

Adventures of the Teen Furies

by MaryJanice Davidson

Hard Shell Word Factory - Young Adult



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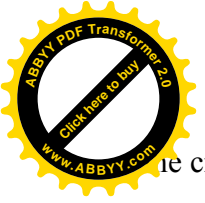
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Dedication

For the Crazy Loonies, the finest and most interesting (take that however you like) friends I'll ever have.

Acknowledgements:

Thank you's aren't necessary—I did it *all myself*. Okay, that's a huge lie. While I did the actual writing unaided, this book wouldn't have been possible without the encouragement and support of my friends and family. Thus, I'd like to thank my family for always backing me up, particularly my husband, Anthony, who willingly read and edited everything I wrote. Special thanks to Barbara Carlson Musch, who gave excellent constructive criticism after reading a mediocre first draft (and who was the impetus for a much better title), and Jessica Lorentz Growette, who thinks everything I write is wonderful—two extremes which made this book better. I'd also like to thank the best teacher on the planet, John Fogarty, for insisting I had a brain, even when I pretended I didn't. He was one of the first to encourage my writing, so



the critics now know whom to blame.

Finally, I'd like to thank Barb, Curt, Jessica, Joe, Marnie, and Todd. They aren't the Furies, but they did inspire them. You guys are the greatest. And I'm not just saying that because I know you'll be reading this.

Chapter 1

MR. LEARY LOOKED up from his clipboard. "Red light coming up," he said, voice trembling slightly.

I wasn't impressed. Cannon Falls only had one light, first of all; second, I'd been driving since I was eight. So I just kept cruising. Leary, that wimp, wouldn't let me turn on the radio so I hummed under my breath.

"Red *light* coming up."

"It's seven blocks away," I said patiently. "On the down side of this hill. I can't even see it yet."

"That's why I was—watch out!"

Four blocks ahead, a Ford escort had pulled into traffic. I sighed; from the back seat I heard Trisha smother a giggle.

"It's all right, Mr. Leary." Soothe, soothe. "I see it. And the high school is only a couple miles from here. We'll be back soon." *You'll be safe again*, was the unspoken end to that statement.

We crested the hill and I could see the lone stoplight. Sure enough, it was red. Of course, by the time I got there, it would be green. Not that—

"Red light, red light!"

—Mr. Leary would take that into consideration.

"Do you want to get in the back seat and stretch out? Maybe pop a couple Valium?" I asked sweetly, holding on to my temper with a mighty effort. "You're awfully pale—*get your foot off the brake!*"

Leary had been riding the passenger side brake, though we were blocks and blocks from an intersection and I was creeping along at a bare twenty-five miles per hour. Nothing took years off a car's brakes like keeping a constant foot on the pedal, and my father had broken me of that habit when he first started teaching me to drive. Consequently, I had no tolerance for it.

"Miss Grouper," Leary said stiffly, after he had hastily complied, "I will not tolerate that tone from any student."

"You've got something against women drivers, doncha, Leary? We make you nervous, right?"

"Certainly not and you will refer to me as *Mister* Leary."

"How 'bout I refer to you as—"



Andrea...” Trisha said warningly from the back.

“Mr. Leary,” I finished wearily, slouching low in the seat. I had whizzed through the green light by now and the high school was in sight. Leary visibly relaxed, though his foot was inching toward the brake again. “I’ll call you Mr. Leary, okay, Mr. Leary?”

“That will be fine, young lady.”

Oh, I hated young lady! How’d he like to be called middle-aged man? But I kept my lip zipped and a smile on my face as I executed a flawless parallel park. Trish clapped from the back seat while Leary scribbled on his clipboard. I moodily unbuckled my seat belt and got out of the car; Trish and Leary clambered out behind me.

“Hmm, now, let’s see, I’ll see you again Wednesday night, Andrea.”

Oboy.

“Excellent work, Patricia, but you might work a bit on your parallel parking; you could pick up some pointers from Andrea and reread that section in your driver’s manual.”

I smiled sweetly; Trisha made a face. She liked being called Patricia about as much as I liked ‘young lady’. “Thanks, Mr. Leary,” she said dutifully.

“Yeah, thanks tons, Mr. Leary.”

“Very well, then, I’ll see you both Wednesday.”

“Bye,” we chorused, watching him stride away. He had perked up considerably once escaping the confines of the car. Poor slob. The teachers had a lottery every autumn to see who’d get stuck teaching the sophomores how to drive. Some took it better than others.

“Well, *Patricia*, we’d best get inside.”

“Knock it off, Andy. And please, *please* be nicer to Mr. Leary. If you lose your temper one more time he’ll refuse to teach you, which means I, your luckless partner, will be screwed out of my driver’s license.”

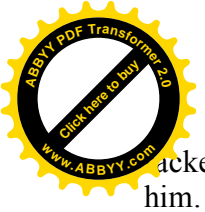
“I hate wimps,” I muttered.

“You’ll hate being chauffeured to prom by your father even more.”

“Yuck, good point.”

“Now come on,” she said, softening her rebuke by smiling the smile that melted males from the age of six to fifty-seven. “Speech practice will be over by the time we get in there.” She took off in the direction of Mr. Berman’s room. I was female and immune to her grin, but followed anyway.

Once inside we were greeted by the usual din. Bermie—Mr. Berman, the speech coach—claimed no one could work in perfect silence, that in the real world people had precious few opportunities to concentrate in utter quiet and the sooner we got used to working amid chaos the better. Myself, I figured the constant



acket was because he simply let everyone do as they pleased. It was one of the reasons most of us adored him.

He was part teacher, part mother, part nag. In particular, he nagged me, but I kind of liked it. He had this nutty idea that I was smarter than I let on—worse, he was trying to convince my parents of the same thing. Luckily, they still saw me as an amiable idiot, but Bernie didn't. He even went so far as to get me enrolled in Critical Thinking—Smart Kids Class, as we dummies called it. That was a laugh, because while I was Critical, I didn't spend a lot of time applying it to my Thinking. A less determined individual would have seen that I wasn't cut out to hang with the brainiacs, but Bernie was stubborn.

He also persuaded me to join the speech team last fall, and to my surprise I turned out to be pretty good at standing before a group of strangers and making a fool of myself. Unfortunately, I applied the same energy to speech that I did to my studies—the least amount of work to get the job done, that was my goal. It drove Bernie nuts that I could be a straight A student if I wasn't so lazy. Likewise, he was tormented by the fact that he could have had another State-quality speaker ... if I wasn't so lazy.

It was a constant battle of wills, and we were pretty evenly matched. He was an intelligent adult with the full resources of the Cannon Falls Junior-Senior High School behind him. I was an adolescent who cherished her spare time, who had unlimited resources for avoiding work. Luckily, he had dozens of other students to worry about, whereas he was my only real nemesis.

That's what he called me once—his “blonde nemesis”. I looked up the word—it meant formidable opponent. I liked that, even if I didn't dare tell him he'd inadvertently made me learn something. Oh, he was a tricky one.

While I was pondering Bernie's sneaky way of making me learn stuff, Meredith Devonshire, my best friend and worst enemy, was on stage performing. She was gesturing dramatically and the other speech team members were watching her every move. The ignorant observer might assume she held them in thrall because her speech was very topical and moving. In truth, everyone was staring at her because she was dressed in one of her bizarre ensembles. Today it was a black leotard, orange running shorts, red tights, green tennis shoes, and her straw-colored hair was caught back in a severe bun. Electric blue eyeglass frames completed the picture. Her dark green eyes blazed out at the audience as she made another imperious gesture.

I used to think I'd go blind if I looked at Meredith too long. The truth is, you don't go blind, but you develop a pretty amazing tolerance for unusual color combinations.

“New glasses,” Trisha muttered, sliding into a seat.

“And new hair.” It had been jet black last month. She must have dyed it back to the original color—a sort of brown-honey blonde—then bleached it. Business as usual with Meredith, which was great. Better than great, because—

“Capitalist dog-pigs!” she spat. “They should crawl in filth! They should spawn more maggots to feed the machine which grinds up our young!”

—well, because Meredith had been having a rough time lately.

There was dazed applause from the audience; Meredith shook her fist and then bowed. Straightening, she looked toward Trisha and me and practically skipped over.



"Nice outfit," I said.

"Nice speech," Trisha said.

"Thanks, you big liars," she retorted. "A, my outfit is far beyond the grasp of your puny artistic capabilities and B, neither of you have the vaguest clue what my speech was about, coming in on the last thirty seconds like you did."

"Probably the usual theme," I said, bored. "Oppression, repression, and angst. Yawn."

In reply Meredith asked sweetly, "How did the driving lesson go? Have you driven Mr. Leary to suicide yet?"

"Don't say that name to me," I grumped. "I can't believe they won't let me test for my license until I've completed this damned course. I've been—"

"—driving since you were eight," Meredith and Trisha said.

"Well, I have."

"Meredith, what are you doing here? I thought you were off the speech team for the year, since your break—I mean, since what happened last month."

I raised my eyebrows. Direct questions weren't Trisha's style. Meredith called her, not incorrectly, the Mistress of Tact. And what Trisha was so delicately referring to was Meredith's nervous breakdown barely four weeks ago. Merry was a sophomore in high school like the rest of us, but she had a head full of worries and last month they'd gotten to be too much for her, culminating in a mad dash outdoors in sub-zero weather without coat or shoes. When we finally tracked her down, she had frostbite on most of her toes and fingers, and it was the briefest of stops from the Emergency Room to the psychiatric ward of the Mayo Clinic. She'd lost the smallest toe on her right foot and we counted her lucky that was all she lost.

"I *am* off the team," Meredith said, smiling. "But I came in for fun. I've been cooped up in the house for days, and now that Grandmother's in the nursing home it's awfully quiet at home."

Trisha and I didn't have anything to say to that. Meredith's grandma going to the nursing home was very bad. She had cancer and wasn't expected to live to see April Fool's Day. Being around her every day, watching her get sicker and sicker was part of the reason Meredith went crazy in the first place.

"At least," Meredith continued, "Mr. Leary's ordeal is over for another week. How are *your* lessons going, Trisha?"

"Fine, I guess." She looked at me unhappily. "But if Andrea keeps losing her temper we're both out of luck."

"Oh, too bad," Meredith said, barely keeping the smirk off her face.

"I don't want to talk about Driver's Ed anymore," I said shortly.

"Want to see my license again?" Meredith asked brightly. "I only got the hard copy yesterd—"



"I've seen it!" I shouted, earning a disapproving glance from Mr. Berman and a guffaw from Trisha. "Shut up, Trish. Are you ready, Merry?"

"Don't call me that. You know I hate that. And yes, I'm ready, though I don't know why I let you talk me into this."

"Into what?" Trisha asked.

"I invited her to my friend Brenda's tonight. I didn't ask you because I knew you had a date," I explained. Trisha had stayed home on a Friday night maybe once since ninth grade ... I think that was the week she'd had intestinal flu. "You can come next time. I'm sure it'll be fun." Fun, of course, was an understatement. I'd been looking forward to tonight since I got Brenda's letter, and I couldn't wait for her to meet Meredith.

Brenda Morrison was my one and only friend from the last school I'd been incarcerated in. I'd cried hard when Mom and Dad told us we were moving, and had been stonily silent to them for a week after their big announcement. We only moved thirty-six miles, but it meant I wouldn't be going to school with Bren anymore—hell, as it was I only saw her once a month or so. We consoled each other with the fact that we would get our licenses this year and then would be able to see each other all the time.

I was anxious for Meredith, my new best friend, to meet Brenda, my old best friend. They didn't have a thing in common, Bren being nice and normal and Merry being a complete fruitcake, but I loved them both and wanted them to hit it off so we could all be friends together.

Trisha decided to stay put for a while and practice her speech for Bermie; Merry and I decided to cruise. I was hungry anyway, and wanted to swing by the Dairy Inn before we headed up to Hastings.

I needed Meredith about eating while we buckled in. Or, I should say, while I buckled in. Meredith refused to wear a seat belt. I told her again and again it was vanity; worse, it was stupid and against the law besides, but she wouldn't hear me. At times Meredith could be as fun as an overindulged four-year-old, and I told her so.

"It's the gambler in me," was her amiable reply as she pulled out of the high school parking lot. "If there's an accident, will I be killed? Will I sail through the windshield with the greatest of ease? Will I live? If I live will it be by God's intervention, or sheer chance? If by God's intervention, then am I to live because I'm here for a specific purpose?"

"You're so weird."

"It seems like cheating, to buckle my seat belt and bilk Fate out of having her way with me."

"You'll change your mind in the hospital after you've been fed through a tube for six months and—hey, stop! You're going past the Dairy Inn!"

Merry shuddered convincingly but pulled in. Her idea of fast food was Red Lobster, anything else was—

"Garbage. How can you eat here?"

"I'm starving. Mom and Dad went fishing this morning and cleaned the place out. The cupboard's bare and it's after three o'clock! I haven't eaten since this morning." Meredith strolled unhurriedly inside while



practically ran up to the counter. “Yes, hello, I'd like two double cheeseburgers, an order of onion rings, a large Coke...” Beside me, Meredith was making muffled retching noises; I ignored her and went on. “...and for dessert I'd like a chocolate ice cream cone dipped in chocolate sprinkles. You want anything, Merry?”

“A *small* vanilla cone.”

“Right, and we'll take that here.” I forked over the cash; we got our food and sat down. I made short work of mine; I love fast food. Even watching Meredith go through her Dairy Inn Ritual didn't dampen my pleasure.

She would delicately nip at her vanilla cone (she was the only person I knew who chewed ice cream) and occasionally help herself to one of my onion rings. Carefully balancing her cone on the table, she would firmly press an onion ring between two napkins to soak up the grease, and then take five minutes to eat the tiny, crushed thing; in that form it looked more like a battered tapeworm than anything else. Sometimes I couldn't watch her. Today I was too hungry to care.

“You're almost as lean as I,” Meredith said, watching me eat with an expression of awed revulsion, “and I can't understand it. When was the last time you had a fresh vegetable? Or a piece of fruit?”

“Onion rings are vegetables,” I said, polishing off my cone and burping gently. “Totally off the subject—”

“Oh, Lord, here we go.”

“—I told Brenda all about you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Hope you don't mind. It's just that while you were—uh—”

“Losing my mind?” she prompted sweetly.

“Yes. Bren was the only one I could really talk to about it. But she's not a gossip like Trisha; she wouldn't talk that stuff around.”

“Not a gossip like Trisha?” Merry raised her eyebrows and I flushed. I was as much a gossip as Trish, probably worse, in fact. I loved to talk, especially about other people. And for the first time in my life, I had other people to talk *about*. “How fortunate for me.”

“Like I said,” I continued, ignoring the insinuation, “Brenda wouldn't talk that stuff around. Besides, who would she tell? No one we know. But I wanted you to know that she's heard quite a bit about what happened over the last few months.”

Meredith considered that. Then, “I suppose I don't mind too much. From what you've told me she sounds pleasant. She won't make fun.”

No, Bren certainly wouldn't make fun. She was much too nice. Way nicer than me, super-smart—almost as smart as Merry—and a killer artist. There wasn't a thing in creation she couldn't sketch in about thirty seconds.



now for the tricky part. “Bren said something about having people over to play a game,” I said, so-o-o casually. “Since I moved last year she's made some new friends and she wants me—us, I mean—to meet them.”

Meredith froze, the last bite of her cone stopping an inch from her lips. I feigned innocence and ordered an ice cream sandwich to soothe my nerves. Merry hated strangers, hated meeting new people, hated parties. Even before the breakdown she'd been something of a recluse. The post-breakdown Meredith was morbidly afraid people would find out she was seeing a psychiatrist twice a week, that she entertained thoughts of killing herself, that she had gone crazy over her grandmother and been pulled out of high school, that she was using private tutors in order to keep up with the rest of us.

She once said to me, “I'm a cat surrounded by jackals.” She'd always felt the odd man out, and being around other people made her feel more alone, more different. She avoided pep fests, rallies, parties—anything where the number of people in the room was greater than four; the only group gathering she tolerated was speech practice. Part and parcel of her illness, I figured.

But I was tired of her living like a monk, avoiding everyone but Trisha, me, and her parents. Hardly ever leaving the house except for speech practice. Hell, she wouldn't even go to the movies. It wasn't healthy, and I'd had enough.

“Don't look at me like that,” I said sharply. “It's a little get-together, not an inquisition. It'll be fun.” I hoped. I couldn't imagine Brenda had taken up with a bunch of jerks in my absence, but you never knew. After all, she'd taken up with me. “You know—fun? Remember fun?”

“You tricked me.”

“How could *I* trick *you*? As you never get tired of telling me, you're about five times smarter than I am. Come on, don't be mad,” I begged. “You've been cooped up since before Christmas. It's not the Dark Ages anymore, they don't make psychiatric patients hide from the light. Besides, you're talking like I did this to you to be mean. *We'll have a good time*. I wouldn't be dragging you all the way to Hastings—”

“An interminable twenty miles,” Merry said dryly.

“—if I didn't think you wouldn't enjoy yourself. Give it a try. Please?”

Her green-eyed glare bored through all the layers of my brain and I shriveled in my seat. “You're not so smart,” she sneered, and I relaxed. “Finish your sandwich. And wipe your mouth, there's chocolate everywhere.”

I stuck out my tongue, showing her even more chocolate, and she threw her napkin at me.

Chapter 2

WE PULLED INTO Brenda's driveway and Meredith, despite her misgivings, was appreciably silent. Brenda lived in the country, and snowy forests rose up on either side of the house, which was a white split-level. Meredith loved trees and there were plenty, plus Brenda's brothers had built two tree houses, one in the front yard, one in back. Good ones, too, with furniture and books and other stuff inside ... when the weather was nice Bren and I had occasionally slept in them.

“You should see this place in the summertime,” I said. “It's awesome.”



Meredith grunted and pulled the emergency brake; with a jerk we came to a stop, and I unbuckled and got out. “C'mon, we'll go in through the basement. That's where everyone's supposed to be.”

“Great,” she muttered. She clasped her elbows with mittened hands and followed me. No coat, of course. Her psychiatrist was trying different kinds and combinations of medications to combat her depression and suicidal impulses. It was a trial-by-error situation and Merry had been suffering a variety of side effects. The last stuff had given her the nearly constant urge to eat dirt. The current stuff gave her frequent hot flashes and she ran around in T-shirts and such these days, to keep from collapsing from internal heat. Which wouldn't be too bad, I guess, except January in Minnesota wasn't exactly balmy.

“I can't believe I let you talk me into this.”

“Will you relax?” I spoke heartily, covering my own nervousness. I hadn't seen Brenda since Thanksgiving, and was a little worried about meeting her new friends. “It'll be fun.”

So saying, I banged hard on the basement door and shouldered it open, past some slight resistance.

“Ouch, dammit!”

We stepped in and looked down. Lying full length on the concrete floor was a boy my own age, glaring up at me.

“Sorry.”

“Dammit!” he said again, his voice spiraling into upper octaves. I realized with a start that his voice was higher than mine. Almost higher than Merry's. And familiar. Eerily familiar. “Give a guy a chance to get to the *door*, you silly bitch.”

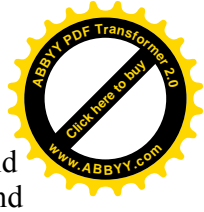
“I said I was sorry.” He was, unfortunately, quite good-looking in a ghoulish sort of way. He had the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen on a boy; grey-green and framed with long black lashes. His short hair was quite dark, nearly black, and his pale skin was a startling contrast. He had the long thin fingers of a pianist, or a surgeon, his nose was a blade and his lips were full and sneery. I'd seen the phrase “aquiline features” in plenty of books but never knew what it meant until now. “You're so scrawny I didn't see you there.”

“Andrea...” Meredith murmured reprovingly.

I bent over and pulled him to his feet, fairly effortlessly. I was a good three inches taller than he was, and probably about ten pounds heavier, he was pretty thin. And I couldn't help but notice he took the opportunity to sneak a peak down my shirt. Too bad there wasn't much for him to see—I was tall and blonde, but didn't have much in the way of boobs. Yet.

“I really am sorry,” I said, pulling my coat closed. “There's not much to you ... I guess I thought the door was caught on something.” Something small and inconsequential, rather like a cockroach. “My apologies.” There, that was three I'm sorries in less than a minute. A record for me. He ought to be satisfied.

“Yes, I can see you're all choked up about it, you barbarian.” He said that last mildly enough, and his voice was finally climbing down from the rafters. He brushed himself unconcernedly across the ass and leered at me. “Next time it'll be *your* butt in the dirt.”



“Oh, stop sniveling,” Merry said from behind me. We both turned and I saw the guy's eyes narrow and gleam. The reason why was immediately apparent. Meredith often went braless as well as coatless, and her leotard was clingy and displayed to both of us that, yes indeed, it certainly was cold out. “Since Andrea isn't about to remember her manners and introduce me, my name is Meredith Devonshire.”

“Well, Meredith, I can't resist commenting on your lovely pair of—youch!” He glared at me, rubbing his arm where I had poked him, then pinched me back, hard enough to sting. This creep was like the brother I'd never had, or wanted. And why did he seem so familiar?

“Terry Flanagan,” Creepboy said, not even granting her the courtesy of looking her in the face. No, his gaze was riveted to Merry's leotard. Amazingly, Meredith didn't seem to mind. Or notice.

A shout from the corner of the room distracted us: “Andy! Oh, you're here! And you must be Merry, I'm Brenda Mor—”

“Don't call me that, *please* don't call me that,” she begged. “Andrea coined that dreadful nickname for me last year and I can't get her to stop. Now don't you start.”

“MerryMerryMerryMerryMerryMerry...” From el creepo.

Meredith sniffed at him and took off her mittens. “Is there somewhere I can put these?”

“You can shove them down my pants,” he offered politely.

“Okay, that's *it!*” I said, enraged on Meredith's behalf. “You're—”

“Shut up, Terry, you're being obnoxious,” Brenda said, shoving past him and throwing her arms around me. “I'm so glad to see you again! It's been ages! Weeks!”

“Months!” I said, hugging her back. She was so tiny, I had to bend down. About Trisha's height, she had dark brown hair pulled back in what I assumed was a perpetual ponytail. I had never seen it down around her shoulders. Never. She wore thick glasses and had beautiful blue eyes, but, more importantly, Brenda was stacked. Unlike most of us, she actually had a figure. Boobs, waist, hips ... it was enough to make you ill.

“Meredith, please don't mind Terry. He does that stuff to all the girls, he's a *total* pervert.”

“I know you are,” Terry said mildly, “but what am I?”

“He's charming,” Merry said coolly. “In a boorish, revolting sort of way, of course.”

I snickered. Good one, Meredith.

“Come say hello to the others,” Brenda said, pulling me toward the middle of the room. Two boys were sitting at a big table, staring at us with unabashed curiosity. “Guys, this is Andrea, I told you about her, she went to school with us last year...” Brenda gulped for air, so excited her words were tripping over one another. “...but I don't think she met any of you before she moved.”

“And there's a good reason for that,” I said, eyeing Terry, who was eyeing Meredith.



And this is her friend Meredith. Meredith, Andy, this is Kyle and George.”

George said something polite—probably “Nice boobs, Meredith” but I didn't hear it. I was staring at Kyle, who had risen to shake our hands.

It's not that he was devastatingly handsome, though he wasn't hard on the eyes, that was for sure. He just had this—this *presence*, this tall, dark, quiet presence that made me want to alternately shock him and hug him. He was two or three inches taller than me, about six feet, so right away I found him attractive. Since kindergarten I'd towered over everybody in my class; this year was actually the first I had been running into boys my own age who were taller than I. Meredith had explained about growth patterns and puberty and boys finally catching up to girls but this was the first year I was seeing the evidence with my own eyes. Anyway, Kyle was tall, with short dark hair that fell casually across his forehead, warm brown eyes, and a terrific smile. In fact, he was smiling now. In *fact*, I was grinning back at him like an idiot.

“Nice to meet you, Meredith,” he said in a pleasantly deep voice. And what did he mean, nice to meet you, Meredith? Hello? *Was I in the room?*

I felt my eyes widen and they must have just *blazed* out at him because he looked startled and said, “And you, too, Andy. You probably don't remember me but we had choir together when you lived here.”

