Chapter One

You have the face that suits a woman
For her soul's screen,
The sort of beauty that's called human
In Hell, Faustine.

MRS LIGHTFOOT WAS STANDING BY THE BAY window. 'Sit down, Miss Crayle. I'm afraid I have bad news.'

Faustina's mouth held its usual mild expression, but a look of wariness flashed into her eyes. Only for a moment. Then the eyelids dropped. But that moment was disconcerting – as if a tramp had looked suddenly from the upper windows of a house apparently empty and secure against invasion.

'Yes, Mrs Lightfoot?' Faustina's voice was low-pitched, clear – the cultivated speech expected of all teachers at Brereton. She was tall for her sex and slender to the point of fragility, with delicate wrists and ankles, narrow hands and feet. Everything about her suggested candour and gentleness – the long, oval face, sallow and earnest; the blurred, blue eyes, studious, a little near-sighted; the unadorned hair, a thistle-down halo of pale tan that stirred softly with each movement of her head. She seemed quite composed now as she crossed the study to an armchair.

Mrs Lightfoot's composure matched Faustina's. Long ago she had learned to suppress the outward signs of embarrassment. At the moment her plump face was stolid with something of the look of Queen Victoria about the petulant thrust of the lower lip and the light, round eyes protruding between white lashes. In dress she affected the Quaker colour – the traditional 'drab' that dressmakers called 'taupe' in the thirties and 'eel-grey' in the forties. She wore it in rough tweed or rich velvet, heavy silk or filmy voile according to season and occasion, combining it every evening with her mother's good pearls and old lace. Even her winter coat was moleskin – the one fur with that same blend of dove-grey and plum-brown. This consistent preference for such a demure colour gave her an air of restraint that never failed to impress the parents of her pupils.

Faustina went on: 'I'm not expecting bad news.' A deprecating smile touched her lips. 'I have no immediate family, you know.'

'It's nothing of that sort,' Mrs Lightfoot answered. 'To put it bluntly, Miss Crayle, I must ask you to leave Brereton. With six months' pay, of course. Your contract provides for that. But you will leave at once. Tomorrow, at the latest.'

Faustina's bloodless lips parted. 'In mid-term? Mrs Lightfoot, that's – unheard of!'

'I'm sorry. But you will have to go.'

'Why?'

'I cannot tell you.' Mrs Lightfoot sat down at her desk – rosewood, made over from a Colonial spinet. Beside the mauve blotter were copper ornaments and a bowl of oxblood porcelain filled with dark, sweet, English violets.

'And I thought everything was going so beautifully!' Faustina's voice caught and broke. 'Is it something I've done?'

'It's nothing for which you're directly responsible.' Mrs Lightfoot lifted her eyes again – colourless eyes bright as glass. Like glass, they seemed to shine by reflection, as if there were no beam of living light within. 'Shall we say that you do not quite blend with the essential spirit of Brereton?'

'I'm afraid I must ask you to be more specific,' ventured Faustina. 'There must be something definite or you wouldn't ask me to leave in mid-term. Has it something to do with my character? Or my capability as a teacher?'

'Neither has been questioned. It's simply that – well, you do not fit into the Brereton pattern. You know how certain colours clash? A tomato-red with a wine-red? It's like that, Miss Crayle. You don't belong here. That must not discourage you. In another sort of school, you may yet prove useful and happy. But this is not the place for you.'

'How can you tell when I've only been here five weeks?'

'Emotional conflicts develop rapidly in the hothouse atmosphere of a girls' school.' Opposition always lent a sharper edge to Mrs Lightfoot's voice and this was unexpected opposition, from one who had always seemed timid and submissive. 'The thing is so subtle, I can hardly put it into words. But I must ask you to leave – for the good of the school.'

Faustina was on her feet, racked and shaken with the futile anger of the powerless. 'Do you realize how this will affect my whole future? People will think that I've done something horrible! That I'm a kleptomaniac or worse!'

'Really, Miss Crayle. Those are subjects we do not discuss at Brereton.'

'They will be discussed at Brereton – if you ask a teacher to leave in the middle of the fall term without telling her why! Only a few days ago you said my classroom was "most satisfactory". Those were your very words. And now . . . Someone

must be telling lies about me. Who is it? What did she say? I have a right to know if it's going to cost me my job!'

