

1 WE WERE DISCUSSING the witch trials that took place in Salem, Massachusetts, U.S.A. Mr Kramer, our history teacher, told us about one old woman who was accused of being a witch. She said she was innocent and that the man who accused her was lying. She threatened that if she was hanged, the man who lied would also die.

They went ahead and hanged her anyway. And soon afterwards, the man who accused her choked to death!

‘I can’t believe that,’ Jan Draper said. Jan didn’t believe much anyway.

A deep voice came from the back of the room. ‘I think it might be true.’

I’d never heard that voice before. I turned and glanced in the newcomer’s direction. Then I just sat and stared, my heart pounding like crazy.

I don’t like people who stare, but I couldn’t help it. He was the handsomest boy I’d ever seen. He looked like a magnificent statue.

‘Well,’ Mr Kramer said, ‘there’s a lot of evidence to indicate that the man did choke to death.’

‘But the old woman couldn’t make it happen,’ Jan said with a laugh.

‘I wouldn’t be so sure,’ the boy said in his deep voice.

My friend Dina had noticed the new boy, too. After class, as we walked to our lockers, she told me what she knew about him.

‘His name is Basil Harris,’ she said. ‘I heard he’s a transfer student. I also heard he was the best looking boy on the face of the planet. At least that part is right.’

‘I wonder where he’s from?’ I said.

‘Someone told me that he lives with his grandmother. I suppose his parents are dead.’

Dina added, ‘I heard he’s smart, too. Who knows, he could end up dux. Of course, he’d have to beat you. And nobody is smarter than you!’

I laughed. ‘Oh, Dina!’

It was true that I worked really hard and got good marks. But the speech teacher, Ms Brundage, made the final selection for class speakers. Just having the best marks wasn’t enough. She had to like you.

I’m not one of Ms Brundage’s favourite students. I think the fact that I have epilepsy makes her nervous. That’s silly because as long as I take my medication, I’m fine.

Unfortunately, Ms Brundage keeps worrying that I’m going to have a fit or something. In my first year at Hawthorne High, she even suggested that I should not compete in the speech contest. She kept hinting that I might embarrass myself ‘under the stress of the situation’.

I suppose a lot of people feel uncomfortable around things they don’t understand. I know Ms Brundage does.

‘Look, there he goes!’ Dina hissed. Then she nudged me so hard, she almost made me lose my balance.

I sneaked a quick peek and saw Basil walking toward the library. ‘Hey, I bet he’s really lonely being at a new school,’ I said. ‘One of us should show him around, give him the inside facts.’

‘Not me,’ Dina protested. ‘I’d be too nervous.’ She laughed.

‘Okay. I’m elected,’ I said, grinning happily. I suppose I’m what you’d call the friendly type. My parents always say that if aliens from outer space ever landed here, I’d be the first to make friends with them.

I hurried down the corridor and caught up with Basil. 'Hi,' I said 'I'm Valerie Moran. I'm in your history class. Maybe you didn't see me.'

He smiled. 'I saw you. My name's Basil Harris.'

'Well—welcome to Hawthorne. Such as it is.'

I glanced down the hallway. Hawthorne was once a nice school. The students used to have a lot of spirit. The buildings had been in good condition. The grass had been green and pretty shrubs sprouted up everywhere.

Now the kids didn't seem to care. The buildings were covered with graffiti and vandals had torn up the shrubs.

'Our school is a bit run down,' I apologised. 'But some of us are trying to do something about it.'

'Good for you,' he said.

'I'd like to show you around the school if you have time. That is, if you haven't already had the grand tour.'

'Just a modest one. I could do with another. I'm still a bit lost.' He really seemed glad I was taking an interest in him.

I led Basil to the science building and the tiny patch of grass where I sat during lunch break. My favourite eucalyptus tree stood there and I pointed it out to him.

'I sit under it and dream,' I explained. 'I think of all the places I'm going to go, all the things I'm going to do. I call it my dreaming tree.'

'Everyone should have a dreaming tree,' he said with a smile.

I continued with the tour, showing Basil around the rest of the school. Then I turned to him and said, 'I've saved the best for last.'

'What's that?'

'Come on. It's outside in front of the library.' I grabbed his hand and led him to the bronze statue of William Evans Hawthorne.

We both stopped and examined the piece. It was old and dirty—it desperately needed to be cleaned. You couldn't see the face very well anymore. But for all that, it still looked very noble.

'That's William Evans Hawthorne,' I explained. 'He was the first principal of this school, back in the nineteenth century.'