“We did?” I studied him hard but he didn't look even remotely familiar, dammit. “No, I'm sorry. I don't remember you.”

“Well, I remember *you*,” Terry said shortly. “We had wood shop together. I was the—”

“Oh my God!” I cried, finally recognizing him. “You were that horrible scrawny pale little kid in the corner who—”

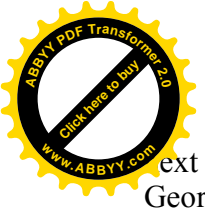
“—everybody hated,” Brenda, George, Terry, and Kyle said in unison.

I stared at Terry. In the last couple years he'd gotten taller and had filled out a bit in the shoulders, but I remembered him now, oh, yes. He was very likely the only kid in class who was consistently in more trouble than me. Everyone was always looking for an excuse to beat the crap out of him, not so much because he was a nerd but because his mouth kept getting him in trouble. He had a smartass remark for every occasion, but didn't have the size to back it up. I remember he tormented me quite a lot until I punched him in the stomach; then he kept his distance but called his insults across the room to me at the top of his voice. His drilling, penetrating, shrieky voice. Like Kyle, Terry's voice had changed, too, but he could apparently draw on his pre-puberty tone with minimal effort.

“You got bigger,” I said, looking him up and down. And it was too bad. He was nearly my height and I didn't like that one bit. “Not *much* bigger, though.” I smiled at him. He smiled back, and showed me the tip of his tongue.

“Are you ready to play now?” the other guy—what was his name? George something—asked querulously. For the first time I got a look at him. I'd been so busy drooling over Kyle and trying not to spit on Terry that I'd forgotten there was someone else in the room. This one was short—little taller than Brenda!—with baby fine blonde hair, rimless spectacles, and pale blue eyes. He was nicely dressed; everything was just so and crisply pressed, even his jeans, and I had the impression that here was a guy who maybe took himself a little too seriously. Or at least took his wardrobe a little too seriously.

I nodded a hello to George and tried to remember where Kyle had been sitting so I could snag the seat



next to him. But Brenda grabbed that one, Terry moved to the head of the table, and I was left next to George, with Meredith on my other side. Phooey.

“What are you guys playing?” I asked, unzipping my coat and getting comfy. Several pairs of dice, pens, pencils, papers, and various booklets were scattered all over the table amidst bowls of pretzels and popcorn, and cans of Surge.

“Villains and Vigilantes,” George said, ooching his chair closer to mine to make room for Terry, who didn't need the room. Hmm. “You played before?”

“No, never. What is it, like D&D?”

Terry snorted. “Yeah, right. Villains and Vigilantes are to Dungeons and Dragons what graduate school is to kindergarten.”

“Oh, very good,” Meredith said while I glared daggers at El Creepo. Someone couldn't wait to start scoring points, that was for sure. It was what I had always loathed about him. How could it have taken me so long to place the new, taller Terry?

Eventually, with Brenda, Kyle, and George constantly interrupting, the game was explained to Merry and me. You decided if you were going to be a good guy or a bad guy (Thus the name Villains and Vigilantes, I figured.), made up a name for your character, gave him powers, sent him on missions and, depending on the roll of the dice, he succeeded or failed. For example, Brenda was a good guy, her character's name was Anya and her power was telekinesis. (“Telekinesis?” I asked. Terry rolled his eyes. “That means she can move things just by thinking about it, stupid.”) Terry's character was a bad guy, his name was Black Flame, and he was pyrokinetic. (“That means—He can set things on fire just by thinking about it, yeah, yeah, I got it.”) Kyle was a bad guy, his name was Shadowbyte and he was a cyborg with super-strength and intelligence.

George's character was a good guy named Ninjaboy, (At that point a small silence fell over us as I tried not to giggle. Ninjaboy? The silence was broken by Merry's gentle, “Was that the best you could do?”) who, of course, was a ninja. And a boy.

“Yeah, he can kick ass,” George enthused.

“When he can reach the asses,” Terry returned promptly, then practically fell on the floor laughing.

“Terry thinks short jokes are the height of wit,” Brenda said dryly.

“Ooh, good pun,” Meredith said.

That left Merry and me to think up characters and powers. Kyle showed us a list of powers; the name, sex, and what your character looked like was up to the individual. Brenda, George, Kyle, and Terry's characters looked and acted like they themselves did, so Merry and I followed suit.

I glanced over the list of powers and passed it to Merry, who didn't touch it. “You poor chumps can call my character Stiletto,” I announced. “She's a good guy whose primary power is to hit whatever she aims for. Period.”

“You mean, like, with guns and stuff?” George asked.



Yeah, like, with guns and stuff.” I was trying to ignore the fact that his leg was pressing against mine. I assumed he wasn't conscious of it but it was starting to get on my nerves. Across from me, Brenda was busily sketching and in a minute she showed us: a slim, leggy blonde with my hair and face, dressed in a skin-tight black bodysuit, a revolver strapped to her hip, a bow and quiver at her back, and a knife in a sheath at her calf. “Yeah! Perfect!”

“This character ... you can give her any powers you want and you pick ... well, you seem to me to be a very physical person,” Kyle murmured.

You have no idea, Kyle baby.

So Stiletto and I were all set. I was getting into the spirit of this, and was hoping Merry wouldn't ruin things by tilting her nose in the air and saying something cold.

“Do you have an idea what you'd like to be, Meredith?” Brenda asked politely, pencil poised. Merry still hadn't picked up the list, she just sat there with her arms crossed and looked at us.

“If you want some pointers...” Terry leaned forward, eager to help.

“Mental domination.”

A small silence.

“Mental domination,” Meredith said again. “Agnostia can bend *anyone* to her will, given enough time.”

“Agnostia?” Terry squeaked.

“Like agnostic,” I explained. “Can you say agnostic?”

“Yes, and unlike some blonde bimbos, *I* know what it means.”

“Agnostia and Stiletto ... isn't that cute,” George said, pressing against me like a cat wanting a scratch.

We spent the next two hours polishing our characters. Rolling the dice to see exactly how strong they were in which types of situations, what weapons they were allowed, how smart they were, blah blah blah ... it took forever. I couldn't see why we didn't just start the game. And Kyle, Brenda, George, and Terry took the whole thing so seriously—sometimes their arguments made me fear they would fall upon each other like starving cannibals.

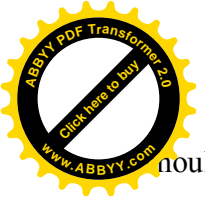
“No, no, no! Ninjaboy can't teleport!” Terry screamed, his pale face suffusing with color. “He's a ninja, not a sorcerer!”

“Calm down, buddy, you're going to rupture something,” I said. “It's just a game.”

“He's right, though, George,” Brenda said. “You can't have a physical power and a magical one. That's against the rules.”

“Oh, fine, don't have a heart attack over it,” George said sulkily. “Ninjaboy can still kick everyone's ass.”

“So he doesn't need to teleport,” Meredith said reasonably. “Terry, do you want a Valium? Maybe you



ould lie down for a while.”

“I hate it when people screw around with the status quo,” he said.

“Take two Valiums, then,” I said. “I can't believe you can get this worked up over—”

“Don't say it,” Terry warned.

“—a stupid game.”

“If you think it's so stupid, why are you here?”

“Because I have absolutely nothing better to do,” I snapped back, then had to apologize when I saw the hurt look on Brenda's face.

This sort of thing went on for quite some time. So I was pretty annoyed when, once everything had finally been settled to everyone's satisfaction, Terry and Brenda started putting the dice, pencils, and papers away.

“What? After all that and we're not even going to play?”

“It's after midnight, Andy,” Meredith said through a yawn. With a start I looked at my watch and realized she was right.

“So you guys will come over next week and start the game with us?” Terry asked Meredith, pretending he was interested in both of us coming back.

“I imagine so,” she said airily, pulling on her mittens. “It's certainly an intriguing idea, giving oneself powers and looking for trouble ... we'll see how it goes. You are spending the night, Andrea?”

“Yup. Thanks for the ride.” I leaned in close. “Told you we were gonna have fun.” This was a guess on my part, I'd assumed she had enjoyed herself. Sometimes it was hard to tell.

She wrinkled her nose at me, fighting a smile. I loved it when I was right, and she didn't want to give me more ammunition than necessary. She shook hands all around, saying, “It was fairly tolerable to meet you all,” and I knew she'd liked them.

“I'll walk you out,” I said, stepping forward, and was rudely jarred back into place by Terry's elbow.

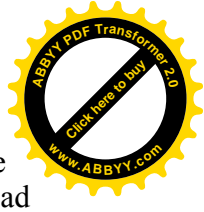
“No, *I'll* walk you out,” he said, giving me a good glare so I would obey.

“Okay, okay,” I muttered as they left.

Brenda stared after them, open-mouthed.

“Wow, Terry's really gone on your friend,” George said.

“Yeah.” She'll cut him off at the knees pretty soon, fella, so don't get your hopes up. I knew Meredith had no idea that Terry was flirting outrageously with her, and once she realized it she'd tell him n-o, NO, before he even had a chance to pucker. They didn't call her the Ice Queen around school for nothing.



It would be amazing if *two* of us found true love tonight,” George said softly, and I stared at him. He didn't mean...? He *couldn't* mean ... Naw. I was definitely imagining things. The guy was at least a head shorter than me, after all. How could he be interested in the blonde beanstalk?

“Meredith seems ... interesting,” Brenda said, smiling. “I'm glad you talked her into coming. I wanted to meet who you took up with after leaving me in Hastings.”

I snorted. “Yeah, leaving Hastings for the glorious golden streets of Cow-Town, USA.”

“We all liked her,” Kyle said politely. He had his hands in his pockets past the wrist (My, what deep pockets you have ... oh, pay attention, Andrea!) and was gently rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. “The game next week will be something to look forward to.”

“Huh,” I said. This I hadn't expected at all. They were certainly an open-minded group. Meredith effortlessly antagonized just about everyone. Her ice-cold demeanor and haughty way of talking was a complete turn-off to just about everyone we went to school with. But these guys liked her on short acquaintance, and that was absolutely *unheard* of. Trisha'd never believe it when I told her.

The door crashed open, cutting us off from further speculation, and Terry bounded in. His deathly pale face actually had some color in it, no doubt from the cold, unless he'd trapped a rat in the garage and sucked it dry of blood. “All right, Andy,” he said, panting from his exertions. “Spill it. Tell me everything about Meredith. And don't waste any of my time talking about yourself.”

“Uh ... Terry...” Brenda began. She knew, of course, that Merry was under psychiatric care, that she was still getting over a breakdown and the end was very definitely not in sight, but I had sworn her to secrecy and she was in a bind.

“Don't expend any energy in that direction, fella,” I said, smiling happily at the thought of crushing his good mood. “I can pretty much guarantee she's not interested.”

“We'll see,” he said. “And do you have to look so happy about it?”

Chapter 3

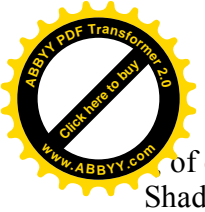
HE SWUNG AT me and I ducked, stepped into his reach, and kicked his feet out from under him. I placed my foot gently but firmly across his throat and said, “No, really, I'm not interested in contributing to your charity but my friend is. Give him your wallet, B.F.”

Black Flame sneered at me. “Aren't you funny. All right, buster, spill it. Did Kyle send you after us?” The man at our feet made some sort of inarticulate gargling sound and turned an interesting shade of indigo. “Get your foot off his throat, Stiletto, I can't understand a word he's saying.”

I complied doubtfully. Our would-be assassin gasped for air and said, “I don' know no Kyle.”

“Thank you,” I said, and put my foot back. “There, you see? He don' know no—”

“Shadowbyte, idiot! Did Shadowbyte send you after us? Damn, I shouldn't have double-crossed him,” Black Flame fretted. In his agitation smoke was curling up and out of his ears and nose. “I never thought he'd find out I kept the money, how could he find out?”



of course, kept prudently silent but as everyone knew, there was little you could keep from Shadowbyte. On short acquaintance I had already figured that out, so what *had* Black Flame been thinking? We weren't even supposed to be working together—he was a bad guy, partners with the baddest of all bad guys, and I was the new good guy on the block. But I'd seen him get set upon by several thugs, so I stepped in to give him a hand. Four unconscious bodies littered the filthy alley, and our lone source of information was looking up at us with terrified eyes.

“This guy can't tell us what he doesn't know,” I said reasonably, cutting Black Flame off from his temper tantrum before it really got started. “Why don't I ask Agnostia to come have a chat with him? She'll get him to ‘fess up and you can decide what to do from there.’”

“I won't do it,” Agnostia said from the shadows. She'd been trying to coax an alley cat into the light and had given up. She stepped out and I saw Black Flame's jaw go slack as he saw what she was wearing: a sea-green sweater dress that fell just past mid-thigh, dark blue fishnet pantyhose, and purple ankle boots. Her hair was a dusky pink, nicely setting off her black Lone Ranger mask. “I won't do it, so you needn't bother asking.”

“Why not?” I said, exasperated. Black Flame was beyond speech but I'd had more practice recovering from Agnostia's costumes. “It won't hurt him. He's just a brainless thug, anyway, whose only part in this is to impart information. He's like one of those red-shirt security guys on Star Trek with three lines to say before he gets wasted, or sent away. ‘Captain, we've arrived at the planet’. ‘Captain, I'd better go in there. You stay here.’ You know. So like I said, it won't hurt him.”

“It certainly will hurt him. If I mentally dominate him into telling us what he knows it will violate his civil rights. I—I have to sleep at night, you know.”

“It's just a game!” Black Flame cried, having finally found his tongue.

“All life is a game,” was the unperturbed reply, “and must be played and lived accordingly.”

Black Flame groped for something horrible to say, something that would put his point across while doling out a healthy dose of humiliation for the offending party. His face got redder and redder as he struggled to find an appropriate put-down, insult, shut-her-up phrase. Agnostia had that effect on people. She'd get you so mad, so frustrated, you couldn't *think*. You just wanted to sputter and, when you finally sucked in enough breath, scream.

Effortlessly, or pretty much, I took charge. “Observe, Black Lung or whatever you call yourself,” I murmured. “Observe and get a lesson in Handling Agnostia 101. Agnostia,” I said louder, “you're absolutely right. You *would* be violating his civil rights. Thank God you're here to enlighten us. Don't go near him. Black Flame and I will take care of everything. You know as good guys we can't kill anybody in this game except the main players. But I can start breaking things and shooting things off. And Black Flame, here, as a bad guy, can start setting things on fire ... things like arms, legs, genitalia. So one way or the other, we'll get this guy to talk.” A bubbling, despairing scream rose up and was promptly cut off as I stomped on the guy's throat. “You don't have to do a thing, but by not helping us, you're not helping *him*. Ready, B.F.?” I asked with a sweet smile.

“A guy could fall in love,” was Terry's grateful response. The color began to leave his face and he looked normal—as normal as he ever did, I mean. Standing as close to him as I was, I could feel the air around him crisping the hairs on my arm. He was getting ready to fry this guy, all right. And that would be just too—



stop!”



—bad.

“Don't you two go near him,” Agnostia said furiously. “Someone's got to be this game's conscience.”

“Good, so get him to tell us what we need to know. Ask him if—”

“No! And you won't touch him. You—you're blind. Both of you!”

Darkness, like God had turned off the cosmic light switch. I groped in front of me and encountered Agnostia's bony shoulders. I shook them, hard, and yelled into what I hoped was her face, “Dammit, Agnostia! You can't mentally dominate your teammates! We're supposed to work *together*.”

“Hold on to her,” Black Flame panted, stumbling into me. “I'm going to blow her up, as soon as I find her. She suckered us both.”

I let go of Agnostia like she was hot (and if Black Flame had his way, she soon would be) and shoved her away from him. I didn't dare touch him, even to tackle him, because of the heat he was giving off, but thanks to that same heat I had a rough idea where he was. So I stuck out a foot and tripped him, startling him into releasing a giant fireball which incinerated all of us.

* * * *

“OH, FOR GOD'S sake!” I said, disgusted.

“What do you mean, we're dead?” Terry's voice rose to an outraged scream. “We just started!”

Kyle shrugged, smiling. “Sorry, Ter. You were set upon by thugs, Stiletto only left one conscious to impart information, you tried to talk Merry—”

“Don't start,” she warned.

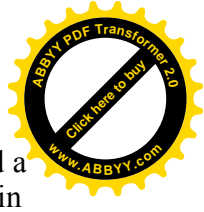
“—sorry. *Meredith* wouldn't have anything to do with you, and to save the nameless thug she mentally dominated both of you into thinking you were blind. Andy tripped Terry to get him away from Meredith and that triggered a fireball which killed you all, in...” He checked his watch. “Less than five minutes. Game's over ... at least for you three.”

“I've never ... *ever* ... been killed so fast. I can't believe this!” Terry was still shrieking, and I was getting a headache. If his voice climbed any higher, only dogs would hear him. “You two are a menace! You stay away from me in future V&V games, I mean it!”

“Nice job, Merry,” I said.

She looked entirely too pleased with herself. Not at all repentant. “That will teach you to take the law into your own hands.”

“Take the law ... hello? The game's called *Villains* and *Vigilantes*. Get it? If you're not one, you're the other. You—you're—” I could feel my face getting as red as Black Flame's had, and I sputtered for words to make her see reason.



“Everybody just chill,” Brenda said, slapping her notebook closed. During the game she had sketched a scene from the alley and showed me: Stiletto with her foot on the thug's throat, gun in hand, her face in shadow, looking sexy and dangerous. Black Flame standing near her, frowning, the air around him shimmering with heat, and Agnostia stepping out of the shadows holding a scrawny alley cat. I loved the way Brenda drew; it was a reflection of how she saw the world. No one was ugly. Everyone was strong. “Hear me? Just calm down. It was only for practice, so Meredith and Andy could see what playing was like. We started so late anyway—”

“We had to wait half an hour for the Cannon Falls faction to show up,” Terry grumped. “A mistake we're definitely not going to repeat.”

I crumpled up a piece of paper and bounced it off his forehead.

“Anyway,” Bren was saying, “why don't we quit for the night and go sledding? It's warm out!”

I shuddered. Warm to the Minnesotans meant above freezing. Which, to give them some credit, *was* warm, for January in the wastelands. Warm winter weather to me, born on a Mississippi Air Force base, was anything above fifty. It was after ten p.m. and the idea of going sledding in the pitch dark in freezing cold didn't sound terribly safe.

“Great!” Meredith said, green eyes sparkling. I shuddered again. I'd seen that look before. As far as Meredith was concerned, anything a little dangerous was something to immediately try, and never mind the consequences. In her head, she was halfway there.

“I'm game,” Terry said. With a start, I realized they were *all* game. What a bunch of lunatics!

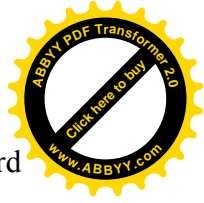
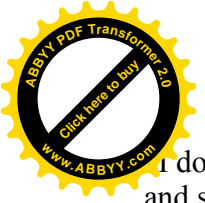
* * * *

A FEW MINUTES later we were all standing atop the hill behind Brenda's house. We couldn't see the bottom. Not because it was so high, though it was a pretty respectable sledding hill, but because the outside lights didn't illuminate the yard that far. Meredith and Brenda were dragging sleds and a saucer over, Meredith bulky in a coat borrowed from one of Brenda's brothers. Of course Merry hadn't brought her own, but Bren wouldn't let her leave the house without one. Defiantly, Merry had left it unzipped and it kept flapping open.

“Who's going first?” Kyle asked mildly. I had noticed he was always very calm, very controlled. I'd never heard him raise his voice. This made me nervous, because I wondered at his calm, and it also made me want to try and *make* him raise his voice. I'd never met someone like him and, to be perfectly honest, he fascinated the hell out of me.

“We are,” George said aggressively. I looked around to see what he meant by ‘we’, when he grabbed my arm and hauled me over to one of the sleds. Oh. Pretty strong, too, for such a small guy. “Here, sit down,” he said, and, still very surprised, I did. He oohed in behind me, wrapping his arms around my middle, and Terry leaned in to give us a push.

“Oof! Jeez, how much do you weigh?” The only thing his pushing did was shove George more firmly into my back. I groaned as I tried to resist being folded in half. Luckily, George didn't seem to mind. I was definitely starting to wonder about that boy. Actually, I was starting to wonder about all of them. One lunatic in my life was enough; five was too much to ask of anyone. “Kyle, give me a hand, Andy weighs a ton.”



"I do not!" George's grip tightened and I gasped for breath, then gasped again when we surged forward and sped down the hill with a dizzying whoosh. We picked up speed and I heard myself screaming happily, barely heard George yelling in my ear, and then we saw the trees come rushing up so we bailed. Snow went down my front, down my back, and up my nose. George tumbled past me as I got to my feet, shaking myself like a dog.

"Look out!" Merry screamed. Still wiping the snow from my eyes, I looked up to see another sled arrowing toward me, Terry deliberately steering it in my direction. Behind him, Merry and Brenda were yelling at me to get clear.

With minimal effort I jumped aside, but I forgot to look around for George and I plowed into him, knocking him over just as he'd gained his feet. There were yells and shrieks as the other three all leaned to the side and dumped the sled. I bent over and scooped up a handful of snow.

"That was great!" Bren gasped, staggering past the sled. Behind her, after brushing snow off her shirt, Meredith furtively zipped her coat.

"This hill's not so good for sledding," George fretted. "The trees come up so fast, if you're not paying attention you can really get hurt."

"Yeah!" Meredith said, smiling happily. "Let's go again!"

Terry trudged over, pulling the sled behind him. "I'm not going down with you again, Brenda," he complained. "You just about took my ear off with all that yell—mmph!" He staggered back and clawed at his face, but I'd thrown a pretty big snowball and it would be a while before he could wipe it all off. I marched over and tripped him, then let life imitate art by putting my boot gently on his throat.

"You tried to run me over," I said pleasantly.

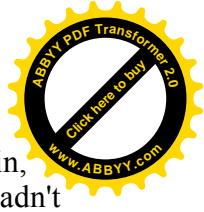
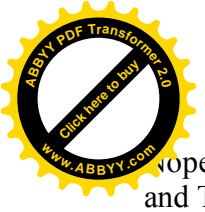
"People will say you two are in love," Meredith snickered. She sank to her knees in the snow beside Terry and wiped his face so his gorgeous, romance novel heroine eyes were blazing up at me. Blazing—no. Sparkling, *gleaming*, with suppressed laughter. The swine was like a Timex—he took a licking and kept on ticking. In disgust I took my foot off his throat but not fast enough to avoid what happened next. He seized my ankle and, with a wiry strength I never suspected he possessed, shoved me off balance and followed it up with a body-slam into the snow.

I lay there, the breath forced out of my lungs, and waited for the sky to stop spinning. My near-loathing of the boy was being replaced with grudging respect. He was a wise-ass, yes, and aggravating beyond belief and rude and not tolerant of others, but I couldn't help but appreciate someone who shared so many of my own odious qualities.

Six or seven years later his face appeared above mine. He was grinning that nasty grin but I didn't say anything, not feeling particularly witty at the moment.

"Told you it'd be your butt in the dirt before long," he said, extending a hand and helping me up. We started trudging up the hill, which was always the worst part of sledding, and I could see Kyle's silhouette at the top, patiently waiting for us.

I wondered how I could manage to sled with Kyle. I wondered if he would squeeze me tightly, as George had. Or maybe I'd sit behind him and get to do the squeezing.



Nope. Bren had beaten us up there and was settling in behind Kyle. So I went down with George again, and Terry and Meredith crammed themselves into the saucer, Merry going down on Terry's lap. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I'd never have believed it. Maybe she thought of him as an honorary girl. Certainly she wasn't—she couldn't be—attracted to him. Could she? Naw.

Next time, Terry made Meredith lie face down on the sled, then he climbed on top of her, saying over his shoulder, “To cut down on wind resistance.” Yeah, right. I still couldn't believe she was putting up with all this. And ... maybe I was a little jealous. I wasn't used to her getting so much positive attention. Brenda's friends were certainly...

“Let's try that, Andrea,” George said.

...amorous.