Something came into Mrs Lightfoot's eyes that might have been compassion. 'I am indeed sorry for you, Miss Crayle, but the one thing I cannot give you is an explanation. I'm afraid I haven't thought about this thing from your point of view – until now . . . You see, Brereton means a great deal to me. When I took the school over from Mrs Brereton, after her death, it was dying, too. I breathed life into it. Now our girls come from every state in the Union, even from Europe since the war. We are not just another silly finishing school. We have a tradition of scholarship. It has been said that cultivation is what you remember when you have forgotten your education. Brereton graduates remember more than girls from other schools. Two Brereton girls who meet as strangers can usually recognize each other by the Brereton way of thinking and speaking. Since my husband's death, this school has taken his place in my life. I am not ordinarily a ruthless person but when I am faced with the possibility of your ruining Brereton, I can be completely ruthless.'

'Ruining Brereton?' repeated Faustina, wanly. 'How could I possibly ruin Brereton?'

'Let us say, by the atmosphere you create.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

Mrs Lightfoot's glance strayed to the open window. Ivy grew outside, freckling the broad sill with patches of leafy shadow. Beyond, a late sun washed the faded grass of autumn with thin, clear light. The afternoon of the day and the afternoon of the year seemed to meet in mutual farewell to warmth and brightness.

Mrs Lightfoot drew a deep breath. 'Miss Crayle, are you quite sure you can't – guess?'

There was a moment's pause. Then Faustina rallied. 'Of course I'm sure. Won't you please tell me?'

'I did not intend to tell you as much as I have. I shall say nothing more.'

Faustina recognized the note of finality. She went on in a slow, defeated voice, like an old woman. 'I don't suppose I can get another teaching job, so late in the school year. But if I should get a post next year – can I refer a prospective employer to you? Would you be willing to tell the principal of some other school that I'm a competent art teacher? That it really wasn't my fault I left Brereton so abruptly?'

Mrs Lightfoot's gaze became cold and steady, the gaze of a surgeon or an executioner. 'I'm sorry, but I cannot possibly recommend you as a teacher to anyone else.'

Everything that was childish in Faustina came to the surface. Her pale tan lashes blinked away tears. Her vulnerable mouth trembled. But she made no further protest.

'Tomorrow is Tuesday,' said Mrs Lightfoot briskly. 'You have only one class in the morning. That should give you time to pack. In the afternoon, I believe you are meeting the Greek Play Committee at four o'clock. If you leave immediately afterward you may catch the six twenty-five to New York. At that hour, your departure will attract little attention. The girls will be dressing for dinner. Next morning, in Assembly, I shall simply announce that you have gone. And that circumstances make it impossible for you to return – greatly to my regret. There should be hardly any talk. That will be best for the school and for you.'

'I understand.' Half blinded by tears, Faustina stumbled toward the door.

Outside, in the wide hall, a shaft of sunlight slanted down from a stair window. Two little girls of fourteen were coming

down the stairs – Meg Vining and Beth Chase. The masculine severity of the Brereton uniform merely heightened Meg's feminine prettiness – pink-and-white skin, silver-gilt curls, eyes misty bright as star sapphires. But the same uniform brought out all that was plain in Beth – cropped, mouse-brown hair; sharp, white face; a comically capricious spattering of freckles.

At sight of Faustina, two little faces became bland as milk, while two light voices fluted in chorus: 'Good afternoon, Miss Crayle!'

Faustina nodded mutely, as if she couldn't trust her voice. Two pairs of eyes slid sideways, following her progress up the stair to the landing. Eyes wide, but not innocent. Rather, curious and suspicious.

Faustina hurried. She reached the top, panting. There she paused to listen. Up the stairwell came a tiny giggle, treble as the hysteria of imps or mice.

Faustina moved away from the sound, almost running along the upper hall. A door on her right opened. A maid, in cap and apron, came out and turned to look through a window at the end of the hall. Her sandy hair caught the last light of the sun with a gleam like tarnished brass.

Faustina managed to compose quivering lips. 'Arlene, I'd like to speak to you.'

Arlene jerked violently and swung round, startled and hostile. 'Not now, miss! I have my work to do!'

'Oh . . . Very well. Later.'

As Faustina passed, Arlene shrank back, flattening herself against the wall.

The two little girls had looked after Faustina slyly, with mixed feelings. But this lumpy face was stamped with one master emotion – terror.