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The **MIDNIGHT** Club



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CHAPTER I

Ilonka Pawluk checked herself out in the mirror and decided she didn't look like she was going to die. Her face was thin, true, as was the rest of her, but her blue eyes were bright, her long brown hair shiny, and her smile white and fresh. That was the one thing she always did when she looked in the mirror – smiled, no matter how lousy she felt. A smile was easy. Just a reflex really, especially when she was alone and feeling down. But even her feelings could be changed, Ilonka decided, and today she was determined to be happy. The old cliché sprang to her mind – today is the first day of the rest of my life.

Yet there were certain facts she could not wish away.

Her long shiny brown hair was a wig. Months of chemotherapy had killed off the last strands of her own hair. She was still very sick – that was true, and it was possible that *today* might be a *large* portion of the rest of her life. But she wouldn't allow herself to think about that because it didn't help. She had to concentrate only on what did help. That was an axiom she lived by now. She picked up a glass of water

and a handful of herbal tablets and tossed all the pills into her mouth. Behind her, Anya Zimmerman, her roommate, and a sick girl if there ever was one, groaned. Anya spoke as Ilonka swallowed the half-dozen capsules.

‘I don’t know how you can take those all at once,’ she said. ‘I’d throw them up in a minute.’

Ilonka finished swallowing and burped softly. ‘They go down a lot easier than a needle in the arm.’

‘But a needle brings immediate results.’ Anya liked drugs, hard narcotics. She had the right to them because she was in constant excruciating pain. Anya Zimmerman had bone cancer. Six months earlier her right leg had been chopped off at the knee to stop the spread – all in vain. Ilonka watched in the mirror as Anya shifted in her bed, trying to make herself more comfortable. Anya did that frequently, moving this way and that, but there was no way she could move out of her body, and that was the problem. Ilonka put down her glass and turned around. Already she could feel the herbs burning deep in her throat.

‘I think these herbs are working. I feel better today than I’ve felt in weeks.’

Anya sniffed. She had a constant cold. Her immune system was shot – a common side effect of chemotherapy and a frequent problem for ‘guests’ at Rotterham Hospice.

‘You look like crap,’ Anya said.

Ilonka felt stabbed, nothing new, but knew she couldn’t

take Anya's comment personally. Anya had a coarse personality. Ilonka often wondered if it was her pain that spoke. She would have liked to have known Anya before she became ill.

'Thanks a lot,' Ilonka said.

'I mean, compared to Miss Suntan Barbie out in the real world,' Anya said hastily. 'But next to me, of course, you look great – really.' She snorted. 'Who am I to talk, huh? Sorry.'

Ilonka nodded. 'I really do feel better.'

Anya shrugged, as if feeling better might not be such a good thing. As if feeling anything but closer to dying might just be postponing the inevitable. But she let it go, opening a drawer in her bedside table and pulling out a book. No, not just a book – a Bible. Big bad Anya was reading the Bible.

Ilonka had asked her the previous day what made her pick it up and Anya had laughed and said she was in need of light reading. Who knew what Anya really thought? The stories she told when they met at midnight were often dark and ghoulish. In fact, they gave Ilonka nightmares, and it was hard to sleep beside the person who had just explained how Suzy Q disemboweled Robbie Right. Anya always used names like that in her stories.

'I feel numb,' Anya said. It was an obvious lie because she had to be in pain, ten daily grams of morphine notwithstanding. She opened her Bible at random and began to read. Ilonka stood silently and watched her for a full minute.

‘Are you a Christian?’ Ilonka finally asked.

‘No, I am dying.’ Anya turned a page. ‘Dead people have no religion.’

‘I wish you would talk to me.’

‘I am talking to you. I can talk and read at the same time.’ Anya paused and looked up. ‘What do you want to talk about? Kevin?’

Something caught in Ilonka’s throat. ‘What about Kevin?’