“Uh—” I said, conscious of Kyle's gaze on me. If I wanted *anybody* to climb on top of me ... but George was already hustling me over to the other sled. “Uh—actually, you lie down first. I'm bigger than you, anyway.” He winced at that, but lay down and I squashed my bony frame down on his smaller, lighter one. There was a muffled snort behind me but when I looked Kyle was wearing his usual bland expression.

I wriggled around to get comfortable and heard a muffled groan from George. Of pain or pleasure, I had no idea, and I wasn't going to stay on top of him long enough to find out. “Give us a shove, okay, Kyle?”

“Sure,” he said, but before he touched us I heard a whoop, and then a crushing weight forced the breath from my lungs, making my ribs creak in protest.

“Let's cruise, baby!” Terry screamed in my ear. George groaned again, very definitely in pain, but Kyle was shoving us down the hill by then. I heard him snort again and say, “Huh, it's an Andy sandwichhhhh...” and then we were out of earshot. I hoped Terry was paying attention because I couldn't see for shit and the trees would be coming up any second. Besides, I was laughing so hard, even if I could see it wouldn't have done any good. Terry was laughing, too, high and shrill like a loon, and I could feel his bony hips grinding into my ass, more uncomfortable than sensual.

“Lean!” Terry screamed.

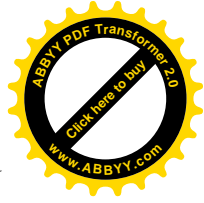
“Which way?” I yelled back.

Beneath me, George was moaning: “I'm gonna puke, ohmyGod I'm gonna puke I'm gonna puuuuke...”

“Bail!” Terry screamed, rolling off me. I rolled the other way and we abandoned poor George to his fate. Incredibly, amazingly, he shot through the trees instead of into one of them, and by then the sled was slowing.

Terry was rolling around in the snow, holding his belly and laughing hysterically. I stomped over and tried to pelt him with another snowball but he rolled away. In truth I didn't try very hard, and my face was starting to hurt from smiling so hard. George staggered up, very pale, and aimed a kick for Terry's ribs. That one he couldn't avoid, and Terry quit laughing and gasped for breath.

“Jerk,” George grunted. “Come on, Andy.” He turned and started up the hill, but I lingered long enough to pull Terry out of the snow. As I expected, the big goober was smirking and unrepentant, though George might have been seriously hurt. And I would not would not *would not* laugh, no matter how much



wanted to. George's body-sledding invite had made me uncomfortable, but Terry had fixed that, and rather neatly.

"Ruined his fun," he said with a grin, reading my mind. "He thought he'd have you to himself and get his jollies at the same time."

"My hero," I murmured, brushing snow from his shoulders.

"Hey, if he gets to jump on top of you, we *all* should."

"Sir Galahad you ain't." We slung our arms around each other, staggering up the hill like a couple of drinking buddies. Brenda and Kyle whizzed by us and I smothered a flash of irritation. She'd been hogging Kyle all night, and she always sat next to him at V&V games. I hadn't had a chance to get near him, and when I did have a chance...

"Come on, Andy, let's go down again."

...George was there. I was flattered by the attention but annoyed and a little sad, too. Why couldn't it be Kyle dogging my steps, insisting on sledding with me, sitting next to me? Then, belatedly, sweet sanity took hold: I was being ridiculous! I'd only met the guy last week and I was acting like Trisha mooning over some boy.

"No thanks, George. You go. I'm sitting this one out."

"Well ... I guess I will, too." He handed the sled to Terry, apparently forgetting that he'd tried to kick in the guy's ribs five minutes ago, and walked over to me. "That was some ride. You sure are ... uh ... soft."

Terry snickered and I felt my face turning red. Meredith's noisy entrance: "What's everyone standing around for? Terry, I want to go down on your shoulders." At least it offered a welcome change of subject.

"You want to what?" I cried, but Terry was already settling himself in the sled. He sat cross-legged and motioned Merry to come near. She did, carefully climbing atop his shoulders until her feet were resting on the sled's bottom and her hands were fisted in his hair. "You're going to die," I predicted.

"Wow. We should try that, Andy." This, predictably, from George. *He* was out of his mind, too. If we tried that I'd probably crush him like a bug.

"Somebody give us a push," Meredith said breathlessly, and I noticed with a start that she actually looked pretty. I had never thought of her as pretty. Trisha was pretty. My sister was pretty. Meredith was Meredith. Not ugly, never ugly, but not cheerleader gorgeous, either. She had a good figure, better than most girls our age, great green eyes, and a flawless complexion, the color of really good bond paper. But she was too thin, and dressed weird, and talked weirder. Tonight, though, the cold and exercise had put wild roses in her cheeks and her eyes were sparkling like emeralds on jeweler's velvet. And she was finally starting to put on some weight. Still too thin, but she no longer looked like she ate one meal a week.

Looking at her in the light from Brenda's garage, I felt I was seeing a well Meredith, a Meredith who didn't think about suicide or contemplate knives for more than paring apples. A girl whose grandma was perfectly fine, a Meredith who had nothing more on her mind than having a good time tonight and maybe acing next week's Bio quiz. Sometimes you can look at a friend and see what they will look like when they are very old. That night, I looked at Meredith and saw what she might look like were she a perfectly



ormal teenager. A Meredith I, of course, had never met.

I got the shivers and my teeth started chattering, but not from the cold. George saw—he saw everything—and put his arm around my waist while Kyle and Brenda carefully pushed Merry and Terry (and didn't that sound just too cute) down the hill. I was grateful for his touch and leaned into him, watching Merry somehow keep her balance atop Terry's shoulders, all the way down. I heard Kyle laugh for the first time, a good belly laugh he completely abandoned himself to as Meredith and Terry performed an impromptu dance of victory in the snow.

“What a couple of weirdos,” Brenda said to me, smiling, and I smiled back. Then thought, what the hell am I standing here, smirking like an idiot? Kyle's right there. Grab him!

“Say—”

“C'mon, Kyle, let's go down one more time,” Brenda said, and Kyle, that sheep, that amiable goat, that mindless amoebae, obediently climbed on the sled behind her.

So that's how it is, hmm? Okay, *fine*. “George!” I barked. “One more time, you and me.”

The only thing left atop the hill was the saucer, and I squashed myself into George's lap, elbows and knees sticking out everywhere. We started down the hill ahead of Brenda and Kyle (*Take that, you guys, see what fun I'm having?*) spinning down and down like some sort of mutant tumbling tumbleweed. The saucer overturned halfway down the hill and we spilled out, and before I could get up Brenda and Kyle's sled ran over my ankle.

“Aagghh! Oh, Jesus, that hurt!”

“Andy! Are you okay?” George's face hovered anxiously over mine.

I'm fine, George, don't worry about a thing. “Oww! Ow-ow-owwww!”

Meredith's face appeared beside George's. “Is it your bad ankle, Andy?” She had been present last November when I attempted my first and last hurdle jump. My foot had caught on hurdle number one and it and I went tumbling into the wall. Students had scattered like birds, I remembered that much. I'd suffered a sprain, shredded the skin and left a hideous trail of blood all the way to the nurse's office. Even two months after the fact it still gave me trouble. Especially when sleds laden with people ran over it. “Is that what's hurting you?”

“No, it's menstrual cramps,” I growled, sounding, to my ears, like the little girl from *The Exorcist*. “Of course it's my bad ankle, dumb shit! Nobody touch me!”

“We have to get her into the house,” Brenda said. She was pale with worry. Good! If she hadn't stolen Kyle for the thousandth time I wouldn't be in this mess. “We have to get her out of the cold.”

“Or shoot her, if it's broken,” Terry suggested.

“Nobody's touching me!” I shouted up at their looming, concerned faces. I shook my fist at them. “Just leave me here on this damned hill until my damned ankle stops hurting and I'll get my damned self into the damned house, so nobody touch me!”



Wow,” Terry said respectfully. “You sound pissed.”

Kyle, who had flinched at my tirade, now bent and hoisted up my shoulders. “Grab her legs, guys. Carefully.”

“Hello? Are you all deaf? You're supposed to be these straight-A students but you can't understand English I said nobody—ouch, DAMMIT NOBODY TOUCH ME OW OW OW OW OW OW—”

“Shut up,” Terry groaned.

“—OW OW OW OW OW OW—”

“That's pretty amazing volume,” Kyle said, staggering under my weight. “I haven't seen her take a breath yet.”

“—OW OW YOU BIG BULLIES PUT ME DOWN OW OW—”

“She had a difficult childhood,” Meredith panted, holding my bad leg with great care. “In fact, she's still having it.”

Onward and upward they slogged, ignoring—or trying to—my string of curses and howls of agony. I was so outraged I couldn't even enjoy the fact that Kyle had his arms around me.

“YOU JERKS I'M GOING TO RIP YOU ALL A NEW OW OW OW OW—”

“Andy *please* be quiet,” Brenda begged. “If the neighbors hear you screaming, they'll think someone's being killed out here.”

“—SOMEONE IS FOOL OW OW OW OW EEAAYYAHHH!” My shrieks of outrage and pain spiraled up as Meredith accidentally jostled my ankle; I thought my throat was going to crack. I became peripherally aware of the snow all around, so white and so much of it, all white, white everywhere, no matter where I rested my gaze just white white white, swallowing me up.

I guess I went away for a while, because the next thing I became aware of was a stinging slap on the left side of my face.

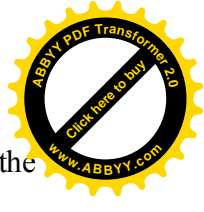
“Ouch!” I opened my eyes and saw five faces goggling down at me. I yelled in surprise—or tried to, my throat was sore and my voice exceptionally foggy, so what came out was a sort of startled croak:

“Graak!”

“You fainted,” Meredith said in tones of deep awe. A turning point in our relationship. She was always the one who fainted, usually from hunger because it hadn't occurred to her to eat in 72 hours. “Right before we got to the top of the hill.”

“Fainted,” I rasped. It hadn't felt like a faint. Everything had gone white, not black ... and boy, did my throat hurt. “Could I have some water?”

“Should we call an ambulance, hon?” Mrs. Morrison asked. I hadn't noticed she was there until just then, but I was glad to see her. I loved Mrs. Morrison. She was a phenomenal cook and always nice to me. She had seven kids, so I guess she liked young people. Best of all, most wonderful of all, nothing rattled her. I



ould have been bleeding out both ears and she would have offered me a cookie while we waited for the paramedics. “Or your parents?”

“No thanks. I'll just take some aspirin. With the water,” I said, an unsubtle hint. Kyle handed me a glass—he had left as soon as I made my request—and I gulped half of it down in two swallows. My! That felt good. Experimentally, I cleared my throat. “I sprained this ankle last fall and it gives me trouble once in a while.”

“Probably strained it again on the original fault line,” Terry said, making me sound like southern California.

“No, it's just really sore. Who smacked me?”

“We all wanted to,” Terry said, wiggling his fingers at me. “But I won the coin toss.”

My ankle still hurt horribly, but it wasn't the ground-glass pain I'd felt outside. I sat up, cautiously, and drained my glass. “Ahhh, that's better.” I cleared my throat again. “You can all stop hovering. I'm fine.”

“You weren't fine outside,” Brenda said, still looking pale and scared. Her eyes were very bright, like she was on the verge of tears. I was no longer glad she was upset. Actually, I felt sort of shitty for being glad earlier. “You kept ordering us to leave you on the hill.”

“And don't think we weren't tempted,” Terry said.

“Oh, shut up,” I said. “I'm sorry I caused all that trouble, but it really hurt. I told you not to move me. I knew if I could just sit there for a few minutes the pain would get a little better.”

“Yes, and you'd still be sitting out there getting soaked to the bone in the meantime,” Mrs. Morrison said briskly, putting to rest any ideas about who was right and who should or should not have been left out in the snow. “You kids stay inside for now. I've got cocoa on the stove and you can put a movie on.”

Well, that sounded pretty good to everyone. In fact, we were all tired after the excitement, and it was getting close to midnight. The boys went home before the movie, some low budget horror flick, was even half over. Meredith and I were spending the night, so she and Brenda pulled out the hide-a-bed in the family room and made it up with fresh sheets and lots of blankets while I rested on the floor and supervised. King-size, there was plenty of room for the three of us. We sat cross-legged amidst about fifty pillows, with bowls of popcorn and big glasses of milk, and caught up with each other's goings-on.

Brenda had just finished telling us how Terry had gotten thrown out of Biology that morning for panting and drooling over the female reproductive organ plates in his book, for proposing *marriage* to his Bio book in front of everyone, and I was laughing so hard I damn near fell off the bed.

“He's very ... striking,” Meredith said. She had snatched a box of toothpicks from the Morrisson kitchen and was making an army of popcorn men. They lay scattered around her like salty, dying troops.

“Striking? He looks like a vampire,” I said, privately deciding she was right. That pale skin, the dark dark hair and the eyes ... the long fingers ... not pretty-boy 90210 handsome, but striking, yes.

“He's all over you, Meredith. It's kind of...”



"Disgusting," I said.

"...scary. He's never done this before. I mean, he pretends to be in lust with all the girls, but with you it's like he means it." Bren shook her head. "Weird."

"Does he know about me? About ... what's happened?" The shrink, the nervous breakdown, the dying grandmother, the—

"No! No, I didn't tell him—tell them—anything about you. Andy said it was private stuff, between you and her and your psychiatrist. All I said was that you two were friends, that I invited you both to play V&V with us."

"Oh." Curiously, Meredith seemed disappointed. I couldn't imagine why. She'd finally found people who accepted her as she was, who didn't care if she was exceptionally weird. The only friends she had at school were Trisha, Kate, and me. Trisha and Kate had known her since kindergarten, so they had a long time to get used to her, and I was the new kid, I'd only started there last September, so I could look at Merry with fresh eyes.

Now here was Brenda's pack of friends who liked her right away, and Meredith was uneasy because they didn't know every gory detail about what happened last fall. Puh-leeze.

"You'll come back next weekend, won't you?" Brenda was asking. "We've only known you two weeks but it'll seem weird now if you and Andy aren't there. Weird and *quiet*."

"Of course, we wouldn't miss it." Meredith looked to me for confirmation and I nodded. "I'd like to see Terry again. And you of course, Brenda. And Kyle and—uh—George, too."

"What do you mean, and—uh—George, too?" I asked. "What's the matter with George?"

"He's so obvious," she sniffed. "He's all over you like a panting dog. It's disgusting. And he's at least a foot shorter than you are."

"You're exaggerating, it's only about six inches and besides, Terry's just as obvious and gross as George is. At least George doesn't stare at my tits while he's talking to me."

"Such as they are," Merry smirked, and got a face full of pillow for it. She tossed it aside and said, "I can't believe you're lumping George and Terry in the same category. It's apples and oranges, they're nothing alike."

"And I can't believe you're so blind!" I shrieked. Brenda made shushing noises and pointed above our heads. Her parents' bedroom was right above us. I lowered my voice and continued. "He's all over you and I don't know why you put up with it. 'Lie down here, Meredith, and I'll get on top to cut down wind resistance.' Spare me."

"It did cut down on wind resistance," Meredith said calmly. I hated it when she got like this: calm and cold and completely unshakable. She always said, the person who raises her voice first in an argument has already lost. Which meant I'd lost every argument we'd ever had. "Besides, he's incredibly smart. I can tell."

"George is smart, too."



George is average,” she went on with the ruthless honesty that was her trademark. “Of course, there's nothing wrong with that.”

“Oh, you liar!” I yelled. “You despise average! You hate it!”

“I was trying to be polite, but you're quite right, I do despise average.”

I looked around for another pillow to toss but Brenda's next words made me freeze.

“I'm thinking about asking Kyle out.”

Be nice. Don't say anything mean. And be careful of the expression on your face. “Oh?” I asked idly.

“Kyle's nice. So tall,” Merry said, a poorly disguised dig at George.

“Mm-hmm,” Brenda said. “He is. I really like him. He's so quiet, almost mysterious. And ... kind of gentle, but strong.”

I smothered a hysterical giggle but not in time; Brenda glared at me.

“Kind of smart, but dumb,” I said. This was good. This is what I would do if I was really okay with this. Keep teasing. “Kind of ugly, but handsome. Kind of flatulent, but sweet-smelling. Kind of—ouch!” I rubbed my arm where she'd given me a pinch, smiling so hard it felt like the expression was being welded onto my face for all time. “How did this come about?”

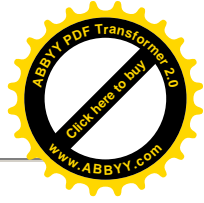
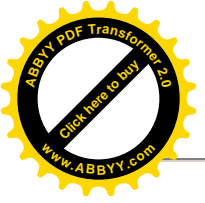
“I never really met any of them until this year,” she said. “That probably makes sense to Andy, but not you, Meredith. Here in Hastings there's three elementary schools and two junior highs, so a lot of us never meet until freshman year. And then it takes time to get to know people.” Meredith nodded. Certainly different from Cannon Falls, where everybody got lumped together from kindergarten on up. You never met new people unless they moved to town. “Anyway, we had some classes together and I found out they were interested in V&V, too, so we started playing and I got to know them. Terry's fun, he's always been fun, and George is nice ... but I'm getting interested in Kyle. The thing is, I only see him at school, or in groups like tonight. I'd love to go the movies or something, just the two of us, but he won't ask me.”

“Likely he's shy. He probably likes you fine, but has to work up his courage. I think it's a great idea, you taking the initiative,” Meredith said, heartlessly terrifying me.

“Yeah, great,” I echoed weakly. This was stupid! I *didn't even know* the guy two weeks ago, now the idea of the two of them snuggling up at the movies, maybe kissing across the popcorn, walking to the car hand in hand, all these mental images were making me ill. She hadn't even asked him out yet and I was, shockingly, near tears.

Your ankle hurts, I told myself savagely. That's why you're close to crying. Not because Brenda wants to ask Kyle out. So don't be stupid. Besides, George thinks you're pretty cool, seems like. And Kyle has never given you one indication that he finds you attractive. He's always nice and polite. He treats all the girls exactly the same. *So stop being stupid.*

“Well, let us know how it turns out,” I said with forced breeziness.



Chapter 4

TUESDAY THERE was a letter on the kitchen table for me, from George. I ignored my mother's raised eyebrows and took it to my room, leaving my books piled carelessly on my desk and flopping, belly-down, on my waterbed. I tore it open—it was quite thick, at least four pages—and started to read. It was dated Saturday, the day after we went sledding.

Dearest beautiful Andrea,

Whoa!

I haven't stopped thinking about you since last night. I hope when you saw who this letter is from you didn't tear it up. Will you forgive me? It's all my fault you got hurt and when I heard you screaming in pain I wanted to die.

WHOA!

You're so beautiful and alive, the night we met all I could do was stare at you. You're so pretty, with your blonde hair and nice smile ... you're always smiling.

Good thing for me he can't tell the difference between a smile and a smirk.

When Brenda said you were coming back the next week to play V&V again I couldn't concentrate that whole week. All I could think of was seeing you again. And then I saw you and you were even prettier than I remembered. I was so happy when we were sledding together, Andrea (I call you Andrea because Andy is a boy's name and you're sure no boy!), it's probably the most fun I've ever had in my entire life. And when I made you go down the hill one last time and you got hurt when that big dumb lug Kyle ran over your ankle I wanted to kill myself! Your beautiful face was streaked with tears.

Now that's an interesting way of remembering what happened. He had it all wrong, of course. I distinctly remembered grabbing him and hauling him over to the sled, so Kyle and Brenda wouldn't notice I was insanely jealous. Nice of him to take the blame for a stupid accident, though, even if I didn't care for his classification of Kyle as a "big dumb lug".

I'm writing to you to beg forgiveness. Please say you don't hate me, Andrea, I'll die if you say that. Brenda says you're coming again next weekend. She also gave me your address. I hope that doesn't make you mad.

Bren, you sly dog! You never said a word!

I can't wait to see you on Saturday. I hope your ankle is better, and I hope you will forgive me. I hope this doesn't scare you but I think I love you. Love, George.

Holy shit. The guy's really gone for me. What a great letter!

I was so flattered and excited I could hardly sit still. I flipped to the last page of the packet.

Here is a poem I wrote the day after we sledded together. I don't know if Brenda told you but I'm a writer, and you're my inspiration.



* * * *

Andrea

So blonde and fair, like a princess out of a fairy tale

With a ready smile just for me

We hold hands and kiss under icicles

Laughing when the rains come.

Andrea, oh Andrea

My life was death until you came.

You lift me up, girl, with your laughs and smiles

Cheering me up, through the pain.

* * * *

And, below this, a pencilled note: *I can't wait to see you Saturday! But if you want, you can call me at 612-438-7930. Love, love, love, George.*

Well.

I nearly knocked my grandmother off her feet getting to the phone. She was drunk—it was, after all, past three o'clock—so even if she'd fallen it's unlikely she would have been hurt, but I still had to waste precious seconds making sure she had her balance and then helping her totter into the living room. Gram had been living with us for a few months and brother, it felt like she'd been here ten years.

Once she was out of the way I dialed Brenda right off. She shrieked when I told her about the letter, and demanded to know what I was going to do.

“Call him, of course. You should see what he wrote, Bren. The guy's *gone* for me.” I could feel my ego inflating like a balloon. To hell with Kyle, anyway. At least George knows I'm alive. “And this poem! I tell you, he's practically made himself sick over me.” Preen, preen.

“Gonna let him off the hook for your accident?”

“Of course, dork. Nice of him to take the blame, though, because it was your damn sled that did me in,” I chortled. “Look, I'm gonna call him right now, but I'll see you Saturday.”

“Meredith, too?”

“She's the chauffeur, baby. If she don't go, me don't go.”

“Call me back and tell me what happened!” she demanded, just before I hung up.



dialled George's number. This was the first time I had ever called a boy, and thank *God* my father was out. All I needed was Mr. Sensitive teasing me from now until doomsday.

“Hello?”

“Hi, can I talk to George?”

“Andrea?”

“Hi, George, I—”

“Did you get my letter?”

“Yeah, and I—”

“How's your ankle?”

“It's fine. Listen, I really appreciated what you wrote, but it was just an accident. And I'm feeling pretty okay. A little sore, you know, but okay. And I wanted to call and tell you that.”

“It's so great to hear your voice.”

I swelled, flush with the power I had over the poor boy. “That's nice of you to say, George. I really loved the poem.”

“I wrote it just for you. The words just poured out of me. Like—like—”

Pus from an abscess? No, that's not nice. And pay attention, Andy, he's still talking.

“—syrup from a bottle. Say, Andrea, do you think maybe we could go out sometime? Like to the movies or something?”

“Sure. Let's talk about it Saturday.”

“Oh. Hey, great. That's great! That's really—”

Great?

“—terrific, I can't wait to see you. Thanks a lot for calling.”

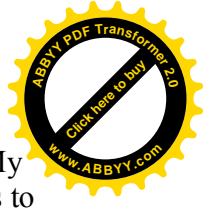
“No problem, George. I'll see you Saturday.”

But as it turned out, I would be in Hastings Friday night.

* * * *

MEREDITH AND I were waiting outside Dr. Cobran's office. It was the second time I had been here, and probably Meredith's dozenth ... I didn't keep count.

I had mixed feelings about attending Merry's psychiatric sessions. On the one hand, it got me out of



school. On the other, I despised Dr. Cobran. Thought he was an unfeeling jerk of the highest order. My mother explained that I probably felt that way because he wasn't outwardly sympathetic—his job was to listen, not ooze sympathy the way Trisha and I did. Also, I thought this whole treatment thing was taking way too long. “Why can't they just pick a drug and make her take it, and it'll cure her?” I complained to Mom. Her reply wasn't exactly comforting, but it had the ring of common sense, like most everything my mother said: “Honey, it took her fifteen years to get the way she is. It might take them fifteen years to fix it. Depression isn't like an infection—you can't just feed it antibiotics and wait for it to go away.”

“*Vogue* has to be the most boring magazine on the planet,” I announced, startling pretty much everyone in the waiting room.

“Don't start,” Meredith said sternly.

“Why can't he stock some good stuff, like *People* or *Glamour* or...”

“*Guns and Ammo*?” she asked sweetly. “*Outdoor Life*?”

“Either would be fine.”

“How's your grandmother?” she asked curiously, knowing full well that was a topic I never discussed.

“Drunk,” I replied shortly, and didn't say another word until it was time to go in.

