stepped over the dead raccoon and stopped inches from my face. I could smell her jasmine perfume and bacon breath.

“Well, well, well. Aren’t you the curious one, Ms. Lau...zee,” she said, making my last name sound like “lousy.”

She stood a couple of inches taller and used her height to intimidate me. I wasn’t about to cave. As the youngest of four high-achieving brothers and sisters, I’d learned to stand my ground. My two older brothers gave me more than a few knocks on the head for it. My big sister had no shortage of cruel comments to cut me down. But I never let any of them win. I always fought back.

My strict Chinese parents scolded me, saying I should respect my older siblings, but I refused. *Maybe Mom and Dad were tired of me fighting everyone, and that’s why they sent me here.*

Pru reminded me of my sister, Agnes. They both thought they knew better than anyone else.

“You were going to tell us who the ghoul is,” I said. “I was just trying to spare ourselves the drama.”

Her nostrils flared briefly before she forced a fake smile and stepped back. “The ghoul is another victim of the evil force. We now call her the ghoul, but when she was alive her name was Emma Stilton. She was one of the first students who attended classes at Heartwood, back when there were more trees and animals than buildings and students.”

She stepped around the dead raccoon, looking down at it as if to build some drama to her story, then continued.

“One day Emma went into these woods against the headmaster’s rules. Some say she loved to go for midnight hikes, but I believe she was drawn to the woods. Perhaps by the very force that led Claude Dubois to the top of the tower. What happened to her in the woods, we won’t ever know for sure, but it was a horrible end. The next morning Emma was found in very much the same condition as this raccoon.”

One of the boys beside me started to gag and covered his mouth. He wore a T-shirt with an imprint of the Hulk's green body on the front, which was a contrast to the boy's scrawny arms. I spotted his name tag—Boston. We all took a step away. Boston didn't puke, but I wasn't taking any chances. I kept my distance. So did everyone else.

"Legend has it the school did not want Emma's death to be a stain on the academy," Pru said. "Instead of reporting it, they lied and said she had run away. They left the body for the ravens to feast on. But death was only the beginning for Emma. Now she is the ghoul who haunts these woods, waiting for the next student to wander too far."

Beside me, a girl with a bob haircut and pink glasses joked, "I guess the ghoul was nearsighted. Couldn't tell a raccoon from a student."

I laughed, as did a few of the other new students. Pru glared and strode up to the girl with the pink glasses. She glanced down at her name tag.

“Ricki, is it?” Pru said. “You think this is funny?”

Ricki smirked. “Not ha-ha funny. More like cringe.”

“You break the rules at Heartwood, you’ll pay,” Pru warned.

“And what are the rules?” I asked.

“I was getting to them!” Pru snapped.

Ricki rolled her hand to signal Pru to hurry up. “Make it fast,” she said. “The smell from the *fake* raccoon is making me dizzy.”

Pru’s eyes nearly bulged out of her head. She gritted her teeth and whispered, “That is a real dead raccoon.”

I took another look at the dead body. The hole in the animal’s chest was perfectly round, and the inside looked more like plastic. Was Ricki right about the body being fake? I started to think this was all a setup. But that changed in a flash. Pru stooped over the raccoon, grabbed a nearby stick, stabbed it into the wound and pulled out a dripping organ.

Boston threw up. Everyone but Ricki jumped back, gasping. A few of the students covered their eyes.

Ricki rubbed Boston's back as she whispered, "It's okay. Just don't look at it."

Pru was enjoying the moment. She held up the stick with the dripping red organ dangling from the end. "Listen up, freshies. Break the rules here and suffer."

"Are you going to tell us already?" I asked.

"Heartwood Academy might have accepted you as a student, but you still have to pass *the test*," Pru said.

"What test?" Boston asked, wiping his mouth.

"It's our way of making sure you're the right kind of Heartwood student," Pru said.

"I thought the right kind was the one whose parents coughed up enough money to get in," Ricki said.

Pru narrowed her gaze at Ricki but ignored the taunt. Instead she addressed the entire group.

“The sophomores are going to lead you into the woods where you have to stay one night. If you last, you’re officially in.”

“Aren’t we already in?” I asked.

Pru smiled. “Not until we seniors say you’re in.” Then she let out a laugh. I shifted uncomfortably. Her cackle was like the screech of a microphone too close to the speakers.

“What happens if we don’t last the night?” Boston asked.

Pru raised the raccoon’s heart and smiled. “You don’t want to find out.”