Anya grinned, a sinister affair on her bony face. Anya was pretty: blond hair, blue eyes, a delicate bone structure, but too thin. Actually, except for Ilonka’s dark hair – her hair had been dark – they looked somewhat alike. Yet the blue of their eyes shone with opposite lights, or perhaps Anya’s shone with none at all. There was a coldness to Anya that went beyond her features. There was her pain, the tiny lines around her eyes, the pinch to her mouth, but there was also something deep, something almost buried, that burned without warmth in her. Still, Ilonka liked Anya, cared about her. She just didn’t trust her.

‘You’re in love with him,’ Anya said.

‘What makes you say something stupid like that?’

‘The way you look at him. Like you would pull his pants down and take him to heaven if it wouldn’t kill you both.’

Ilonka shrugged. ‘There are worse ways to die.’

That was the wrong thing to say to Anya. She returned to her Bible. ‘Yeah.’

Ilonka moved closer to Anya and leaned on her bed. 'I'm not in love with him. I'm in no position to be in love with anyone.'

Anya nodded and grunted.

'I don't want you saying things like that. Especially to him.'

Anya turned a page. 'What do you want me to say to him?'

'Nothing.'

'What will you say to him?'

'Nothing.'

Anya suddenly closed her book. Her cold eyes blazed at Ilonka. Or maybe, suddenly, they weren't so cold. 'You told me you wanted to talk, Ilonka. I assumed you wanted to discuss something more important than needles and herbs. You *live* in denial, which is bad, but it's much worse to die that way. You love Kevin, any fool can see it. The whole group knows. Why don't you tell him?'

Ilonka was stunned, but she tried to act cool. 'He's part of the group. He must know.'

'He's as stupid as you are. He doesn't know. Tell him.'

'Tell him what? He has a girlfriend.'

'His girlfriend is an imbecile.'

'You say that about a lot of people, Anya.'

'It's true about a lot of people.' Anya shrugged and turned away. 'Whatever you want, I don't care. It's not as if it's going to matter a hundred years from now. Or even in a hundred days.'

Ilonka sounded hurt, which she was. 'Are my feelings so obvious?'

Anya stared out the window. 'No, I take back what I said. The group doesn't know anything. They're all imbeciles. I'm the only one who knows.'

'How did you know?' When Anya didn't answer, Ilonka moved closer still and sat on the bed near Anya's severed leg. The stump was covered with a thick white bandage. Anya never let anyone see what it looked like, and Ilonka understood. Anya was the only patient at the hospice who knew she wore a wig. Or so Ilonka hoped. 'Do I talk in my sleep?' she asked.

'No,' Anya said, still focusing out the window.

'You're psychic then?'

'No.'

'You were in love once?'

Anya trembled but stopped quickly. She turned back to Ilonka. Her eyes were calm again, or maybe just cold. 'Who would love me, Ilonka? I'm missing too many body parts.' She reached for her Bible and spoke in dismissal, 'Better hurry and catch Kevin before Kathy gets here. She's coming today, you know. Visitors' day.'

Ilonka stood up, feeling sad, despite her recent vow to be happy. 'I know what day it is,' she muttered and left the room.

Rotterdam Hospice did not look like a hospital or hospice inside or outside. Until ten years before, it had been an

oil tycoon's seaside mansion. Located in Washington State near the Canadian border, it overlooked a rough stretch of coastline where the hard blue water was always as cold as December and crashed as white foam on jagged rocks that waited with stern patience to punish any would-be swimmers. Ilonka could hear the roar of the surf from her bedroom window and often dreamed of it, both pleasant and disturbing dreams. Sometimes the waves would lift her up and carry her out on peaceful waters to fantasy lands where she and Kevin could walk side by side in healthy bodies. Or else the cold foam would grab her and impale her on the rocks, her body split in two and the fish feeding on what remained. Yeah, she blamed Anya for those dreams as well.

Yet, even with the nightmares, she loved being near the ocean. And she much preferred Rotterham Hospice to the state hospital where Dr White had found her rotting away. It was Dr White who had started the hospice. A place for teenagers to go, he told her, while they were preparing to make the most important classroom change in their lives. She thought that was a nice way of putting it. But she made him promise to buy her a wig before she would allow herself to be boarded with thirty other kids her age who were dying.