“Devonshire,” the nurse called, and Meredith and I got up. Dr. Cobran was waiting for us in his office. I felt like a mongoose approaching the lair of a reptile, and don't think I hadn't pointed out to Merry that Cobran was awfully close to Cobra.

“Girls, come on in.” His feet were up on his desk and he was polishing off a blueberry muffin. Crumbs were everywhere.

“Got any more?” I sighed, playing my part.

He beamed, his expression that of a proud pet owner whose puppy had performed an exceptionally fine trick. “Yes, as a matter of fact. There's one left for each of you.”

Meredith glanced at me as she accepted her muffin, and I fought not to roll my eyes. Some shrink. Even I could see through his attempts to feed Meredith. She was obviously underweight and he worried she'd slip into anorexia, so he was always plying her with food. Merry told me once she'd showed up for a session and he'd had chicken dinners brought in, complete with appetizers, salads, and dessert.

“So, what's new, girls?”

Girls. Girls, girls, girls—we have names, you head-peeping moron.

“Andrea's forcing her old friends on me,” Meredith said, and I was shocked at how irritated she sounded.

“Hey! That's not—”

Dr. Cobran frowned, steepling his fingers beneath his chin. Here it comes: the question Mr. and Mrs. Devonshire paid him one hundred and ten dollars an hour to ask. “How does that make you feel?”



ousy, you idiot, how does it sound like she feels? But Meredith was carefully thinking the question over. These sessions were a deadly business to her, regardless of the fact that we both thought Cobran was a transparent dork. She felt it was her only chance to get well.

“I don't like having to share her,” she said after a long, thoughtful pause.

I had been opening my mouth to hotly refute whatever idiocy she was going to spout, but that took me so by surprise I just stared at her, my mouth ajar.

“Of course,” Cobran said. “You're used to having her to yourself. You and she have gotten quite close in the year or so Abigail's been here.”

“Four months,” I corrected, ignoring his misuse of my name. During previous sessions he'd called me Amanda and Anna. “And I had no idea you felt this way, Meredith. Why didn't you speak up?”

“I tried! You knew I didn't want to go down there.”

“I thought it was because you were shy. Not because you wanted to hog me for the rest of your life.”

She glared at me. “Right now I can't think of a single reason why I'd want to hog you for even a nanosecond.”

Quick as a flash, the Cobra struck. “What were Andrea's friends like, Meredith?”

“Brenda's really great,” I said before Meredith could reply. “She's about the nicest person I know.”

“Precious, nice Brenda resents the hell out of me,” Meredith said smugly.

“*What?*”

“Oh, she's very polite and warm to me, but she told me in private she was determined to like me no matter what, because that way she could see more of *you* if the three of *us* get along.”

“Well ... we were best friends when I lived in Hastings.”

“And now I'm in your life,” she said triumphantly, “and she can't stand it.”

“But she has the others ... Terry and George and Kyle.”

“Boys,” Meredith scoffed. “No good at all for best friend material.”

“I ... see what you mean,” I said slowly. I hadn't ever thought of it from Brenda's point of view. I just figured she was so nice, she'd like Meredith, no problem. I hadn't thought jealousy would even enter into it. “Don't you like her?”

“Of course I like her. And she's determined to like me, so that's a worry I won't have. Besides, before two weeks ago you hadn't seen her since Thanksgiving, whereas you see me four or five times a week, and have for months.” Meredith smirked. “It's clear where your loyalties lie.”

“What's the *problem*, then?” I practically shrieked.



I'm supposed to explore my emotional states in these sessions," she explained patiently. "Meeting Brenda and the boys was significant for me. Besides you and Trisha, I don't have any friends."

"Oh, now, that's not—"

"Don't you dare placate me. It's true and you know it. I'm surprised at you, Andrea. As a rule, politeness and tact are things you abhor."

I was still trying to figure out what abhor meant when she continued: "And I think some of that group might become my friends. Dr. Cobran, I'm considering telling them about my breakdown. What do you think?"

"What do *you* think, Meredith?"

"*I* think," I said loudly, "that I don't get any of what's going on. *I* think you should keep your mouth shut. You barely know them."

"And I think," Meredith said, glaring at me, "that Dr. Cobran wasn't talking to you."

The argument raged and before I knew it Cobran was glancing at his watch, his subtle signal that the session was about to end. "Now, Meredith, I believe you wanted to address some medication concerns."

"Yes, doctor, the stuff I'm on now makes me *so* hot. I'm always sweaty and trembling. I can't stand it; I almost never wear jackets anymore. And I don't think the drugs are really doing anything for me. I don't feel any different."

Cobran was already nodding and scribbling out a new prescription. Meredith had explained to me that it was a trial-by-error procedure but I was already impatient with it. God knew how nuts it must have been making her, putting up with all the side effects, getting a new prescription practically every week. "Try this, then, with every meal and just before bedtime with a snack." Cobran always prescribed stuff you had to take with food, to trick Merry into eating, that sly dog.

"Thank you."

"And report any side effects to me immediately, please."

"Of course."

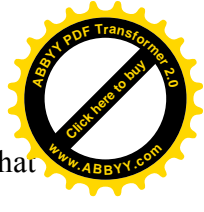
Cobran looked at his watch again and stood to usher us out. The fifty minutes had flown by. That was another thing—the Devonshires paid for an hour and got fifty minutes. What kind of a racket was this, anyway?

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Merry asked me as we climbed into the car. We had about an hour's drive ahead of us; Cobran practiced in North St. Paul. "At least he remembered your name started with an A."

"What a genius," I muttered. "He's so stupid, how can you stand him?"

"He's not stupid, just a little obvious. Besides, he's covered on my parents' insurance plan."

"Oh. Why did I have to come with this time? Not that I mind," I added hastily, "because I don't."



anything I could do to help her get better, I would. I would gladly suffer fools like Cobran if that's what it took. Also, it got me out of school an hour early. "Is it because you knew you'd be talking about Brenda?"

"Well-l-l, he sort of insisted on meeting you."

"Me? Why?"

"Because I talk about you when I'm trying to avoid a subject, so I end up talking about you a lot. So finally he asked to meet you."

"You talk about *me*?" I was delighted. "What do you say?"

She shrugged. "I tell him about how we met—the locker, remember?—and how you joined the speech team because you were worried about me, even though we'd only known each other a couple months ... stuff like that."

"Lot of good that did," I muttered, inwardly pleased. I remembered our first meeting like it had been last week. I'd been diddy-bopping down the hall, minding my own business, when one of the lockers started talking to me, insisting I spin the combination dial. I did, and Meredith fell out. "And for this your parents shell out big bucks? So he can listen to you reminisce?"

"It doesn't do me any good to talk about you anymore. By now he knows that when you come up in conversation I'm avoiding something. But that's neither here nor there; you asked why he wanted you to sit in on some sessions. That's why."

"Fair enough. Time to change the subject—I've got something here I need to read to you. No, don't look at me, watch the road." Meredith was an easily distracted driver and I was taking my life in my hands but, heedless of the risks, I took out George's letter and poem and read them to her. She damn near drove off the road at least six times, she was laughing so hard.

When I finished, she said, "See what I mean about average? What a dull wit. And that poem—ugh!"

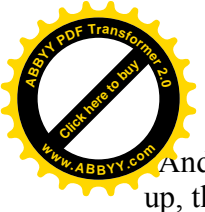
"He's crazy about me, idiot. He's pining for me, all the way down there in Hastings." I sat back smugly.

"And you love it, don't you. Yes, I can see you do. Completely immaterial how you feel about *him*, I'll bet. The fact that he's slathering attention all over you is quite enough for now."

"What are you talking about? He loves me. Isn't that fabulous?"

"How could he not? You're 'so blonde and fair, like a princess out of a fairy tale'." Merry snorted laughter and I quelled the urge to bang her head against the driver's side window. "And he certainly does not love you. He's only seen you twice. Here I thought you two were sledding, but you were holding hands and kissing under icicles ... is that how he put it? And laughing when the rains came. How can you be kissing under icicles one minute and laughing in the rain the next? Does the boy never look at a weather map?"

"You're just not capable of understanding 'the boy's' genius," I said coldly, putting the letter and poem back in the envelope. The teasing was really starting to bug me. She was supposed to be supporting me, not laughing at me. "I'll bet you fifty dollars *Terry* never wrote anybody a poem in his whole stupid life."



Andrea, oh Andrea, my life was death until you came,” Merry sang, tapping the horn. “You cheered me up, through the pain.” She burst into laughter again; the car swerved.

“Will you *stop*? He's a poetic genius and you can't drive for shit.”

“I resent that, and if you really think he's a poetic genius you're the one who should be seeing a psychiatrist, not me. Want to go kiss under icicles? Oh, wait, it looks like rain. No fear, we'll just laugh at the precipitation instead.”

“Jealousy ill becomes you,” I sniffed.

“Oh, very good! That was an excellent imitation of me. But I'm not even remotely jealous. In fact, my next statement will make you retract all the cruel things you just said.”

“Ha!”

“I'm going to be in Hastings Friday night—want a ride to George's?”

Damn! “I retract everything. You might be the most dangerous thing on wheels but at least you drive me everywhere I need to go, mixed blessing though that may be. And what the hell are you doing in Hastings on Friday?”

“Going to see Terry,” she said quietly, eyes (for once) on the road. In fact, she was making a great effort not to look in my direction at all. “We have a ... date, of sorts.”

I was completely beyond words. Couldn't even think of a cutting remark. Meredith “Ice Queen” Devonshire was going on a *date*? With that—that lecherous vampiric *pervert*?

“Say something,” she said uneasily. “Let's get it over with.”

“Uhhh ... buhhhhh...”

“Perfect, and exactly what I expected.”

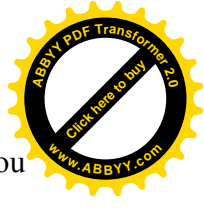
“Trisha's not going to believe this,” I chortled, recovering at last. “Hell, *I* don't believe it. You and Terry ... holy cow! I don't think the universe can take that combination.”

“I'll pick you up around six-thirty Friday,” she informed me, ignoring my comment, “so make sure you have directions to George's house. And I'll pick you up from there on my way back home. Okay?”

“You got it,” I said, shaking my head. In my mind, I was already telling Trisha the story, getting gratification from her shrieks of disbelief.

* * * *

FRIDAY NIGHT we were both nervous wrecks. First date for both of us. Merry, true to form, relieved her edginess by teasing me unmercifully, and by the time we rolled past the Hastings city limits I was longing to shove her out onto the pavement, back the car up, and run over her two or three or twenty times.



expressed this sentiment aloud and was rewarded with: “How will he kiss you goodnight? Maybe you should bring a stool.”

“Do you even *know* what color eyes Terry has?” I snapped back. “He never makes eye contact with you, you ever notice that? Too busy staring at your boobs. Nice outfit, by the way.” Meredith was wearing black stirrup pants, athletic socks, red high heels, a cream-colored T-shirt with the logo, ‘Starving Artist’, and she had striped her (currently dark blonde) hair red in places with temporary hair color. I was relatively conservative in dark blue stretch pants and a cranberry tunic.

Of course, I could have been wearing a bra and boxer shorts, and shaved my head to boot, and I’d still look conservative next to Meredith.

“So what are you and your pint-sized Romeo up to this evening?”

“Shut up! And I don’t know; we’re starting at his house and maybe going to Perkins later for dessert.” George, of course, had been overjoyed when I called and told him I’d be in town Friday night. His happiness at my coming far outweighed Merry’s uncomfortable jibes. “Not that it’s any of your business. What’d your parents say when you told them you were going out with El Vampiro?”

Meredith shrugged. Her parents were a little preoccupied these days; her brother had just gotten married and his second child was on the way, and her grandma was busy dying of cancer. Things were a little hectic in that usually placid household. Merry’s shrug meant that they hadn’t attached much significance to her going out tonight.

My family, on the other hand...

My mother: “A date? That’s wonderful, honey!”

My father: “You’ll pop him on if he gets fresh, right, kid?”

My sister: “Who’d want to date you?”

Business as usual in the Grouper household. Before Merry picked me up I’d gotten The Lecture from my father: you’re a good girl, we trust you, don’t let him touch you, don’t be scared to call if your date is too drunk to drive (I didn’t think they served booze at Perkins, but didn’t want to interrupt), be good, behave, don’t let him touch you, don’t forget your curfew is 11:00 p.m. and don’t you dare be late. And don’t let him touch you.

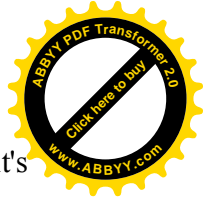
I relayed the story to Meredith and was rewarded with: “If your father got a look at George his worries would just melt away.”

I gave up. She was so nervous she probably didn’t realize how obnoxious she was being. I hoped not, anyway. “How’s that new medication working for you?” I asked, changing the subject.

Merry shrugged again. “I got the prescription filled yesterday, so I’ve only been taking it for a day.”

“Feeling okay? No weird side effects?”

“Nothing so far.”



“Oh. That's good.” I looked at my directions. “Slow down, willya? We're in town and you still think it's highway 52. Now, George says to turn left at the third light.”

“Your impending arrival has no doubt inspired him to more mediocre stanzas.”

“Thank you very much, and there goes the second light. The turn'll be up here.”

His house was easy to find, and in minutes I was jumping out of the car before Merry had even brought it to a stop. “Thanks! See you at 10:30.” She nodded and was gone, leaving me standing in the driveway.

Not for long, though. I strode to the door and punched the doorbell, and before the chime had died out the door was yanked open and I was face-to-face with the alleged man of my dreams.

“Come on in, gorgeous,” he said, pulling the door open wider. I quelled the urge to look over my shoulder to see who he was talking to, shucking off my boots and coat in the entryway and following him in. His dad, I was informed, was out, but I met his mother and sister. They both stared at me during introductions and every time I turned to talk to one of them, the other checked me out again. It was as if they couldn't believe this Amazonian apparition was actually in *their* kitchen, here to see their son/brother.

After about five minutes of mumbled conversation, George pulled me into the family room, where MTV was blaring. He plunked down on a couch and patted the seat beside him. I went, a little reluctantly—is that what we were going to do all night? Watch videos?—and he slung an arm around my shoulders. So he had me in one hand, and the remote control in the other. Paradise!

I was a little uncomfortable with his arm around me, and annoyed because I was uncomfortable. Why was I being so mean to him in my mind? It was all that rotten Meredith's fault, I couldn't get her nasty comments out of my head. What did I come here for, anyway? Did I expect to play Monopoly and scarf up junk food and horse around and tease, like I did with Merry and Brenda? No, of course not, you didn't do those things with *boys*. But I didn't care for his arm around me, all the same. In fact, the things you were supposed to do with boys I hadn't the slightest urge to do with George. I realized, somewhat surprised I hadn't thought of this before, I didn't know him very well. We'd only met twice, after all.

“I'm so glad you came over,” he breathed in my ear. Goose bumps raced up and down my right side and I fought back a shudder. My ears and neck have always been hyper-ticklish. “I was counting the minutes until you showed up.”

He was? Of course he was! The boy was crazy about me, after all. *That's* why I was here. I smiled at him and noticed with an internal start that his face was awfully close to mine. I had never been this close to anyone, ever. My eyes, wide with alarm, were reflected back at me in his glasses.

His arm tightened around my shoulders and his breath was hot on my face. I fought down the urge to shove him off the couch. What was *wrong* with me? Was I frigid? “I really liked the poem you sent me,” I said, pulling back as much as his arm would allow, a nervous ear straining for the kitchen, where Ma and Sis were still puttering, and occasionally peeking. “No one's ever written me a poem before.”

Like benign magic, his arm was suddenly gone and he was standing up. “Yeah? I've got lots more. Come on, they're in the ... bedroom.” Incredibly, he winked. Even more incredibly, I got up and followed him.

His bedroom was festooned with posters of South Park, thong-clad babes, and Green Day. I knew Meredith would have taken one look and immediately vomited. Controlling a grin that wanted to come



ut at the mental image, I didn't immediately hear what George was saying.

“What?”

“I said, these are for you.” He handed me a thick sheaf of papers, and when I flipped through them I realized there were at least a dozen poems here. “I've been working on them all week.”

I was touched, and incredibly flattered. And mad at myself for being so jumpy on the couch earlier. “George ... I don't know what to say. I've never ... you're the first...”

“You don't have to say anything, baby,” he said in a tough/tender voice. (I'd always wondered what one of those sounded like, and now I knew.) “Just remember, you're worth it.” He looked up at me for a few seconds, then seemed to make up his mind about something. “Come on, let's go back to the living room.”

As I followed him out, I was able to put a name on the expression that had been on his face: indecision. He'd wanted to kiss me but we were both standing up.

Shit, I thought, plunking down beside him on the living room couch. Meredith was right. He does need a step stool.

* * * *

“I DON'T KNOW why you wanted to come here. It's cold out,” George complained, following me into Perkins. “And if you wanted something to eat we could have had it at the house.”

“I just felt like getting out for a while,” I said shortly. The truth was, we had been sitting in his living room watching videos for the better part of two hours. When I wasn't being bored to death by The Goo Goo Doll's latest on-screen antics I was shivering and shuddering as George whispered ticklingly in my ear and, I could tell, tried to decide whether or not to kiss me. Sis kept making up excuses to come into the family room and George would scream at her to get out, half-deafening me. The truth was, I needed to get out of there, at least for a while. “Besides, I'm in the mood for a sundae.”

We seated ourselves and asked for dessert menus; I immediately became engrossed. Few things are more important to me than food and I was almost always hungry these days. I'd grown two inches in the last eighteen months and sometimes fancied I could feel the calories burning up inside me as my body devoured fuel and got taller.

“How long can you stay tonight?” George asked.

“Merry's picking me up at 10:30,” I replied absently. The chocolate mousse pie looked good, but so did the brownie sundae. It was cold out, sure, but never too cold for ice cream.

Across from me, George fretted. I wondered just what the hell his problem was. It wouldn't occur to me until later that he liked having me to himself, in the relative privacy of the living room, much more than he liked having me in public. “This is stupid. I'm bored.”

My temper wanted to flare but I put a lid on it by thinking about that sheaf of poems, and all the effort it must have taken to put them to paper. He really did like me, and for that reason alone I could put up with his impatience. “We won't be here long, George. I just want to get a bite—ow!” Something grabbed me right below my left breast, and I twisted around in the booth. Nothing. I rubbed the spot and turned back



George.

“What's the matter?”

“Nothing,” I said calmly. “Probably my imagination, or maybe my shirt caught on a nail and pulled taut.” I laughed shakily and put down my menu. “It startled the hell out of me, though.”

This time, when the bone-white hand snaked through the partition to pinch me again I grabbed onto it and yanked, hard. There was the satisfying thud of a body slamming against the other side of the wooden partition, and someone let out a yelp.

I picked up my fork and poked the tines into the palm of the hand I held. The fingers twisted in my grip but I held on. Finally, someone trumpeted, “Let m'go, bitch!”

I let go, the hand vanished, and over the top of the partition appeared a leering face I knew too well.

“Hi, Terry,” I sighed.

“Hi, yourself. Did I get a handful of tit, or was that just wishful thinking?”

“You got a handful of ribs, and where's Merry?”

“Some place where you'll never find the body.”

“I'm not surprised. Why don't you dig her up and join us?” I said, ignoring George's frantic head shakes.

“Don't mind if we do!” Terry crowed, and then—I couldn't believe it—he clambered over the four-foot partition and plunked down beside me. “C'mon, Meredith!”

Meredith took the long way. Rather, she got up out of their booth, walked down the aisle, took a left, walked down our aisle, and slid in beside George. Meanwhile, Terry had just about crowded me out onto the floor making himself comfortable.

“And how are you two doing?” he trilled.

“We *were* fine,” George grated.

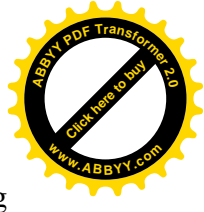
I was actually very glad to see them. I'd had enough of George for a while, and felt like diluting his effect with other people. I turned to Terry to say something—probably ‘drop dead’ or an equally friendly phrase—when I noticed....

“Terry, are you wearing lipstick?”

He nodded enthusiastically and Meredith sat up straighter than usual. “He insisted on a make over,” she said proudly. “Wouldn't leave the house unless I shared my lipstick and eyeliner.”

“Too bad you skipped the blush,” I said. “Boy-o, you look like Death. You should get some sun.”

“What, in January?” he replied scornfully. “Sure. I'll just lay out and catch some rays ... and get frostbite, most likely.”



"I know, pal, I thought Meredith was the weirdest person I was ever going to meet, but you're tough competition." He tried to shove me out but I braced my feet and shoved back with my hips, squashing him against the partition. I grinned at George and Meredith while Terry wriggled like a bug pinned to a board.

"Well," he groaned, trying to shove back. "I thought *you* were the bitchiest person *I* was ever going to meet. And I was right."

I quit shoving—the partition had begun creaking ominously—and let him settle himself. Then I feigned a poke at his eyes and he flinched back, smacking his head on the partition. I hooted with victory, then had my hands full as he started pinching me in the ribs.

"Cut it out, you two, we're going to get thrown out of here." Meredith's voice was as mild as a summer breeze; she had taken out her Ayn Rand paperback (*Atlas Shrugged*) and was preparing to pick up where she left off. She looked like an indulgent mama watching her two kids tussling on the playground. George, glowering beside her, did not look like the happy papa.

"Thrown out of Perkins, thrown out of Perkins!" Terry shrieked. "Oh, the shame of it!" He picked a small container of half-and-half, squeezed, and a stream of cream hit me square in the face. I retaliated by smacking him upside the head with my menu while wiping the cream out of my eyes, then unscrewed the top of the salt shaker and dumped salt down his shirt. "How will we ever be able to hold our heads up again? How can we live the with disgrace, the despair?"

Two minutes later, we were all standing on the sidewalk. "Well, smart guy," I asked, cream freezing in my hair, "how *are* we going to live with it? And more to the point, where else will I get a sundae at this hour?"

"I've got salt all over my nipples," he leered by way of response.

Chapter 5

SHADOWBYTE stepped out of the shadows; I gulped and took a step back *into* them. I'd never met the man but Black Flame had described him to me: tall, dark, mean looking. All that, and then some. Three or four inches more than six feet, solidly built, dressed head to toe in coal-black fatigues, sunglasses hiding his eyes, mouth a grim slash. I checked him for telltale bulges that would let me know if he was carrying but he didn't appear to have any weapons on him. He was strong enough to pick up a refrigerator and toss it ten feet, so he probably didn't bother with switchblades.

And what the hell was I doing here, anyway? I was a good guy, he was the worst of the bad guys, and I was still pretty new to the vigilante game. The cub doesn't take on the leader of the pride her first week out.

"Let's get him," Agnostia hissed. She bounded out and I grabbed her by the hem of her sweater dress and hauled her back in. Ten yards in front of us, Shadowbyte was in profile, supervising his minions. They were systematically emptying some sort of computer warehouse, but most of the boxes they were carrying were too small to hold monitors or hard drives. Must be snatching chips. "Let go of me!" Agnostia hissed. "He's stealing!"

"Him and about twenty other guys," Brenda—I mean, Anya—muttered. She was doing a Lady Godiva bit: a flesh colored bodysuit molded her figure, and her long, dark brown hair flowed almost to her knees



in a barbaric flood. At first glance, it looked like she wasn't wearing anything but her hair and a gold mask. Her sapphire blue eyes, much darker than Brenda's, ("Well, I always wished my eyes were darker, instead of this faded blue. They're like an old pair of jeans," Brenda said, annoyed. "Shut up and pay attention to the game.") narrowed as she took in the scene. "We can't jump him without taking everybody on," she said, "and there's only three of us."

"Four," Ninjaboy said from behind us. We all started and turned. Ninjaboy was dressed in a blinding white ninja suit which told us, presumably, that he was a Good Guy. A sheathed sword hung across his back, and, like me, he didn't wear a mask. He was grinning at us expectantly. "C'mon, let's take 'em. It'll be a good fight."

"For once, I am in complete agreement with George. Kyle's just standing there, getting rich, making those poor oppressed souls slave for him like dray horses—"

"What is it with you and the hired thugs?" Anya wondered.

"—and now the time for revolution is at hand!"

"Perfect," I hissed, checking the loads in my 9 mm semi-auto for the third time. Agnostia's little speeches always made me itch to have a gun in my hand. I didn't know if it was to defend her, or shoot her. "So we'll all go charging up to him—it's thirty feet from here to there, if you haven't noticed—and he'll hear us coming long before we get anywhere near him. So he'll sic his thugs on us and watch us get dusted ... the odds are about five to one. Then he'll step over our unconscious bodies, finish loading the truck, get in, and drive away. All we'll have to show for our foolishness is a four-pack of splitting headaches, assuming he doesn't have us killed after the fight."

"Admirably logical, Stiletto," a deep voice said from our right. "Frightening to discover how well you know the criminal mind. Ever think about changing sides?"

We all screamed and lurched to our left, Anya's head coming up sharply and catching me in the chin. I looked wildly behind us and saw Shadowbyte at the other end of the alley, his back to us, still watching his worker bees.

"Hologram," Anya muttered, rubbing the top of her head. A flash of silver arced toward her; I had my gun up and squeezed off a shot before I could think about it. I was rewarded with a sharp 'ptwang!' as Shadowbyte's throwing star was knocked off course and clattered to the ground several feet away.

"Hmm," he said, and where the hell was he? I looked around wildly, barely hearing Brenda's shaky, "Thanks."

"Hmm," he said again. "You shot my shuriken. I wouldn't have thought that possible. Not nice, Stiletto."

Great, I was getting lectures on good manners from the Adolf Hitler of Villains and Vigilantes. Beside me, Agnostia shrieked, "Evil swine oppressor! Pig of pigs! You walk on the backs of peasants with clawed boots!"

"Agnostia, are you feeling all right?" Anya asked. Even for Agnostia, this was weird behavior. "And what's with all the revolutionary jargon?"

"Will everybody please shut up?" I cried, aggrieved. "I can't hear him, and if I can't hear him, I can't—" There was a whirl of sound behind me and I threw myself aside, nearly impaling myself on Ninjaboy's



word. “What was *that*?”



“You dodged his kick,” Ninjaboy said, elbowing me aside and brandishing his sword at the dark. “Barely.”

“Duplicitous swine!” Agnostia shrieked, launching herself at Shadowbyte, who had finally shown himself. With a shudder I realized he had snuck up behind me and cold-bloodedly aimed a kick to my head. If it had connected I'd have been down for the count, if not pushing up daisies. “You drink the hot rich blood of the workers! Yaahh—” Shadowbyte caught her by the wrists and lifted her off the ground, then swung her effortlessly into a wall. “—aahhoomf!”

Anya and I winced in unison. Agnostia bounced off the wall and fell on her back like a stunned beetle. We didn't dare go to her, it would mean we had to turn our backs on Shadowbyte. “Woe to the commonwealth,” she groaned.

Ninjaboy called, “Come on, you guys!” and darted toward Shadowbyte. Anya and I just stood there and watched as Shadowbyte mopped the floor with him. Though Ninjaboy had the best martial arts skills of us all, Shadowbyte's reach was longer, and he was faster and much stronger. He blocked George's initial sword thrust, disarmed him with a second blow, took a kick to the outside of his thigh that didn't even knock him off balance, and rendered Georgie-pie out for the count with a cobra-quick strike to the solar plexus.

He stepped over Ninjaboy and skirted Agnostia, obviously intent on us.

“Uh—” Anya said.

“Got any sort of a plan?” I asked nervously.

“Run?” she suggested weakly.

“His legs are longer,” I pointed out. “Of course, he couldn't catch both of us. Probably.” I brought my gun back up. “That's far enough.”

He kept coming. We backed up. “That's far enough, Shadowbyte.” My voice cracked; I steadied it and kept the sight of the gun trained on the hollow of his throat. I could see my terrified reflection in his sunglasses as he came implacably forward. I was reminded of the Terminator. “This is an automatic, so there won't be any dramatic cocking of the gun. It's ready to go now. So I'll just shoot you.”

His mouth quirked up on one corner a bare fraction of an inch. For him, an ear-to-ear grin. “Okay,” I warned. “Let's see if you know how to dodge bullets.” I fired. The bullet buried itself in the wall behind him.

“As a matter of fact, I *do* know how to dodge bullets.”

“More martial arts mumbo-jumbo,” Anya muttered, her forehead creasing in concentration.

“What, that's something you can *learn*?” I looked at my gun distrustfully. What good was it against someone who could step out of the way of bullets? A machine gun, *that's* what I needed.

Anya's telekinesis kicked in, then, and I had the satisfaction of watching Shadowbyte jerkily spin around



nd slam into the wall, shoved hard by invisible hands. “There, he's stunned,” she said. “Let's beat feet, partner.”

We ran.

* * * *

“HOLD IT! HOLD it! Foul, foul!”

“What?” Brenda cried, leaning forward. “Anya's telekinetic, she can shove him into a wall. And where were you, Terry?”

“I decided to stay out of this one. I didn't want to have to get too close to the Horsewomen of the Apocalypse,” he said, jerking a thumb at Meredith and me. “Besides, you used all your telekinetic points last round, remember?”

“Yeah, but I got a recharge by staying out of the fight until the last minute,” Brenda pointed out. Ah! So that's why she didn't lift a finger until our asses were grass. “Now I can't use telekinesis until I roll three sixes, but the blow's good. Kyle's stunned, and Stiletto and I are safe.”

“For now,” Kyle said with a smile. I smiled back, warmly. He still made me tingle, and he'd never actually touched me. Not even to shake hands, or to give me a pat on the back (Hauling me up the hill with the help of four others hardly qualified as a touch.). Hell, *I'd* never actually touched *him*, when you got right down to it.

Terry, on the other hand, was always touching me, and I was touching him, usually to give him a punch. I didn't take it personally. The poor kid was so sex-starved, he'd fondle an IBM Selectric just to feel the thrum.

Next to me, watching Brenda and Terry argue, Meredith began to giggle. I'd been keeping a wary eye on her since she picked me up this afternoon. Our dates had been last night and she'd been fine, we'd talked about George and Terry all the way home. She still didn't understand what I saw in him. I tried explaining how his poems made me feel, but she didn't get it. Most times, I didn't get it, either. But I sure wasn't going to stop enjoying the attention.

Last night she'd been sarcastic, per usual, but today she was acting really weird. Almost ... high. All the way up here she'd kept veering into the other lane, then yanking the car back to where it was supposed to be, screaming obscenities at other cars and then laughing at herself. I yelled at her until I was hoarse and stepped out of the car with legs that trembled and would barely support me. That had been an hour ago.

She giggled again, louder, and Terry giggled back, mockingly. Her mirth escalated until she was literally screaming with laughter. We all watched (except Terry, who was looking for something to throw at her) in stunned silence as Merry laughed and laughed at nothing, pointing at us with tears in her eyes and laughing until she had to gasp for breath.

I grabbed a piece of paper, scribbled, “New medication” on it, folded it into quarters, then shot it across the table to Bren, who picked it up, unfolded it, read it, and nodded at me.

“What say we go outside?” she said calmly, and I could have blessed her for it. “Maybe work off some energy.”



“Energy ... energy ... energyyyyy!” Merry yodeled. She shot up out of her chair and before any of us could move, bounded out the door. Without her coat. Or boots.

The rest of us sat there for a few seconds, unbelieving, then everyone jumped up. The next few minutes were a nightmare of people crashing into each other, yelling and wildly hopping around while trying to slide into boots and coats. I tripped and fell twice, Brenda stepped on my hand once when I was down, Terry tripped over Kyle and went sprawling, and all the while I was yelling, “It's below freezing outside, we have to get her!” When all said and done, I realized I'd been struggling into Brenda's jacket, Terry had mine, George had Terry's, and Brenda had George's. Only Kyle had the presence of mind to grab for his own stuff; the rest of us were blindly pulling on whatever we could reach. Finally Terry yanked open the basement door and went after Meredith. We all followed.

She was easy enough to pick out. It had snowed all day and she was a splash of color (Green tractor T-shirt, red stretch pants, pink nylon anklets, pink ballet shoes, dyed black hair) against white snow banks. Terry spotted her first and took off, yelling her name.

Unfortunately for us, Meredith was the fastest runner I knew. She was unbelievably quick, and viewed Terry's clumsy lunges for her as some sort of game. She danced out of the way again and again, shrieking and laughing and completely zoned out of her mind. I couldn't even help; I was frozen in place, staring. Brenda and George moved up to close ranks, helping Terry box her in, and I finally gathered my wits enough to follow. I took one step forward ... and stopped.

Kyle's hand had closed around my upper arm, holding me as easily immobile as Shadowbyte had held Agnostia. I looked at him, shocked at the strength in that hand, at the resolve on his face. A thought raced through my brain: *if it was Kyle on the couch with his arm around you, MTV blaring in the background, would you want him to kiss you?* and was gone almost before I knew I'd had it.

“What's she on, Andy?” he asked kindly, calmly. I tried to shake him off, with no luck. It was like trying to shake off my own hand. “I don't think she's drunk, but it's obvious something's wrong. Cocaine, do you think? She's got enough money for the habit.”

“T-tell you later,” I croaked, unnerved by his nearness, his touch. He let go, still looking at me thoughtfully, but I wasn't volunteering anything, no way. It wasn't for me to tell, in the first place, it was Meredith's business. *And in the second place, Kyle sweetie, do you think feeling might return to my arm pretty soon?* “C'mon, let's help.”

We got there in time to see George hurl himself in a low dive at Meredith. She dodged but overbalanced, and Terry slammed into her from the other side, forcing her into the snow. She struggled to get up but Brenda piled on top of Terry, and George fell across her legs, effectively pinning her. They looked like an advertisement for group sex.

Meredith was shrieking mindlessly at us, so loud and fast that no one could make out what she was saying. Then she started laughing, high, shrieky laughter that spiraled up and up until she lay still, gasping for breath.

Terry was breathing hard and lying almost directly on top of her. Brenda was lying on top of *him*. “Well,” he panted, “this was fun. Now what?”

I could practically feel the snow melting beneath her body, soaking into her thin clothing. “Let her up,” I said, shivering in empathy. “But keep hold of her. I'll be right back.” I turned and shambled back to her car, popping open the glove compartment and grabbing a bottle of pills, their use, Cobran had cautioned



s, for emergencies only. Well, this sure as hell qualified. I got back to the yard in time to see my friends haul Meredith inside, and followed them in. “Bren, could you get me a glass of water?”

She was way ahead of me; must have guessed what I went to get. I opened the bottle and shook out two pills. My hands weren't very steady; a dozen or so spilled on the floor. “Okay, Merry, open wide,” I said with forced briskness. She glared at me and pressed her lips together so tightly they immediately went white.

“Terrific,” Brenda muttered.

“What's going on with her?” George demanded. “Is she drunk or what?”

“Of course not, you idiot!” Terry snapped. “What are you, blind *and* stupid?”

“Never mind, you guys. Just ... help me get her mouth open, okay?” I was trembling, near tears, the adrenaline wearing off and horrid sorrow for my friend taking its place. How humiliating, to have such a thing happen in front of a bunch of near-strangers. Now we'd pry her mouth open like an animal who may bite, and force pills down her throat, and when this was all over she'd have some explaining to do, and like as not would never come back here. Even if they welcomed her back, she'd probably be too embarrassed.

Kyle stepped forward and put a hand on the back of her neck. He'd been so quiet I'd forgotten he was there. She flinched back from him and then stood still, trembling like a puppy. “Come on, dear, open your mouth,” he said gently, kneading the back of her neck. “It will make you feel better. Then we can all rest for a while.”

She looked at him distrustfully and then, incredibly, unbelievably, she opened her mouth so wide we could all see she'd never had her tonsils out. Quick as a flash I popped the pills in; her jaws clicked together and, ignoring the water Brenda was offering, she crunched them up and swallowed.

“Yuck,” was George's comment.

Kyle and Terry were looking at me. I showed them the bottle. “Tranks,” I said, and they nodded in unison.

George still looked mystified, and a little annoyed. “What do you mean, tranks?”

“Trank-wuh-li-zers,” Terry drawled. “Want me to spell it?”

“Oh.”

Leaving the boys in the basement, Brenda and I helped Meredith upstairs to Bren's room. We got her wet clothes off, and when we had stripped off her slippers and socks I checked her feet for frostbite. She was fine; we'd gotten her out of the snow in time. Bren noticed the missing toes (a reminder of the last time Merry went galloping out into the snow *sans* footwear) but, typically, didn't say anything. She pulled back the sheets and blankets of her bed and, once Merry had clambered in, pulled them up to her chin, looking like a mom tucking in the world's biggest toddler. The tranks worked fast and Merry was docile, yawning. I knew she'd sleep for some time.

Brenda carefully pulled the bedroom door shut, and as soon as we got back downstairs the inquisition



egan.

“Spill it,” Terry ordered, arms crossed over his chest.

“It's none of your business, Terry,” I retorted. One date, and the guy thinks I'm going to bare Merry's secrets? Ha! “Merry'll tell you herself, if she wants to.”

“She's undernourished, and she's not in school this semester,” Kyle said. “She mentioned something about home tutoring ... obviously, she's been pulled out of classes, to recover from ... whatever ... at home. Anorexia? No, she's not *that* thin...” He was thinking out loud, brow furrowed in thought, and doing a pretty good job of deducing, too. It was kind of scary to watch. “I wonder ... tranquilizers? Could she be a manic-depressive?” He had turned, was consulting Terry, and while they discussed One Hundred and One Things that Might Be Wrong With Meredith, he took off his glasses and polished them with his shirt. I saw then the only flaw in his good looks: when his glasses were off, he squinted and his velvet brown eyes practically disappeared. His vision must be *terrible*, worse than Brenda's.

“Guys, will you stop?” Brenda said, annoyed. “Andrea *said* if Merry wants you to *know*, she'll tell you. That's *it*. She's going to sleep forever, so you can either wait for her or go home.”

Brenda, for all her diminutive size and mousy good looks, was a regular hellcat when she thought someone was being talked about behind their backs, and she wouldn't stand for it. Terry glared at her but Kyle looked abashed, and spread his hands in mute apology. George still looked mystified and annoyed.

“Well, this sucks. I'm not gonna hang around here while she naps all afternoon,” he grumbled. He was looking at me hopefully, but if he thought I was abandoning Merry to go watch MTV with him, he was out of his mind.

“I'm not going anywhere,” I said firmly, and Terry nodded agreement. Kyle decided to wait, too, and so George changed his mind and said he would stay. So we sat around and looked at each other for a while, trying to figure out what to do next.

* * * *

“HURRY UP!” Anya panted.

“I *am* hurrying,” I hissed back. “Look, this is ridiculous. We're running away. Good guys don't run away.”

“I'm out of telekinetic charges and he can dodge your bullets.”

I put a little more into my sprinting and managed to pull abreast of Anya, who could practically fly when she put her mind to it. Short legs or not, that girl was *fast*. “What's—the worst—that can—happen—to us?” I gasped.

“Death,” was the terse reply.

I didn't have the breath to argue. And I was hot, so hot from running, it was almost like an envelope of oven-air was surrounding the two of us. Breathing was torture, it felt like someone had reached into my mouth and dropped two or three red-hot coals down my throat.



suddenly, Anya dropped into a crouch and stuck out her leg. I tripped over it and hit the street nose-first, narrowly missing the wall of heat Black Flame had set up for us. We couldn't see it, but the baking heat it was giving off would have fried us in a nanosecond.

“Thangs,” I wheezed, getting to my knees and cupping my hands to catch the flow of blood.

“Oh, Stiletto! Your nose is just *gushing*! I'm so sorry but I realized we were running into a trap and there wasn't time to warn—you're bleeding all over yourself!”

“Thangs fo' th'tip,” I muttered, coughing up some more for good measure and spitting it onto the street. Where was Agnostia when I needed her, to mentally dominate me into thinking I didn't have a skinned forehead and bloody nose?

High, witch-like laughter filled the night air. My fingers itched to throttle the life out of Black Flame. A red boot appeared in front of me and I followed it up: red boots, orange spandex pants, sun-yellow spandex shirt. His mask was a swirl of yellow, red, and orange. He looked like a giant candle flame.

“Whad are you subbossed to be?” I said. “A downhill racer?”

He grinned at me. “You're going to have a beautiful black eye.”

I coughed and sneezed and blew and spat, finally clearing most of the blood from my nasal passages and thoroughly grossing out poor Anya. Black Flame was unmoved, commenting throughout on how big my nose was getting and how long it would take a black eye to fade. I knew what he was doing, of course: stalling until Shadowbyte could get here. But I was too tired and pissed off to care.

“Don't touch him,” Anya warned as I got to my feet. She could probably read the mayhem on my face, see the way my fingers curled into white-knuckled fists. “He's too hot, you'll get burned.”

“Naw, go ahead, grab me, Stiletto. I've got something for you,” he taunted.

“Come on,” I said to Anya, walking around him. Bewildered, she trotted to catch up.

“What are you doing? Don't turn your back on Black Fl—”

“He can't hurt us. In fact, he's under specific orders from Shadowbyte *not* to hurt us. Otherwise he would have killed us already. C'mon, let's put some miles between them and us. I don't know about you but I'm not anxious to find out what Shadowbyte's got in mind.”

“Wait!” Black Flame cried angrily. “Don't go any further! I'm warning you two bimbos, that's far enough!”

“He can't stop us without seriously injuring us,” I explained. “But if we die, he dies. Shadowbyte will make sure of it. Black Flame's got a terrific power for self-defense but it's limited if you're supposed to take prisoners, if you're not allowed to actually hurt anybody.”

“Huh!” Anya said. “I never thought of it that way. You're pretty good at this, Andy.”

“Yes, indeed,” Shadowbyte said, doing one of his step-out-of-nowhere numbers. I was getting better; I didn't scream this time and only flinched back a foot or so. I was overjoyed to see evidence of a recent



hooded nose on his face, as well. Anya must have thrown him pretty hard into the wall.

“Shadowbyte!” I cried with feigned happiness, ignoring Anya's frightened squeak. “My man! Murderer of widows and orphans! Swindler of the poor! Beater of the pre-adolescent! How have you been?” Out of the corner of my eye I saw Black Flame grab Anya's upper arm and get an elbow in the throat for his trouble. Then I had my hands full with Shadowbyte.

One second he was towering over me, the next his hands had shot out too fast for me to skip back, and he gripped my shoulders and pulled me forward. I felt my feet leave the ground by a good four inches, and then we were eye to eye. Or eye to sunglasses. I observed my reflection and noted that Black Flame had been right. I *was* going to have a shiner. And I was very proud of myself. Scared shitless, but not showing it. Worrying about my looks, not my life.

“Are you familiar with the phrase, too smart for your own good?” he asked me softly, calmly, as if he wasn't holding my 140 pounds off the ground, as if we were chatting at a faculty tea.

“You know, we never talk anymore,” I said, and then white light exploded in the back of my brain somewhere, and I went night-night for a while.

* * * *

“HA!” KYLE SAID, looking at the dice. “Got you!”

“Don't be so proud of yourself,” I snapped back. “You've been playing this game ... what? A *year* longer than I have?”

“What's this ‘elbow in the throat’ idiocy?” Terry asked, scowling at the scoresheet. “How long am I out of it? Couple seconds?”

“Seconds!” Brenda hollered. “You wish!”

“It's not like you crushed my larynx or anything.”

“No, but the blow probably drove you to your knees,” Kyle pointed out, “and you're not going to be thinking about anything but breathing for a good five minutes.”

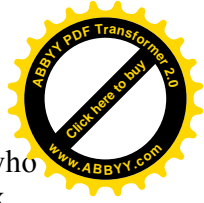
Grumbling, Terry made the appropriate annotation, and Brenda slid her pad across to me. She'd sketched Stiletto on her knees, looking up at Black Flame, with Shadowbyte in the background and Anya in the foreground.

“Wow!” Terry said, looking over my shoulder. “That's great, Brenda, just the way I pictured it. We should get you some colored pencils, then you could get the costumes exactly right.”

“So! Kyle, now that I'm unconscious, what are you going to do to me?” I asked, smiling, pulse going about two hundred twenty.

He smiled back. “You'll find out.”

“Be careful what you do to my girl,” George said, slinging an arm around my shoulders. Aarrggh! And what do you mean, *your* girl?



Hello,” Meredith said quietly, and everything stopped. She'd come noiselessly down the stairs and who knew how long she'd been watching. We looked at her for a long moment; she was standing about six feet away, wan and pale, swathed head-to-toe in Brenda's unicorn bed sheet.

Terry started, and I'm sure he didn't mean anything. But she just looked so ... so cute and so silly wrapped in that sheet, he couldn't help snorting. And then laughing. Pretty soon we were all shrieking laughter. Meredith put her hands on her hips and mock-glared.

“C'mere,” Terry gasped at last, pulling out an empty seat. “Come over here and sit down. Nice outfit.”

“My clothes are soaked,” she said, taking her seat. The sheet slipped as she settled herself and for a moment every guy's attention was riveted on her as she tried to right it. “I didn't have many options. Luckily your mother didn't see me, Brenda.”

“You missed some fun,” Kyle told her, being the first to tear his gaze from her chest. “My character just KO'd Stiletto, and Brenda practically broke Terry's larynx. It was a good time.”

“Practically broke, my ass,” Terry growled. “One lucky shot and you've all got me in a medical ward with tubes everywhere. Unlikely!”

I saw what they were doing and could have hugged them all. They were pretending nothing unusual had happened, were taking her symptoms in stride, were still including her. I was stunned, and proud to call them my friends. How had they come to mean so much to me in less than a month?

“I'm seeing a psychiatrist for depression,” Meredith announced, and all the chatter stopped. A cliché, but you really could have heard a pin drop. “I had a nervous breakdown two months ago, just before the holidays, and that's why I'm not in school.”

Utter silence. She had their complete attention.

“I should have told you before, but I didn't know anyone very well, and I didn't think—I didn't count on—I never thought I'd like coming here so much. That I'd like all of you so much,” she said, looking around at everyone and letting her gaze linger on Terry. “What you saw earlier ... my hysteria ... that was a reaction to some medication my psychiatrist is trying. It won't happen again.”

Kyle spoke. “That ... *particular* reaction won't happen again, isn't that right?”

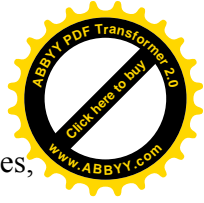
“Yes. That's exactly right.” Unsaid: who knows how many more reactions you'll have to witness, so you'd better figure out right now what you think about that.

“Don't come here again,” Terry said, and Meredith went white, “without a coat. I mean, Jesus! You could have frozen to death.”

“I agree with Terry,” Brenda said in a scolding tone. “You've got to take care of yourself physically or you'll never get better mentally.”

Merry, still pale but smiling, sketched a mock salute.

“Besides, you're in good company. In fact, psychiatric bills ought to be a prerequisite for membership in the Teen Furies,” Kyle said. Brenda, Terry, George, and Kyle had been calling themselves the Teen



uries for about a year and we had apparently joined the club. They called us the TFCFF's: Teen Furies, Cannon Falls Faction. I called them the TFBW's: Teen Furies, Buncha Weirdos.

“With the number of I.Q. points in this room, I'm sure we can come up with a name less ... how shall I put this ... stupid?” Merry took the sting out of her words with a sweet smile which, of course, did not stop us from jeering her.

We all trooped upstairs to find her something to wear while her clothes dried, though Terry argued strenuously all the way up that she should stay in the sheet.

“How about this?” he said a few minutes later, holding up a sky-blue bra with mammoth cups. He had been elbow-deep in Brenda's underwear drawer a moment before, something bound to give any girl nightmares.

“Nothing of that sort will fit me,” Merry said dryly. She wasn't exactly flat-chested, but compared to Brenda's she might as well have been.

Bren slapped his hand and the bra fluttered to the floor. I slammed the drawer shut, just missing his fingers. “We don't need your help, Terr,” I said. “Why don't you go outside? Forever?”

“No, I want to help. How about this?” He held up a pair of fishnet tights. I had time to wonder what the hell *Brenda* was doing with fishnet pantyhose before she grabbed his arm, shook the tights free, and marched him to the door.

I followed. “We'll see you outside, Merry.”