But, of course, she was not dying, not for sure, not since she'd started taking good care of herself.

Ilonka's room was on the second floor – there were three floors. In the long hallway through which she strode after

leaving Anya, there was little evidence that the mansion had been transformed into a place for the sick. The oil paintings on the walls, the rich lavender carpet, crystal chandeliers even – she could have been enjoying the hospitality of ‘Tex’ Adams, the man who had left Dr White his favorite house. *Hospital* and *hospitality*, Ilonka mused – yet the words were practically cousins. The odor of alcohol that touched her nostrils as she reached the stairway, the flash of white below her that signaled the beginning of the nurses’ station, and, most important, the *feeling* of sickness in the air told her, or anybody, that this was not a happy home for the rich and healthy. But a sad place for the young and poor. Most of Dr White’s patients came from state hospitals.

Not Kevin, though – his parents had money.

On the way down the stairs she ran into another member of the ‘Midnight Club’, as they had named it. Spencer Haywood, or simply ‘Spence’, as he liked to be called. Spence was the healthiest person in the hospice – next to her, of course – even though he had brain cancer. Most of the guests at Rotterham spent their days in bed, or at least in their rooms, but Spence was always up and wandering about. He was on the thin side – actually, *everyone* at the hospice was on the thin side, or just plain emaciated – with wavy brown hair and one of those half smiles that was suspiciously close to a smirk forever etched on his face. He was the joker in the group – every group needed one – and his energy was

contagious, even for teens who had painkillers trickling through their bloodstreams. His face was as wild as his stories. It was a rare night when a dozen people didn't get blown away in a Spencer Haywood tale. Ilonka loved being with him because he never talked as if he was going to die.

'My favorite girl,' he said as they stopped together on the stairway above the nurses' station. He had an open envelope in his right hand, a sheet covered with minute handwriting in the other. 'I was looking for you,' he said.

'You have a friend who wants to sell me life insurance,' she said.

He laughed. 'Life and medical. He's a moron. Hey, how are you doing today? Want to go to Hawaii?'

'My bags are packed. Let's go. How are you doing?'

'Schratter just gave me a couple grams twenty minutes ago so I'm not even sure if I still have a head on my shoulders, which is a great way to feel.'

'A couple grams' was two grams of morphine, a strong dose. Spence may have been able to walk about, but without heavy drugs he got horrible headaches. Schratter was head nurse of the day shift. She had a backside as broad as the moon, and hands that shook like the California coast on a bad day. When Schratter gave you a shot, you usually needed stitches afterward. Ilonka nodded toward his letter.

'Is it from Caroline?' she asked. Caroline was his devoted girlfriend – she wrote practically every day. Spence often

read her letters in the group and it was their opinion that Caroline had to be the horniest chick alive. Spence nodded with excitement.

‘There’s a possibility she might visit next month. She lives in California, you know. She can’t afford to fly but she thinks she can take the train up.’

A month was a long time at Rotterham Hospice. Most of the patients were there less than a month before they died. But Ilonka thought it would be in bad taste to suggest the girl come earlier.

‘From what you’ve told us about her,’ Ilonka said, ‘you’ll need transfusions of all your vital fluids after her visit.’

Spence grinned at the prospect. ‘Some fluids it’s a joy to have to replenish. Hey, I’ve got to tell you why I wanted you. Kevin is looking for you.’

Her heart skipped – so high it almost crash-landed. ‘Really?’ she asked casually. ‘What for?’

‘I don’t know. He told me if I saw you to give you the message.’

‘He knows my room number. He could have come to get me.’

‘I don’t think he’s feeling very good today,’ Spence said.

‘Oh.’ Kevin had not looked well the previous night. He had leukemia and had fallen out of remission three times, which was all the doctors said was allowed. Three strikes and you were out. Yet, like herself, she couldn’t imagine