“God! Did you see when the sheet slipped?” Terry groaned when Bren's door slammed shut. He clawed at the door and I had to pull him away. “I think I saw the upper edge of her nipple.”

“Gross!”

“Well, I think I did. I wish they would have let me stay.”

“Forget it. Buy *Playboy* like everybody else.”

“She's just the cutest goddamned thing.”

“Cute?” I echoed, incredulous. Meredith was a lot of things, but cute wasn't one of them.

“Oh, sure. You knew about her breakdown, huh?” he asked suddenly, startling me into an honest answer.

“I was there when it happened.”

“Probably pretty hard for her to keep it from you, then, huh?”

I stared at him; he looked perfectly serious. Then he grinned and I laughed a little. “Yeah. Probably. What do you think about it? I mean, Meredith likes you a lot, God knows why, and her announcement—it might change things between you, right?”

“Change things?” He looked at me blankly. “What things? I think it's cool.”



Of course,” I said comfortingly. “Even as a little boy, you always knew your first girlfriend would be mentally unstable, right?”

“Har-har. Besides, I'd figured most of it out myself already.”

“You're sooo smart,” I breathed, dodging when he tried to give me a pinch.

George was waiting for me as we descended the steps, frowning as he watched me slapping Terry's hands away. Times like this made me think the guy had ten hands instead of the usual two. “Andrea, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure.” I looked back; Terry had headed for the family room, and Bren had things under control with Merry. “Sure, where should we go?”

We went to the basement and he made me sit down on the couch. “I love you and I want to go steady with you,” he said with no preamble, and it was a good thing I was sitting down. He tugged off his class ring and handed it to me. I stared at it in my palm. How had that gotten there? How had *I* gotten *here*?

“Uh ... George, I don't know what to say.” I would have a boy's ring to wear to school! Finally, I would have a boyfriend, an *out-of-town* boyfriend. Someone to hang out with, someone to call and be called by. A boyfriend. My first boyfriend. His ring to wear. His jacket—no, his clothes would never fit me. But a great big ring. I would have to get it sized. Wrap it with yarn, something. Cool!

Wait a minute! He gives you the creeps!

No, he doesn't. I'm just uncomfortable around him sometimes. It's only because I don't know him very well.

Well, then, my inner voice snorted. It sounded awfully like Meredith. By all means, go steady with him. Just what do you think you're doing? You don't even like him, you like Kyle.

Well now, *Kyle* isn't down here trying to give me his class ring, is he? *Give him a chance, idiot. Your trouble is, you want everything right this minute.*

I ignored the stupid inner voice. I'd never had a boyfriend before, never in my life, and if Kyle wasn't going to get his act together, I sure as hell wasn't about to let *this* opportunity go by.

“I'm flattered.” I clenched the ring in my fist, then loosened up and slipped it on the middle finger of my left hand. Mental note: call Trisha and double check which hand I'm supposed to wear this thing on. “Thank you.”

He pulled me to him and kissed me, pressing his lips down on mine. I looked at him and belatedly closed my eyes and, at his hoarse urging, opened my mouth. His tongue swept inside and I flinched back, but he had a pretty good grip on my arms. His tongue explored my mouth and I was annoyed—my mouth already *had* a perfectly good tongue, thank you. The kiss was very warm, very wet, and seemed to last for hours. Hours and hours.

I pulled back and he lurched after me, then seemed to recover himself and sank back against the couch. “Now it's official,” he said with a smug smile, and all I wanted to do, in order, was wipe my mouth and find some yarn.



* * * *

ON THE DRIVE back to Cannon Falls that night, I noticed Meredith was wearing Terry's class ring.

Chapter 6

I CALLED TRISHA that night and asked, very casually, on which hand a girl wears her boyfriend's class ring. "The left," she said, and I quickly switched hands. Thank God I had a friend who knew these things.

Unusual for Trisha, she didn't demand to know why I was asking. Instead she talked about Jim, her latest. He'd been around since November and I couldn't believe it. She usually went through boys like cats went through litter. Meredith blamed it on television, said Trisha had no attention span. Me, I figured she just hadn't found the right guy.

"He's taking me away next weekend, for Valentine's," Trisha practically whispered, and I started paying attention. *This* was something new. "There's a bed and breakfast in Hastings—the Thorwood Inn. We're going there."

Trisha was a virgin, like me, like Meredith and Brenda. So this was news of great import. I opened my mouth to say, 'Hey! Merry and I will be in Hastings next weekend, too,' thought better of it, and instead demanded, "Who's paying for this?"

"He is."

"Uh-huh."

"Don't say it like that," she said sharply. "We're not going to do anything."

"Uh-huh."

"I mean, we'll *do* stuff, but we're not going All The Way. I love him, but I'm not ready."

You can *do* stuff, without going all the way? What kind of stuff? Never mind, Andy, pay attention. "Does he know this? That you're not—ah—giving up the goods, so to speak?"

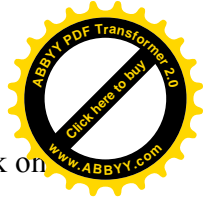
"Andy! Do you think I'd keep *that* a secret? He knows everything about me, and I know everything about him. *He's* not a virgin—I mean, he's almost seventeen, for God's sake—"

I snorted. "A regular candidate for the nursing home."

"But he says he'll wait for me to be ready."

"What a prince. So why the Thorwood Inn? Why not dinner and a movie?"

She replied disdainfully, "We're not babies, Andrea. We can spend the night together without it meaning we're having sex. Our relationship is mature enough for that. By the way, I told my mother I'd be staying with Brenda and you guys in Hastings. So if she calls, cover for me, and then get hold of me at the Thorwood."



“Oh, great,” I grumbled. “Make me your partner in crime. I'm sure Jim won't mind a bit when I knock on the door. ‘Excuse me, Jim, but tell Trisha to call home. Nice thong, by the way.’ Terrific.”

“Please, Andy?”

“Oh, you know perfectly well I'll cover for you.” I paused, feeling wistful. “You must be looking forward to next weekend, huh?”

“Oh, Andy, you have no idea!” she cried. “I love him so much but we can *never* spend enough time together, with school and speech team for me, and basketball for him ... just the thought of spending the night together, knowing I don't have to be home by midnight ... and sleeping next to him all night and waking up next to him...”

“Please. I'm trying not to ralph my supper.”

“You wait, Andy. It'll be your turn someday and then you'll see what I mean.”

My good humor evaporated. It supposedly *was* my turn. I had a boyfriend who loved me and I, presumably, loved him. That was why we were going together, after all. But the thought of spending the night with George ... it didn't make my skin crawl, because he wasn't unattractive, but it made me very uncomfortable. I could never do it. Besides, my feet would dangle over the end of any bed George could fit in comfortably.

When I saw Trisha the next day the first thing she noticed was George's ring. She let out a shriek like a rat had tumbled out of her locker and seized my hand, inspecting the bauble with fierce scrutiny. Trish was great at stuff like that. She was the first person to notice girls wearing class rings, promise rings, engagement rings, new sweaters, new notebooks ... if a girl trimmed her bangs an eighth of an inch over the weekend, Trish noticed.

“You *never!*” she gasped. “You never said a word last night! Oh, I could kill you.”

“I'm not the only one you have to kill, then,” I said smugly. “Meredith has one, too.”

Trisha's mouth fell open and I thought she would fall backward into her locker. “Meredith? *Our* Meredith? Is going with someone? Who?”

I told her.

“Isn't that the one you said looked like a vampire?”

“The same. But you didn't think she would go with your ordinary high school boy, did you? Not our Merry. The weirder they are, the more she wants them.” I wished more than anything that Merry was there, gossiping with us. Mornings at school were the worst, when I talked with Trisha about this, that, and the other thing. It had been our ritual, the three of us. Now it was the two of us. “So we both snagged studs from Hastings.”

“Well, good for you! What's George like?”

“He's—err—he's blonde, wears glasses, likes ... well, he likes *me*, but...” Frantically, I mentally cast about for something, anything, I knew about my boyfriend. “He writes poetry. He's written me the most



mazing poems ... you wouldn't believe it.”

“Oh, you've sized it with yarn...” Trisha hadn't stopped her inspection during our chat, now she patted my palm and let go. “That's good, but you'll have to keep changing it because it'll get dirty and if you get it *wet* ... bleah. You should go to the jewelry store and buy a metal sizer. They're great ... see?” She held up her hand, and Jim's ring twinkled at me.

He showed up about then, looking surprised to see me, and nodded a greeting. I didn't think I'd ever seen him smile. Being Trisha's boyfriend must be a deadly serious business.

“Hi, hon,” Trisha said. “Andy was just telling me about her new boyfriend.”

“Oh,” he said neutrally. Dutifully, I showed him my ring. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” I said. Mindful of Trish's main woe—she and Jim never got to spend enough time together—I decided to make myself scarce. “I'll see you after school, Trisha. Bye, Jim.”

I looked back once, and saw Jim hug her hard enough to life her off her feet. She threw her arms around him and gasped laughter, and he smiled.

* * * *

“YOU'RE GIVING Jim your virginity as a Valentine's Day present?” Meredith asked, aghast. Trisha and I had taken the bus to her house after school to yak and pig out on junk food. It was a daily ritual. “Couldn't you just say it with flowers?”

“For the third time, I'm not going to sleep with him.”

I swallowed a mouthful of pickle and said, “Why the hell are you going to a hotel...”

“It's not a hotel. It's a bed and breakfast.”

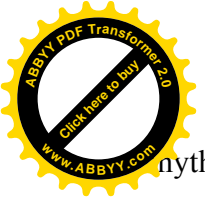
“...if not to do the nasty?”

“Oh, that's a beautiful way to put it,” Trisha snapped. I'd been needling her on and off about Jim all day, and now Meredith looked ready to take a turn. “Why don't you just shut up and have another pickle?”

Anger does not look good on girls. Oh, there's the “you're beautiful when you're angry” bullshit, but in reality anger flushes cheeks and foreheads, narrows eyes, musses hair. It's not a pretty sight, except on rare occasions.

Trisha, of course, was the rare occasion. She looked good no matter what her mood, and anger did great things to her eyes, made them sparkle and shine dangerously. Her cheeks were flushed but her forehead remained cool and creamy, and her hair was its usual light brown, curly mass. She had pulled it back from her forehead today and curls tumbled down her shoulders, emphasizing her hazel eyes. Mold-colored, she said, but they were actually the color of a sea lagoon, or, when she was *very* cross, wet leaves.

“Can't you be happy for me?” she asked. I quit thinking about wet leaves and started paying attention; things were getting interesting. “I'm really looking forward to this weekend, and I'm not going to do



anything I'll be sorry for later.”

“What about protection?” Meredith asked quietly, and I realized that she wasn't bugging Trish to be mean. She was worried about her. “Don't you think you should bring something, just in case? We'll go with you—”

I straightened. “We will?”

“—if you're nervous.”

“I've been on the Pill since November,” she announced, flushing with angry pleasure at our expressions of surprise. “Almost four months, and I haven't slept with him yet. That should prove I mean what I say.”

There was a pause while we digested this, and then Meredith said calmly, “Of course you mean what you say. We're not trying to make you mad, Trisha.”

“*God*, no!” I broke in. Nobody in their right mind made Trisha mad. She never forgot, that was one thing, and Jim was liable to turn the offender into a grease spot on the pavement, that was another. Finally, she was related to most of the town and they were a tight group. Pissing Trisha off resulted in your mail getting lost, your checks bouncing, your bank loans getting turned down, your restaurant meals getting overcooked. She was the Godfather of Cannon Falls.

“We're worried about you, that's all,” Merry continued.

“I—*we* just don't want you to get hurt,” I said. “What if he—now, I don't know Jim very well, but what if he really really wants to? And you say no?”

“If you're suggesting rape, that's the meanest, filthiest—”

“Not rape, okay?” I said hastily. “That's not what I meant. *Coercion*. After all, you really love him, no one doubts that. You think we haven't noticed you've gone out with him longer than anyone else? What is it, six, seven months, now? Hey, I've got nothing against Jim. I don't even know him. But I'm—*we're* afraid you'll let yourself get talked into something you're not ready for.”

Trisha thawed a little. “I appreciate what you're saying, I guess,” she said, visibly reigning in her temper, “but everything's under control. I know about guys getting excited and pushing stuff you're not ready for—you don't think I've had to fend a guy off at the end of a date, someone who wants more than I'm willing to give?”

“I guess that's true,” Meredith said slowly. “You certainly know more about that sort of thing than we do.”

“It's not that we don't think you can handle yourself,” I added, “because you can, probably better than any of us. But you're really crazy about Jim—”

“And he's really crazy about me.”

“—so I guess he wouldn't push you, huh?” I said, giving up.

Trisha looked triumphant. “That's right, he wouldn't. Glad you guys finally caught on. Jeez! You'd think



his was my first date.”

“None of us have ever spent the night with anyone before,” Meredith pointed out.

“Not since we quit turning tricks,” I cracked, trying to lighten the mood.

“It kind of unnerved us, when we heard your plans for the weekend.”

“And what about *your* plans for the weekend?” she asked quietly. She didn't stay quiet for long, though; she turned to Meredith and started giving us holy old hell for accepting rings from boys we'd only known a month or so ... and for not telling her the second we'd gotten them.

“You really should size that thing,” I said, after giving Terry's ring a thorough inspection. He must have had small fingers, because the ring was loose on her finger, but not unreasonably so. George's fingers, on the other hand, were huge. Or mine were exceptionally small. I must have used half a ball of yarn to size it down. “It'll slip past your knuckle one of these days and you'll lose it.”

Meredith waved my concerns away. “You never told me the tearful, touching story of how George talked you into it. Did he tie you down?”

“No!” I said angrily, ignoring Trisha's raised eyebrows. “No, he told me he loved me and asked me to wear it, and I said yes.”

“And?” Trish prompted.

“And...” And he kissed me and it was awful, couldn't get his tongue out of my mouth fast enough. “And that's all. What about you, Merry?”

“We had a bet and I lost.”

“What?” Trish and I shrieked in unison.

“Which word didn't you understand?” Merry asked sweetly. She went on to tell us that on her and Terry's first date, the same day George and I had watched hours of MTV, Terry confessed he might be falling in love with her. Her reply: “There are things about me that, if they came out, would make that emotion vanish.” His reply: “Try me.” She hadn't elaborated, and the bet was born: if and when these revelations came out and he still felt the same about her, she would wear his ring.

“And last Saturday, when you had that reaction to the medication...” I prompted.

Meredith nodded. “Yes. He came to me after I'd changed clothes in Brenda's room and handed me his ring.” She flushed a little, and I just bet Terry had planted a wet one on her, too. Damn! If I wasn't careful, I was really going to like the son of a bitch. “So ... so now I'm wearing it,” she finished, looking at it on her finger. I'd caught her doing that a couple times—she kept looking surprised to find it there.

* * * *

OH, MY HEAD. My aching, breaking *head*. What happened?

“She's coming around.”



Who is? I am? Who said that? Where the hell am I?

“Don't get too close. If she panics she might take your head off.”

Damn right. “Why's it so dark in here?” I demanded, then clutched my head and groaned as my voice boomed around in my skull.

“Because you haven't opened your eyes, dummy.”

I opened them and beheld a most unwelcome sight: Black Flame sitting next to me and Shadowbyte standing at the foot of the couch.

My hand shot out and I got B.F. by the throat, which is harder than it sounds because it's difficult to get a good grip right away, and I have small hands. He made a lovely sound: “Grrgghh!” or something like that, and I went for my—

—went for my—

“It's not there,” Shadowbyte said mildly, crossing his arms over his chest, and I glared at him with every ounce of poison I could muster. We both ignored Black Flame's thrashings and gurglings. “We relieved you of your weapons when we brought you here. Let go of him.”

“Where's Anya?” I grated, squeezing, squeezing and knocking Terry's other hand away. He kept trying to grab my hand and wrench the fingers away, probably trying to give me a bad burn in the process. My fingers were starting to ache fiercely ... and were getting uncomfortably hot. It was like putting your hand on an electric stove burner you knew was heating up. But Black Flame wasn't exactly having fun, either. I knew his throat must still be sore from Anya's last jab. “Where is she? There's going to be trouble if you don't—”

“Oh, for heaven's sake, Stiletto! Let him go!” Agnostia, unnoticed until now, bent and tried to pry my fingers from Terry's throat. “You're just making this harder.”

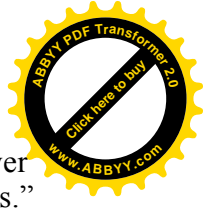
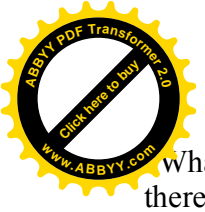
I let go and sat up, fighting dizziness. “What are *you* doing here?” I grumbled. “What's going on? And does anyone have an aspirin? Have you turned traitor?”

“Black Flame brought me here, they'll tell you in a minute, your head doesn't hurt and no, I have *not* turned traitor and shame on you for asking.”

I pressed my hands to my face and thought about getting up. Agnostia's cool hand touched my brow for a minute. “You feel perfectly fine,” she said. I looked up, looked at her. Eye contact made her power work better, and I was grateful for what she was trying to do. “Your head doesn't hurt, you're not dizzy.”

Ah! Much better. I stood up, unaided, and said, “Why don't you talk Terry into thinking his throat doesn't hurt?” Which was as close as I could come to an apology, though I think I was perfectly justified in my reaction.

Anya bounded in just then, clad in a new costume. A dark purple catsuit with a blazing cross on the breast, and a short black jacket with many pockets. Her hair shimmered down her back and her eyes blazed out at us from a dark blue mask. “Great!” she cried. “You're awake! Now we can get down to business.”



“What business? Will someone tell me what's going on? Last thing I remember, me and El Psycho over there...” Jerking a thumb at Shadowbyte. “...were nose to nose, and then someone turned out the lights.”

“I turned out the lights,” Shadowbyte said calmly. “I didn't think you would listen to reason.”

“Yeah, he really misjudged you,” Black Flame croaked, rubbing his throat and glaring at me. I ignored him and kept grilling Shadowbyte. “So, what? Is this your secret hideout? Are you going to have to kill us now that we know the location?”

He gave me a long, speculative look and my mouth went dry. “Just a joke,” I said weakly.

“That's a worry for another day,” he promised. Aack! “Why don't you all follow me into the conference room and I'll tell you what's been going on.”

Yes, why don't we? Ninjaboy was waiting for us and I went to the seat beside his. Shadowbyte sat at the head of the table, Black Flame at the foot, Agnostia and Anya across from us.

Shadowbyte steepled his fingers under his chin, thought for a moment (We figured; it was hard to see his expression behind those sunglasses. He might have been taking a quick cat nap.) and then talked for a long time. I listened with half an ear; he still hadn't given me my weapons back and I felt naked without them. Agnostia and Anya would pay attention for me. What I picked up from the lecture (That's what it was, of course, and never mind that Shadowbyte thought it was a briefing.) was this: Shadowbyte wasn't the top bad guy anymore. There was an even bigger bad guy who was out to capture all of us, for diabolical reasons left unsaid. So Shadow's suggestion was to band together and fight the menace, rather than be picked off one by one.

“That's why you've been coming after us?” Ninjaboy asked.

Shadow nodded. “You all immediately went on the attack whenever I came close—”

“Came close?” Anya sputtered. “You appear out of nowhere like Casper the freakin' ghost and expect us not to be startled? Not to defend ourselves? No offense, Shadowbyte, but your reputation precedes you.”

“—and I did not feel constrained to let you knock *me* out of commission before I explained what I wanted. So Black Flame and I decided to bring you all here. Agnostia and Ninjaboy were easy...”

“Hey!” In unison.

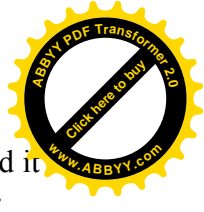
“...but Anya and Stiletto proved more of a challenge. Once I had Stiletto out of the way—”

“I want a machine gun,” I said suddenly.

He ignored me. “—I persuaded Anya to help me bring everyone back here.”

There was a few more minutes of babbling and I shifted in my seat. Where *were* my guns, anyway? And why was this taking so long? Then everyone was standing up and pushing chairs back, chattering like we were all best buddies instead of deadly enemies. I mentally shook my head at these turns of events but had decided long ago to take my cues from the veteran players.

“Come here, Stiletto,” Shadowbyte said, and I obeyed without thinking. Damned if that wasn't annoying!



He slid my Beretta across the table to me and with something approaching religious ecstasy I snatched it up and inspected the loads. Then he slid across my dagger, my ankle gun, my switchblades, my mini-grenades, and my exploding fountain pen. In seconds I was fully clothed again.

“What I can't figure out is, since your costume doesn't have pockets, where you keep everything.” He looked me up and down critically. I looked terrific and knew it; my black bodysuit and silver face-paint did wonders for my figure, but he looked about as turned on as a gynecologist.

“Never mind,” I said primly. A girl has to have some secrets. And how'd he get them off me in the first place, if he didn't know where I kept them? The thought made me shudder. I gritted my teeth and forced the rest out. “Thanks for giving them back.”

His left shoulder went up an inch. Ah! A shrug, that's what that was. “No need to keep them from you. You can't hurt me here.”

“Also,” I prompted, “there's a truce.”

“Of course. A truce.”

“Great,” I muttered. “Hope we don't have to keep reminding you.”

He raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth, presumably to blow me into a thousand pieces with some cutting remark, when Black Flame poked his head in. “You two still here? Hurry up, we've got to get moving.”

“Why?” Shadowbyte asked.

“What do you mean, why?” Behind him, Agnostia was peering at us. “We have to track them down, get the jump on them before they—”

“There's no need for that,” he said mildly. “I know where they are.”

There was a beat of silence, broken by me, of course. “Well?” I demanded. “Where are they?”

“They followed us here.”

“You mean they're coming?” Black Flame asked.

“I mean they're here.”

* * * *

“WHAT?” TERRY exploded. “You mean your character kept us in one place with that hour-long lecture when we could have been getting ready for them?”

For once, I was in complete agreement with the Vampire King. “Yeah, Kyle, what's the matter with you?” V&V was about fists and fighting and knocking each other out and trying to kill each other. Not boardroom discussions.

He shrugged, and Brenda looked at him sharply. “My character has a plan,” he said. “He always has a



man. Besides, I'm tired of playing. Let's take a break.”

“Yeah,” George said, gripping my hand. We had been holding hands for the last hour and I wanted mine back. “We'll do the sneak attack next week.”

“Kyle,” Meredith asked suddenly, “are you all right?”

I looked at him; everyone did. He looked okay to me. A little pale, maybe, but still tall, dark, and serious. Still mucho cute-o. And hell, it was February in Minnesota. We were all pale.

“I'm fine. Just tired. I might be coming down with something, I've been feeling a little run down.”

“Are you up for tonight's festivities?” Terry asked wickedly.

Brenda perked up. “What? What are we doing?”

“We're going to swing by the Thorwood—” was as far as he got before I shrieked a denial.

“No. NO! Are you out of your mind?”

Everyone stared at me, except for Merry, who smothered a chuckle with her palm.

“We're going to the Thorwood,” Terry said, slowly and carefully, as if he were afraid I might leap up and run from the room, “to take pictures of one of the suites.”

“Oh, for your history paper,” Brenda said.

“Right. My mom knows the innkeepers and they said we could come over tonight. I guess there aren't many guests.” He was still looking at me strangely. I swallowed as my pulse returned to normal. For a moment I had thought ... never mind. “Unless Andy knows something we don't.”

“Of course not,” I said weakly.

“Ri-i-ight,” Kyle said softly. “How could you possibly know something we don't?”

I nodded vigorously, and then they pounced, Brenda and Terry getting up and scrambling *across the table* to knock me to the floor, Kyle coming around to the side, Merry trailing behind. George hadn't let go of my hand and he was on the floor with me.

“Let go of me!” I yelled, wriggling furiously. Beside me, George shouted agreement with that sentiment. Brenda's weight was on my legs, Terry was sprawled across my torso, Kyle was kneeling on George to get a good look at me. Merry stood by and watched, still smiling. “Let me up! Assholes!”

“It'll probably be easier on you if you tell us everything right away,” Kyle said soothingly. He flexed long fingers and my eyes widened. He was known to be a devastating tickler, tireless and without mercy. “Easier on you, easier on our eardrums.”

“Yes, we've all noticed how you can attain terrifying volume,” Meredith, the traitorous wretch, pointed out. She knew everything I did and she was just going to stand there while they tortured it out of me! Some best friend!



“Meredith knows everything I—” was as far as I got before Kyle's bony fingers were digging into my ribs. I started howling with laughter and tried to buck Terry and Brenda off, but it was no good. “Stop! Stop!” I couldn't, couldn't betray Trisha. If they showed up in her room she'd kill me. Or sic her family on me, all six hundred of them.

I shrieked and yelled and cursed and writhed, but Kyle was relentless. George had finally dislodged him and was helping, for reasons I couldn't imagine, except while Kyle was behaving as gentlemanly as possible under the circumstances, George's fingers were straying dangerously close to private property.

“I can't! I can't!” I wailed. “She'll kill me!”

“You can die by her hands, or ours,” Brenda said sweetly.

“Whose hands?” Terry grunted, trying to hold on to my torso despite my bucking and writhing.

What she would say to me ... what she would *do* to me ... and don't forget Jim, who doesn't have much of a sense of humor about such things ... I can't. I can't!

“All right, all right, stop! Stop!” Motion ceased and they looked at me expectantly. “My aunt's in town and she's staying at the Thorwood with her boyfriend.”

“Why wouldn't you want us to go there?” Terry asked suspiciously.

“I don't like her,” I said wildly. “I don't want you to meet her.”

“Which aunt?” Brenda asked.

“Dee!”

The Furies looked to Brenda for confirmation. “Dee is happily married and living in Tucson,” Brenda said, and I was soundly booed and hissed. The tickling started again.

“The penalty for treachery is another ten minutes of this,” Kyle informed me.

“Oh my God, I'm going to wet my pants,” I wheezed. Having six siblings and dozens of aunts and uncles gave Bren a wicked good memory for family trees. Why hadn't I remembered that? “I am, I am, I mean it!”

“Piss away, baby!” Terry yelled in my ear. “Mrs. Morrison has carpet cleaner around here somewhere.”

“All right, all right, stop!” Forgive me, Trisha. “My friend Trisha is staying overnight with her boyfriend.”

“Trisha ... Lane?” Brenda asked.

Meredith nodded, verifying my story, and I longed for something to throw at her.

“Everybody off,” Kyle ordered, nudging Terry away.

“Awww,” he complained. Kyle grabbed one of my hands, George grabbed the other, and they hauled me



to my feet. I staggered to my chair on trembling legs, baring my teeth at Meredith on the way.

“Was that ... really necessary?” I panted. “I think I'm going to puke.”

“Tell the truth on demand next time,” Terry leered, “and avoid penalties.”

“So Trisha's at the Thorwood with her boyfriend ... you know, I'd like to meet her,” Brenda said. “You guys talk about her so much. I've wanted to invite her over one of these nights but she's always out with what's-his-name.”

I was already shaking my head. “No way. No. Way. She'd kill us. She'd kill *me*. This is their big weekend, she's been looking forward to it forever. If we all showed up ... trooped in...” The sight of Trisha in a rage, a rage directed at *me*, was enough to make my blood freeze. I shook my head more emphatically. “You guys couldn't pay me enough. Sincerely.”

“Well, we're going there tonight anyway,” Meredith said. “Maybe they'll be in the lounge or something ... we can say hello, introduce you guys. You know perfectly well she wants to meet our new friends, Andrea.”

True enough. Trish was wild to meet George and Terry, in particular. Having seen the rings, she was interested in viewing the rest. I think she was especially interested in checking Terry out. I never had much to say about George, which puzzled her, but I always had plenty to say about Terry, none of it very nice.

“Okay, *maybe* if we accidentally ran into them in the dining room or something, maybe that would be all right.” But as I looked around at the Furies, I doubted it would be that simple.

“You don't have to come,” Kyle pointed out.

“Yeah, we could stay here, just you and me,” George said eagerly.

“Forget it. I'm coming to make sure you guys don't do something intensely stupid.”

“Oh, *that's* not the blind leading the blind,” Terry said sarcastically. “And instead of bugging Meredith all the time about eating, you might try it yourself. I've never been on top of anyone so bony. Your ribs felt like rulers.”

“Well, I'm not going to tell you what you felt like,” I said coldly, “except to say that I almost lost my lunch.”

“This is very interesting, you two, but are we going, or what?” Brenda demanded.

Of all of us, only Kyle and Merry had licenses. So George and I got the back seat of Merry's car, Terry got shotgun, and Kyle and Brenda went in his car.

She must be in seventh heaven, I thought darkly. I knew he drove her home from school once in a while, and that was really the only time she had him to herself. *Probably fell all over herself offering to ride with Kyle.*

Then I felt ashamed. I was a traitor, to Brenda and to my boyfriend. Here I was, George's great big ring



weighing down my head—I mean my hand—looking at Kyle's car and being jealous of Brenda for sitting next to him. Ridiculous! I loved George, I guessed. He certainly loved me, *ergo* I must love him. That's the way it worked. Trisha loved all *her* boyfriends.

George had pulled me to him as soon as the car left Bren's driveway, cupping my face in his big hands and kissing me. I had decided to keep my mouth shut this time only to find his tongue ramming against my closed lips. His saliva was all over my lower face and I hurriedly opened my mouth, grudgingly accepting his plunging tongue. Did this have to be so *wet*?

"Ohhh, I've really missed you," he panted into my mouth. "You missed me, too, I can tell."

"Holy cow," Terry said. I looked up and saw he was turned around in his seat, watching us. "You two are really going at it. Maybe *you* should be staying at the Thorwood."

George leaned back and grinned, putting his arm around my shoulders. I furtively wiped my mouth. "Yeah. Maybe we should." He leaned forward and, right in front of Terry, started kissing me again. I was mortified, furious, embarrassed, ashamed—everything a girl is *not* supposed to be when making out with her boyfriend. What was the matter with me?

"Lord, I feel like Bill Clinton's chauffeur," Meredith complained. "Will you two stop? My new meds make me nauseated, it's hard enough holding onto my supper as it is."

I pulled away from George, leaving him gasping. "Come on, George," I mumbled. "Let's stop for a while."

"I never get to see you," he complained. "This is the only time we'll have together until next weekend."

I sighed and pointed to Terry and Meredith. "We're making them uncomfortable."

He shrugged sullenly. "Who cares?"

"And I'm uncomfortable."

He rolled his eyes and pulled me against him again. "All right, all right, let me hold you, at least. Hope you don't have a problem with *that*."

The car swerved and I heard Meredith's angry hiss of breath. She was pissed, all right. I smiled, remembering George's latest poetic effort, which I had read to her over the phone day before yesterday:

Beauty

She walks in valleys of green grass

Eyes shining like the stars

My heart belongs to that girl

Our love is known from here and far

This girl is something special



ne loves me and I love her



No matter how the world may change

She will always make my loins stir.

Meredith had gone to pieces. She actually had to hang up the phone and wait until she stopped laughing. She didn't call me back for another half hour, and even then, kept getting the giggles. I should have been mad at her, and I still liked getting George's poems and letters, but sometimes they could be a little ... purple. Her laughter always cleared my head.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked softly.

“Your poems,” I answered, truthfully. Meredith snorted and the car swerved again. I hoped she wouldn't get the giggles.

“Oh,” he said, pleased. “Well, I've got some more at the house. I'll give them to you later.”

“Thank you.”

“No, thank *you*,” Merry muttered.

“Just one more kiss?” George wheedled. I sighed again and submitted. Appropriate punishment for having mean thoughts about Kyle and Brenda. Then I thought, punishment? Is that what I think this is? Something's not right.

I could smell his cologne, could feel his big hands on my face, could hear him as he smacked and slurped. His tongue felt much bigger than mine. My mouth definitely knew there was an intruder in the house.

In front of us, Terry made an irritated sound, turned around again, and said, “Will you leave her alone? I'm not on medication and *I'm* getting nauseated. Everybody is.”

I leaned back in surprise. Was it so obvious to everyone—except George—that I didn't want him to kiss me? Maybe the problem wasn't me, after all. I assumed the onus was on me to feel passion, that if I really tried George could make me feel all melty. And there was the guilt factor, too. I wanted Kyle but had taken George, so I suffered the latter's embraces. Would I want Kyle to always be after me, to get my mouth all wet, to push kisses on me every second we had even a little privacy? Hard to tell. The idea of Kyle paying any attention to me at all was a thrilling one. But maybe George was pushing things a little fast, boyfriend or not, maybe *that's* why I was so bloody uncomfortable when he squashed his mouth onto mine.

Mmm ... no. He loved me. He wanted to do things with me and to me *because* he loved me ... his passion proved his feelings. It was probably my fault for not keeping an open mind.

Meanwhile, Terry's angry statement was still hanging in the air.

“Shut up, Terry,” George said evenly. “It's none of your business.”

“You make it my business when you maul her in front of me, when we can all hear her telling you she's uncomfortable, but you don't give a shit. All you can think about is sucking on her face.”



"Amen," Meredith said.

"Shut up, Terry," he said again, at the exact moment I said warningly, "Meredith..."

Terry looked at me, smiling unpleasantly. "It's all he talks about, all week. How he can't wait to get his hands all over your bod, and how *you* can't get enough. Not that it's a bad bod, and I'm sure you *can't* get enough, but we get tired of hearing all his dumb fantasies."

I was too shocked to say anything. George was bright red and he was breathing hard. Terry, on the other hand, looked supremely satisfied, almost catlike in his smugness. This time, George practically screamed it: "Shut up, Terry!"

"Everyone shut up," Meredith said. "We're here."

Terry was out of the car before it had even stopped moving, yanking open my door and pulling me out.

"Why don't you tell him to fuck off?" he whispered furiously, while I stared at him, still shocked. "You've got no problem letting me know when I'm out of line, letting Meredith know when she's driving you batshit. So why don't you tell him to leave you alone?"

"I—I don't—" But Terry, after giving me a look of pure disgust, had wheeled around and was following Meredith into the bed and breakfast, leaving me standing there with my mouth open.

George slammed his door shut and jerked his head toward the others. "Come on, Andrea."

"Coming," I said numbly. He took my hand and we went up the steps. We got there to hear the end of Terry's, "...need to take pictures of the Captain's suite ... got permission from the innkeepers..." speech and followed the others inside.

The woman who'd answered the door was somewhat harried. We all smiled at her, trying to put her at ease, but her look of suspicion didn't lessen. Obviously, since we were teenagers, we were up to no good. "I've got game hens in the oven, and the dough's rising," she said. We nodded on cue, pretending we cared. "You know where the suite is; door's unlocked. Come back down and wait for me when you're done and *don't* bother the guests."

"You heard her," I muttered, following them up the stairs. "No guest bothering allowed."

"Which room are Trisha and Jim staying in?" Brenda asked with a bland curiosity that didn't fool me a bit.

"I don't know," I lied.

The Captain's suite was very nice. It was actually three rooms: a kind of living room, with couches and a daybed, a bathroom in the middle, and a connecting bedroom, all done in greens and pinks. Brenda oohed and ahed over the fireplace, and Meredith and I checked out the claw-foot tub. Terry pulled out his Nikon and started clicking away.

"What did Terry say to you when we got out of the car?" Merry murmured, running her fingers around the rim of the tub.



He asked me why I didn't tell George to knock it off.”

“Well. Why don't you?”

I shrugged, uncomfortable. “Because he's my boyfriend.”

“He doesn't care about you,” she said with shocking bluntness. “He just likes having someone to get physical with. Weren't you listening to Terry?”

“That's not true!” I said angrily. *Isn't it?* my treacherous inner self whispered. “And I wouldn't believe Terry-the-asshole if he told me the sky was blue.”

“Shh! Lower your voice. I don't want everyone in here. It is true, and if you thought about it for five minutes you'd realize it. Do you even *like* what he's doing to you? It didn't look like it to us.”

“It's my fault if I don't, so just—”

“What do you mean, your fault?” Merry asked sharply.

Well, Merr, it's like this: I wanted Kyle, but he's never shown even a glimmer of interest in me. George was all over me, I'm tired of feeling like an ugly beanpole, he thinks I'm sexy and cool, so I took him. Sure, I'd tell her all that. In a pig's eye. “Never mind. Leave me alone. Stop bugging me about George. In fact, just shut up!” I jerked away from her and crashed through the door, into the master bedroom. George was supine on the bed and when he saw me he sat up, smiling happily.

“Hey! Come over here, we'll try it out.” He patted the bed with one hand and shut the light out with the other. With a groan I stumbled back into the bathroom, ignoring Meredith's hurt look, and kept going. Brenda and Kyle were on their hands and knees, inspecting the marble fireplace, and Terry was taking pictures of the daybed.

“This is beautiful,” Brenda breathed, looking into Kyle's face.

“Yes,” he murmured back.

“What are you two talking about?” I said shrilly.

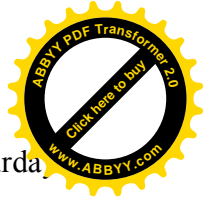
“The scrollwork,” Bren said. “It's positively *ancient*! Come check it out.”

“Andrea?” George called from the bedroom. “Come here.”

I groaned again. I had tormenters everywhere! “I need some air,” I announced loudly. I swiftly crossed the room, yanked open the door, and plunged into the hallway, knocking one person off their feet and throwing a second person into the wall. I looked down and sighed. “Hello, Jim. Trisha. Let me give you a hand up.”

Chapter 7

“WHAT I STILL don't understand is what you were doing there in the first place,” Trisha said coldly.



groaned and buried my head in my hands. We'd been talking about it for an hour. That horrible Saturday had been two days ago; now it was Monday after school.

"For the bazillionth time, Terry needed to take pictures for some dumb history paper he's working on. The Thorwood's a hundred years old, you know. I couldn't stop them from going so I went with them, but I didn't tell them what room you guys were in. It was purely an accident that we ran into you."

"Ran into is right," she snorted. "Jim sprained his shoulder from hitting the floor so hard. You knocked him right off his feet."

"I'm *sorry*. Sorry, sorrier, sorriest. How many times, and in how many ways, do I have to apologize?"

"I suppose," she said, thawing a fraction, "it could have been worse. You could have broken something. You could have blown the place up. As it is, you only ruined our evening."

"Oh, please. How did I—oh. His shoulder?"

"He took some Advil but it didn't help. So we just went to bed early. I could hardly get him to kiss me goodnight. That's why he wasn't in school today; his mom had to drive him to the doctor."

"Oh." I smiled weakly and looked as helpless as possible. "Sorry about that."

"Oh, hell," she sighed. "It's okay. I was such a nervous wreck the entire time I wouldn't have enjoyed myself, anyway. I kept thinking my mom would figure out where I was and come busting in on us."

"That's too bad."

"Forget it. It was nice to meet Brenda, anyway. And you're right about Terry."

"He *does* look like a vampire!" we said in delighted unison.

"And George was ... cute." She was looking at me, puzzled, and I waited for the question. "He doesn't really seem to be your type. He's so..."

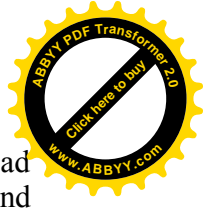
"Short?"

"Well..."

"Don't start. Merry gives me enough grief about him." The ride back to Cannon Falls that night had been nightmarish. Meredith had been icily polite until I apologized about a million times for snapping at her in the bathroom, and knowing Trisha would be lying in wait Monday didn't improve my mood any. "It's too bad about you and Jim, though. You were looking forward to it for so long. Will he be in school tomorrow? Do you think I should apologize again?"

"Andy, if I were you I'd keep my distance, at least for a few days," she said seriously. "Our room cost over a hundred dollars and he saved up for months so he could afford ... just don't get too close to him, okay?"

I buried my face in my hands. "My life," I said hollowly, "is hell."



“Sorry about that,” she said, not sounding sorry at all. I could hardly blame her. At least she wasn't mad anymore. “Listen, I've got to get out of here, it's getting late.” She went to the entryway for her coat and purse; I followed. “Say goodbye to Meredith for me ... would you tell her I'll see her tomorrow night?”

“She's still in the bathroom?” I said, surprised. It had been almost half an hour. Maybe she was sick. “Okay, I'll tell her. Bye. Uh—give Jim my love.”

Trisha rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right.”

I trudged back into the dining room. Woe was me. The one good thing that had happened all damn day was that I'd gotten another letter from George. This one was a passionate declaration of love and lust: “...when I kiss your soft mouth I just go wild, I can't get enough of you.” Balm to my battered ego, that was for sure. Somewhat more disturbing: “I know you're The One, just like I'm The One for you, and when you're ready we'll explore every inch of each other ... I can't wait!” Well, I certainly could. At least when I read the letters and poems it seemed to make everything else I tolerated well worth it. And, of course, I had his ring.

I rapped on the bathroom door. “Merry? You okay?”

“Fine,” she replied distantly.

“Can I come in?”

She didn't say anything, but there was a click as she unlocked the door. I walked in and saw her looking at her reflection in the mirror. “What are you doing?”

“Waiting.”

I was waiting, too. But she didn't elaborate. “For?” I prompted.

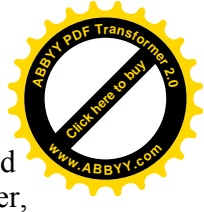
“The medication to work.” She glanced to my left and I looked. The door to the medicine cabinet was hanging open and all the bottles were empty, their tops neatly beside them, the bottles themselves upside down. Everything inside me froze. Looking at them, lined up neatly like soldiers on parade, I had never been so terrified in my life, not even that time I was hunting and tripped, accidentally discharging the gun, and I didn't know where my dad was, didn't know if he'd been shot or not. “I don't think,” she said thoughtfully, “this new medication Dr. Cobran has me on is working. I have these ... odd impulses, you see.”

“Oh Christ,” I whispered. My eyes were looking at the cabinet and reporting to my brain that there were seven empty pill bottles, two bottles of contact lens solution, and one half-gone tube of toothpaste. And I was frozen in place. Not only could I not move, I couldn't even feel my limbs. Everything inside me had locked and gone numb. “Wh—what did—why did—?”

“We'll have to try something else, I think,” she said, still sounding distant, completely detached. “This isn't working at all.”

“Have you lost your mind?” I screamed at her. She looked at me blankly and I mentally kicked myself. Stupid question.

There would, please God, please please please, be time enough later to yell at her. I clawed at the faucet



and turned the hot water on. Then I ran to the kitchen to get the biggest glass I could find, and grabbed the salt shaker. Panting with fear, I galloped back to the bathroom and filled the glass with warm water, then poured in a generous dollop of salt. Stirring the murky mess with my finger, I thrust the glass at Meredith. “Here,” I panted. “Drink this. All of it, fast.”

She looked at it with distaste. “What is it?”

“Salt water. It'll make you puke.”

“I don't want to drink salt water. Gross.”

If my father had teleported in the bathroom just then and handed me my shotgun, I think I might have blown her head off, saving her the trouble of committing suicide. Never in my life had I been more angry, more frustrated, more scared. “You suck down everything in the fucking medicine cabinet and then won't drink *salt water*?” I screamed, practically in an ecstasy of rage. “*Drink it all right now or I'll shove it down your throat you silly bitch just see if I don't!*”

Meredith blinked and started to cry. “You don't have to yell at me,” she sobbed. “I'm doing the best I can so don't yell, okay?”

I took a deep, deep breath and tried to get a grip. “I'm sorry I yelled,” I said tonelessly. “Please drink, Merry, you're scaring me so bad.”

Wordlessly, she took the water from me and sipped daintily. She grimaced and held the glass away. “Ugh! That's awful.”

“Don't sip. Gulp.”

Shuddering, she sipped again. “I can't. I'll going to throw up if I do.”

“*That's the—*” I modulated my volume and said in my nicest, sweetest voice, “That's the idea. Come on, chug it.”

She took a deep gulp and swayed on her feet, turning a kind of greenish-pale. “Oh, this is awful. It's awful,” she groaned. “Why am I doing this?”

“Because you don't want to die, it's just the medication that has you so depressed, that's all.”

“I'm on medication *because* I'm depressed, moron,” she snapped, and I was glad to see some of the old fire.

“You don't want to die,” I said again, louder. “And even if you did, I wouldn't let you. Besides, you—you want to find out how the V&V game ends, don't you?”

She looked at me, gripping the glass tightly. Then she downed the rest in two gigantic gulps, the sound very loud in the bathroom: ‘Oong, oong’. I sighed in relief, just as she bent violently forward and threw up everything in her stomach. Many, many pills, most of them still whole. Some had been crunched up, big pinkish and orangey ones. She threw up so hard vomit splattered everywhere: into the sink, on her shirt, on the mirror, on the counter. I was so happy to see it I didn't mind when she got some on me. I felt like taking a shower in it.



inished, she stayed hunched over, sobbing and spitting, and I patted her back and told her she had done great, really great, and things would be okay now, things would be great, really, they would.

“Things are not great,” she sobbed. “Things are perfectly awful. Get your hands off me.”

I cleaned up the mess while she changed her clothes and brushed her teeth about ten times, then she stretched out on the couch in her robe while I looked up Dr. Cobran's number in the Rolodex.

“This is Andrea Grouper. I need Dr. Cobran right now.”

“I'm sorry, he can't come to the phone right now, he—”

“It's a matter of life and death!” I yelled. Behind me, Meredith groaned and put a hand over her eyes. “Just get him on the phone, quick!”

“May I tell him what it's regarding?”

“Meredith Devonshire, one of his patients.”

There was a click, and for a black moment I thought the bitch had disconnected me. Then Cobran's oily voice came on the line. “Meredith?”

“No, this is Andrea Grouper, her friend. I'm with her now.”

“What's the problem?”

“The problem is, she just gulped down everything in the medicine cabinet by the double fistful, that's the *problem*, you—” *Now, now, don't get hysterical. Keep it together for a few more minutes.* I took a deep, shuddering breath. “I—I made her puke it all up but I don't know what to do next and by the way, Cobran, I think it's time to change her medication again. This stuff either made her *more* depressed or isn't helping at all.”

“What did she take?” Gently, soothingly. The doctor was definitely In.

“I've got the bottles right here.” I'd carried them to the phone with me and got my first look at them. “Uh—let's see ... Flintstone Vitamins, Geritol, One-A-Day...” I couldn't believe this. “... Vitamin C, Vitamin E, Sudafed, and ... and...”

“Yes?”

“She apparently polished off a box of Cherry Sucrets,” I said, then took the phone away and banged my head on the wall, once, hard. “You still there?”

“Yes. Since you made her empty her stomach she should be fine ... I doubt she ingested anything in lethal quantities anyway, but it's better to be safe than sorry. She certainly won't be catching a cold anytime soon.” Soothe, soothe. “Where are her parents?”

“They'll be home any minute.”

“Good, good. Tell her I'll want to see her tomorrow at ... ten, okay? And Andrea? Try not to get into such



panic next time.”

“Next time?” I yelled into the phone. “There'd better not be a next time, buster! If you'd just do your job—” There was a click and I was ranting at a dead line. I slammed the phone down and kicked the table it was on for good measure.

“What are you so mad about?” the bane of my existence asked. “I'm the one who has to explain to my mother why she can't take her iron supplements.”

“Shut up! Don't talk to me, don't even look at me! I *loathe* you,” I hissed.

She sighed. “Come here and sit down. And stop kicking that table. My parents bought it on their honeymoon.”

I stomped over to her and sat down, still wishing for that shotgun.

“Andrea ... I didn't do it to make you mad. I don't know why I did it. In fact, I don't remember doing it.”

Shocked, I stared at her and she nodded. “That's right. I don't remember. I do remember sitting with you and Trisha and listening to her talk about Jim's shoulder ... and for some reason I just got so down, I knew I was going to cry and make a fool of myself. Then I got up and went to the bathroom because I didn't want you to see me cry ... and I was looking for a Kleenex or something and there were all these bottles and I thought, my medication, it's time for my medication ... and the next thing I knew, you were threatening me with disembowelment if I didn't drink that wretched potion you concocted.”

“Scaring me like that isn't allowed anymore, okay?” I said tearfully. “Don't do it anymore, okay?”

“I don't want to,” she said, and hugged me. “Lucky for us Mom keeps all the aspirin and painkillers in the kitchen, not the bathroom, huh?”

* * * *

“WHAT DO YOU mean, they're already here?” Black Flame practically screamed.

“Duck,” Shadowbyte said conversationally, and yanked me down to the floor with him. I hit the carpet so hard my teeth rattled—the schmuck didn't know his own strength, or didn't care—just as the far wall fell in, missing Agnostia by about six inches.

“Incoming!” Ninjaboy yelled. He crawled toward us on his elbows; Anya and Black Flame had dived toward us at Shadowbyte's ‘Duck’ and were now coughing and trying to wave the dust away.

“Nothing bothers you, how is it that *nothing* bothers you?” I yelled at Shadowbyte, which was stupid because now the bad guys had a fix on me. “Don't you *ever* raise your voice?”

“Don't you ever lower yours?” he said coldly. We ducked again as a spray of gunfire went over our heads and to the right—excellent. In the dust and rubble they hadn't yet figured out our position. “I find your constant hysteria wearying.”

“Hysteria?” I shrieked angrily. I had my gun out, but whether I meant to defend myself or shoot Shadowbyte wasn't yet clear to me. “I'll show you hysteria, you techno-creep!” He was ignoring me,



amn his eyes, scanning for attackers. I punched him in the shoulder to get his attention. It was like punching an oak. “I’m talking to you, you cyber-psycho!”

“Quiet. Let me scan.”

“Scan this,” I said, giving him the finger.

Agnostia was the only one of us still standing, and as one of our attackers emerged from the dust cloud she shouted at him: “You don’t want to do this! You want to help us!”

In response, he raised his gun and pointed it at her which was, I’m happy to say, the last mistake he ever made. My shot went exactly where it was supposed to and his head exploded in a spray of blood and bone.

“Holy shit!” Black Flame crowed. “Nice shot!”

“I imagine they’re wearing earplugs to shut out her voice,” Shadowbyte said mildly. “Body armor, too, which neutralizes many of our powers. They obviously know all about us.”

Black Flame pointed a finger at one of them—there were a half dozen or so, emerging from the dust cloud, dressed in bulky white suits and heavy gloves, clutching many, many guns—and a ball of fire leapt from his fingertip and engulfed one of them. The man promptly dropped to what was left of the carpet and rolled briskly, smothering the flames.

“Fire-retardant body armor,” Shadowbyte remarked, calm as a clam.

“Their faces are uncovered, that’s where they’re vulnerable,” I said grimly.

“Yes, I imagine they thought you wouldn’t be able to see well enough in the gloom to hit anyone.”

“Well, I guess they don’t know everything, then, do—Agnostia, for Christ’s sake, will you get down?” I shot another one as he swung toward her and he dropped like he’d been—well, like he’d been shot. “Do I have to do everything?”

“Bitch, bitch, bitch,” Anya muttered.

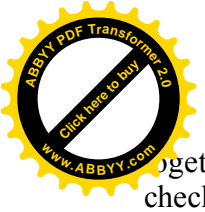
“No kidding,” Black Flame said. “Can we get you a box of Pamprin, dear?”

Ninjaboy flanked one of them and took the man’s head off with a swipe of his sword. Another made the mistake of getting too close to Shadowbyte, who bounded to his feet and fired a kick at the man’s chest. There was a crunching, cracking sound as the body armor split neatly down the middle, forcing the man to stagger back. Shadowbyte wasn’t one to let an opportunity like that go to waste; he wrenched the gun away from him, reversed it so he was holding the barrel, and split the man’s skull.

“Gross,” Anya wheezed, turning an unflattering shade of green.

“Yeah,” I said, struggling with my own gorge. Shadowbyte contemptuously tossed the rifle on the man’s battered corpse and sidestepped a spray of bullets; I fired a few of my own to give them pause.

Anya telekinetically pounced on the last two—they suddenly stiffened, dropped their guns, and crashed



together, falling to the floor in a soundless heap. Shadowbyte picked his way through the rubble and checked them. “Still alive,” he pronounced. “Excellent. When they wake up they'll tell us everything.” He saw Agnostia open her mouth and went on. “And don't talk to me about civil rights. They were sent here to kill us and came fairly well prepared. If you can't get them to tell us what we need to know...” Here Shadowbyte smiled for the very first time and let me tell you, it wasn't a pretty sight. “...I'll violate their civil rights like you wouldn't believe.”

* * * *

“Woo-hoo-hoo!” George yelled, pounding on the table. “We kicked their asses, boys and girls! What a great fight!”

Terry was tallying up everyone's points. “Nobody lost any points, none of us were even hurt,” he said smugly. “Cool.”

“Cool, nothing,” Meredith complained. “It all happened so fast, I didn't get a chance to convert any of them. Whenever I tried, Andy would shoot him, or George would stab him, or Kyle would bludgeon him. What a bunch of barbarians!”

“Well, well,” I smirked. “Someone's feeling better.” Her attempted vitamin O.D. had been four days ago, and as a consequence she'd had to see Cobran every afternoon since. I figured if nothing else dissuaded her from trying it again, that would.

Cobran had told me that she hadn't really tried to kill herself—you couldn't overdose on Sucrets and Vitamin C. She had been feeling abandoned and lonely and tried something drastic to make sure people still cared about her. I didn't believe it. He didn't see how miserable she was when she was puking her guts out all over the sink. No one would do that to themselves on purpose. Besides, she told me she couldn't remember taking the pills, and I believed her. I maintained it was the medication, which had been changed as a matter of course, so hopefully our discussion was moot.

“I'm feeling fine,” she sniffed, responding to my verbal dig. “Just sick at heart because you're all a bunch of marauding psychotics.”

“Awww, Merry, you know just what to say to make us love you,” Brenda teased.

Terry snickered and pointed to Kyle, who had tipped back his chair against the wall and was snoring lightly. “Look at him. Will someone please wake him up? That's the third time he's dozed off today.”

Brenda gently shook Kyle and said, “What do you mean, the third time?”

“Oh, he nodded off in Chemistry, and then again at lunch, and now here. Must have had a late night.” He wiggled his eyebrows at me suggestively and I had to grin. The idea of Kyle prowling strip bars like a tomcat was just a little silly. “Wakey wakey, Kyle baby!”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry, guys,” Kyle said, sitting up. His chair came forward with a thud while he yawned, took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. “I can't seem to concentrate very well today. Would anybody mind if I headed home?”

“I'd mind,” George said. Kyle was his ride and if Kyle left, George had to go, too. “It's not even nine o'clock.”



Jesus, George,” Brenda muttered, flushing angrily. “Put your kissing lips in park. Can't you see he's sick?”

“What?” he said innocently. “Look, Kyle, if you're tired you can take a nap here.”

“No, he ought to go home,” Meredith said, looking Kyle over critically. “You've been pretty run down lately. It's been two weeks, at least. You should try and catch up on your sleep, shake whatever bug you've picked up.”

“Merry's right,” I said firmly. Kyle did look terrible, and I didn't care one way or the other if George went home early. “We'll be able to see each other next weekend.”

“Jeez, Kyle, I hope you're happy,” George said, flushing angrily. I was a little appalled—did stealing a few kisses with me mean that much to him? “Come on, then, if you've got to go, let's go.”

“Sorry, everybody,” he said sheepishly, getting up and glancing at me apologetically. With a start, I realized he thought I was sad because George had to leave. I caught his hand as he passed me.

“Don't worry about it, silly,” I said gently. “Just get better. We'll see you next weekend.”

He smiled at me and squeezed my hand (squeezed my hand!), then let go and went to get his coat. George motioned for me to follow and I got up, sighing internally.

“I'm really sorry I have to leave,” he said, once we were in the relative privacy of the hallway.

“Yeah, we all heard,” I said dryly. “Listen, don't make Kyle feel worse than he already does. It's not his fault he's sick.”

George shrugged and looked sullen, an expression I was getting pretty familiar with. I was looking down at him and realized quite strongly just then that I didn't want him to kiss me, so I threw back my shoulders and stood as tall as I could.

It worked. He was so unnerved, looking up at me (unnerved, or getting a painful crick in his neck), that he just gave me a brief squeeze and went out with Kyle. I smiled in relief and then slapped my forehead, hard. I should give him his ring back if this was how I felt. I should never have *accepted* the thing if this was how I felt. He was so nice to me, how could I be so mean to him? I was using him, which was beyond disgusting.

But another pile of poems had arrived that day, scorching, romantic poems, and I realized I wasn't ready to give up this kind of attention. He really worshipped me, and I loved it, even if I wasn't sure I loved him.

I walked back into the basement in time to hear Brenda say, “...don't know what she sees in him ... he's a *total* asshole sometimes.”

Hmm. I didn't think I had ever heard Bren use the A word. Maybe I'd delay my arrival for a few seconds.

“I'll tell you what she sees in him,” Meredith's dry voice came to my ears as clearly as if she were standing next to me. I could even picture the expression on her face. “She's fairly new at school and most of the girls don't like her. She intimidates the boys because she's reasonably fearless and doesn't know



ow to flirt, so she gets zero for male positive attention. Now here's George who writes two or three letters every week and sends her poetry. She loves the attention, and turns a blind eye to his obvious character flaws. As for him..."

"You can blame Brenda for his infatuation," Terry said.

"What? What did I do?" she cried.

"Oh, please. You were always telling us about Andrea Grouper, your friend who moved to Cannon Falls, blah-blah-blah ... whenever she wrote you a letter you'd tell us all about it, hell, you *read* them to us. And whenever you visited her you'd come back all happy and tell us about it. But all you really said about *her* was that she's funny and has a huge appetite and gets in trouble with her big mouth. You didn't mention her looks. We were all expecting someone dressed in camouflage with a mustache, and when we actually got a look at her it was a hell of a surprise..."

"Andrea isn't exactly hard on the eyes," Meredith agreed.

"And George took one look at her and saw this ... I dunno, this sex goddess, or something, and fell hard."

"Sex goddess, right," Meredith chortled. "Goddess of mayhem and bar brawls, maybe."

"Of course I didn't tell you about her looks," Bren grumbled. "Who cares what she looks like? And her going out with George is *not* my fault."

Well! While it's never a good idea to eavesdrop on friends, because you almost always hear something you'd rather you hadn't, I could feel my face getting warm with embarrassed pleasure. I was so pleased I had to sit down on the steps for a few seconds and wait until my face was cool again.

"I think she likes George long-distance much more than she likes him in person," Meredith said.

"Oh my God, you're not kidding!" Terry cried. "You didn't see her face when George was trying to kiss her in the car on the way to Thorwood. I thought she was going to kill him."

"I would have helped," Meredith said grimly.

"Oh, stop it, guys," Brenda said. "You can't blame George for wanting to kiss her all the time. They *are* boyfriend and girlfriend. Besides, the problem will take care of itself, I bet. He'll push her too hard one of these days and she'll take his head off."

"No, she won't," Merry said. "She likes the attention too much to give it up any time soon. And the girls at school are jealous because her boyfriend's from out of town."

"If they met him that'd take care of the jealousy," Terry said dryly.

There, see? I had heard something I didn't like. Finding out Meredith knew what made me tick was aggravating beyond belief. She had put her finger on the one thing that made George irresistible to me: he showered me, practically drowned me, with attention. What she didn't know was that if Kyle had ever showed even a smidgen of romantic interest in me, I'd never have given George a second look, even if he wrote a thousand poems praising the color of my eyes.



got up, brushed my hands off on my leggings, and entered the room. My friends were suddenly very busy studying their scores and playing with pencils. “Well, they're off,” I said with forced brightness. “I hope Kyle feels better soon.”

“Too bad George was such a baby about it,” Terry needed.

“What can I say?” I said airily. “He's crazy about me and didn't want to leave my glorious presence.”

“No, he's just crazy,” was the predictable reply. I threw a pencil at him and another impromptu missile war began.

Later, Brenda and I were upstairs making popcorn and I said casually, wondering why I was opening this can of worms, “Do you think George was a little out of line this evening?”

“I think he was an asshole,” Bren replied with uncharacteristic bluntness. My! She was certainly enjoying the use of that word this evening, especially in conjunction with my boyfriend. “Making Kyle feel bad like that just so he could go French kiss you some more ... what a jerk!”

I was appalled. Certainly I didn't like hearing it put in those words. It made me sound like I was responsible for George's behavior, when *I* had wanted Kyle to go and rest, too.

“Well, I sort of told him he was out of line,” I said lamely. “And he didn't get to kiss me so that should cheer you up.”

Brenda smiled crookedly. “I'm not mad at you ... or George, I guess. I'm just worried about Kyle. He's been so weak lately, and he's not getting any better. His mom's taking him to the hospital next week for tests.”

“Really? What do they think might be wrong?”

“I don't know, but it scares the hell out of me. *He* scares me ... always so tired and run-down all the time. You could tell his heart really wasn't in V&V tonight and he looks forward to playing all week.”

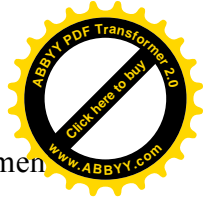
“Hmm,” I said. Now Bren was scaring *me*. Kyle was so solidly reliable, so quietly there all the time, it was hard to imagine him being deathly ill. Unfortunately, Bren and I had phenomenal imaginations. “Likely they'll figure out what's wrong and fix it,” I said, comforting us both. “Don't fret. I'm going to go down and see if Terry and Merry want popcorn. Be right back.”

In the basement, I rounded the corner and saw an amazing, somewhat frightening, sight: Terry and Meredith with their hands all over each other. He had her backed up against the cement wall (Must be pretty cold over there, my mind gibbered uselessly.) and was kissing her, *they* were kissing, mouths open and eyes closed. Her hands were clutching his shirt in double fistfuls and he was unbuttoning her blouse with the care of someone who wasn't sure his fingers were going to do what his brain told them. They were both groaning and whispering to each other.

My first thought: *Trisha will never believe this!*

My second: *Get out of here before they see you!*

I stepped back softly, groping behind me until I found the banister, then pulled myself up the stairs and



out of sight. Remembering Bren would want to know how much popcorn to make, I banged the basement door open and stomped down the steps slowly, taking as much time as possible. “Terry! Meredith!” I sang, pausing on the third to last step, still out of sight. “You guys down here?”

“Yes,” Terry said in a low voice.

“You want popcorn? Bren's making tons.”

“Yes,” Meredith groaned. “With lots of salt—oh!”

“Okay. Be back down in a few minutes.” Then I stomped noisily up the stairs and slammed the door so they'd know I was gone. They were so far gone in each other they thought nothing of the fact that I, if I didn't know they were making out, would think they sounded way too interested in salted popcorn. Merry, in particular, had sounded damn near pre-orgasmic.

“What's the matter with you?” Brenda asked when I finally made it back to the kitchen. “You look like someone knifed your puppy.”

“Meredith and Terry,” I said hollowly, putting my hands to my face, which was starting to get hot. “They were—uh—”

“Swapping spit?” she teased.

“And then some! They were really going at it.”

“Well, of course.” She stirred the popcorn and salted it. “They're going together, after all. You think they spend all their time holding hands and reading poetry to each other?”

“I try not to think about *what* they do together. And it was so...” Carnal, but that probably wasn't the right word. “They were so passionate. I couldn't believe ... I mean, I never thought that Meredith...”

“Andy, you can be such an idiot sometimes,” she said kindly. “Meredith might have some emotional problems but there's nothing wrong with her sex drive.”

“Do *not* put it in those terms, please, if you want me to be able to eat any of that popcorn. And I know that she's just like every other girl her age, yaddah-yaddah-yaddah—”

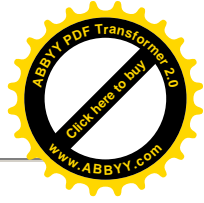
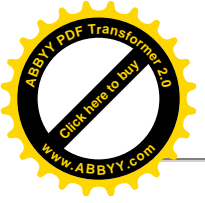
“You don't know any such thing; you don't believe she's like you, or like me. Or you wouldn't have come up those stairs looking so surprised. I haven't seen you so rattled since you walked in on my brother.”

“Since he was naked at the time, I had every right to be rattled,” I said coldly. “And Terry and Meredith's make-out session didn't rattle me. I was just surprised, is all.” I took a handful of popcorn and munched moodily. “He must be a really good kisser ... she sure looked like she was enjoying herself.”

“Maybe she's the good kisser, ever think of that?”

I snorted. “No.”

“Besides, why would she go out with someone she didn't like to kiss?” Brenda asked innocently, and I didn't have an answer for that one.



Chapter 8

DEAR ANDREA,

Boy was I mad when Kyle made me leave you Saturday! All week the only thing keeping me going was the thought of seeing your beautiful face and I had barely had a chance to even kiss you hello and it was time to leave! Oh well, I guess it's not his fault he got sick. I can't wait until I have my driver's license though.

I wish we could have some time alone just the two of us. I never see you anymore unless there's a million people around. Too bad you don't have a license or you could come down and see me every day after school. Oh well—guess we'll have to wait until we're a little older!

I love you so much and when I kiss you it's never enough for me ... I just hope you know how special you are and how much I need you. I enclosed a poem I wrote after Kyle dropped me off. I hope you like it.

Love, George

Frustration

She's so lovely and fair

Her kisses set me on fire

When will she be ready

To show her love?

I look at her and go weak

She looks back and I see

The love shining out of her eyes

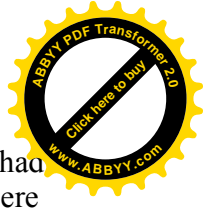
Soon we will join together,

You and me, girl.

And the world will tremble at our love.

Uh-huh. I felt two things when I read this latest pack of goodies: embarrassed pleasure at the kind words in his letter, and outrage that he was already pushing sex on me. If he thought I was going to sleep with him anytime soon he was nuttier than Meredith.

I sighed and folded the letter up, then slipped it back into the envelope. Meredith was right, I did prefer George long-distance. But now he was getting pushy in his little missives of love, and I didn't know how to cool him off without breaking up with him. Also, I couldn't help but be pleased—I drove the boy crazy, it was plain to see. I mean, let's face it, he fell in love with me in less than two weeks, and had stayed in love for almost two months.



I heard the furious barking of our four dogs out in the pen, a raucous cacophony that meant someone had just pulled in, and forgot about George. My faithful chauffeur had arrived, and about time, too. We were due at Brenda's in half an hour.

I went to the window and saw her edging her way past the dog pen. They howled and clawed, mad to get at her and be patted, and I screamed down, "Shut up, you guys! Come on up, Meredith!"

"How is it that I feel I'm taking my life in my hands whenever I pick you up?" she complained a few minutes later, looking pale and out-of-sorts. She was dressed quite conservatively today in khaki pleated pants, a paint-spattered T-shirt, hair pulled away from her face via a ponytail, and red high-tops. Her hair was still jet-black; I think by now I'd forgotten the original color. "Those swinish canines would devour me in an instant if they ever escaped."

"They just want some attention," I said absently. We weren't having this conversation for the first time, that was for sure. "And how can canines be swinish? Want to see George's latest?"

"It's the only reason I come over here anymore," she retorted, scanning the page I handed her. Her usual reaction was to burst into laughter, recover, point out all the syntax errors, laugh again, and beg me to let her make a copy for her private enjoyment. This time she stayed serious, and when she handed it back her face was grim. "That manipulative little *wretch*."

"Careful," I warned. "You're talking about the man I love."

"I certainly am *not*. You've been going out—what? Six weeks? Neither of you are sixteen and he wants to have sex?"

"You don't have to worry. I'm not going to sleep with him. I don't even—" Like kissing him, I had been about to say, but I shut my mouth fast.

"Andy," she said kindly. "What are you doing? I don't get the sense you're even attracted to him."

"That's my fault, not his."

"Oh, Andy..."

"I saw you and Terry kissing last weekend," I said, apropos of nothing.

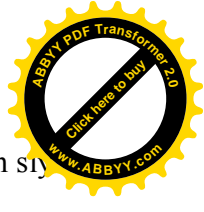
She raised her eyebrows. "Really? Sorry about that. We thought you and Brenda would be busy upstairs for a while."

"What was it like?"

"You sound so timid! If I hadn't heard it myself I would never have believed ... never mind, I'm only teasing. As far as what it's like—it's marvelous, wonderful. He's very ... warm."

"Warm?"

"I think his normal body temperature is around a hundred or so. He always feels so warm to me, almost feverish. And then he makes *me* warm." She closed her eyes and shivered, then opened them and burst into laughter when she saw the revolted look on my face. "Sorry, I sound like a romance heroine, don't I?"



“Better kill me now ... why, Andrea, surely I'm not telling you anything you don't know,” she said with sly sweetness. “Doesn't George set you on fire, romantically speaking?”

I shrugged and changed the subject, not wanting to picture a warm Meredith oozing all over Terry—except I could picture it. I could shut my eyes and see them as they were in the basement anytime I wanted. “How are you feeling? How's this batch of meds treating you?”

“Fine, and fine ... it's awfully quiet around here, except for the pack of wild dogs you keep to terrorize the peasants ... where is everyone?”

“Belinda's in her room, Mom and Dad went fishing, and Gram's passed out on the couch.”

“Already?” she said, sounding appalled but looking fascinated. She thought my grandmother was colorful. Ugh.

I shrugged and pretended it didn't bother me, fooling Meredith for maybe half a second. If that long. She shook her head and started to say something, then seemed to change her mind and instead looked at me sympathetically.

“Knock that shit off,” I snapped.

“Sorry.”

The extension by my bed rang but I ignored it; my sister would race for it and I didn't want to deprive her of her fun.

“Glossing over the awkward silence,” she said, “I'll take this opportunity to again complain about my psychiatrist. I wish he wouldn't prescribe pills I have to take with food ... I feel so bloated.”

“He's so clever, mere mortals like you and me can't understand his complex brain,” I chortled.

My sister, Belinda, interrupted just then, poking her head in the doorway. “It's Brenda.”

“Huh. Hope she's not calling to cancel.” I picked up the phone. “Hey, Bren, what's up?”

Dead silence, and then I heard her choke out, “Andy? Something awful's happened.”

“What? What is it? Are you all right?”

She paused, then burst out, “Kyle's in the hospital! He woke up this morning and couldn't move, couldn't even turn his head, and they admitted him ... he's in the hospital!” she said again, and started to cry.

“Oh, Bren, don't. Do they know what's wrong?” Meredith was looking curious; I covered the phone and mouthed, “Kyle's been hospitalized.”

“N-no,” she gulped. “They've got him stabilized—I guess he wasn't permanently paralyzed or anything, just so weak, but they don't know what's wrong and I—will you come?”

“We'll meet you there. We'll be there in twenty minutes, okay? Stop crying, okay?”



He sniffled in reply and I hung up with a bang. “Your lucky day, Meredith,” I said grimly. “I don’t care how many lives you endanger or how many miles over the speed limit you go—just get us there fast.”

Seventeen hair-raising minutes later, we were walking into the hospital lobby. Meredith, not a terribly safety-oriented driver under ideal circumstances, didn’t fool around when she needed to be somewhere in a hurry, and that twenty-five miles had been a horrible, teeth-clenching blur. Still, I wasn’t sorry. In fact, I was pathetically grateful my life had been spared.

Brenda, Terry, and George were waiting for us. Bren looked awful—pale as paper, eyes bloodshot and foundation streaked where tears had fallen. I went to her and put my arms around her shoulders. “Hon, you looked like dead dogshit,” I said in my kindest voice, and was rewarded with a sharp elbow in the ribs.

“That’s great, that’s why I called you down here? To be insulted?” She blew her nose into a tattered Kleenex, gave me a watery smile, and said, “Come on. I’ll take you to his room.”

On the way, Meredith stopped at the abandoned nurse’s station, flipping through the chart rack until she found Kyle’s. “Pity they don’t keep them at the end of the bed anymore,” she said absently, tucking it under one arm and falling into step with Brenda and me.

The door was open, so we all just walked in. Kyle, stretched out on the bed, had been looking out the window, and turned his head to see who was bearing down on him. He didn’t look so terrible, considering. Thanks to television, I had been bracing myself to see tubes coming out of every orifice, to hear the beep-beep of a heart monitor, the hiss of a respirator. He had pajamas on and there was an IV in his arm, those were the only things to remind us that this was not a normal occurrence in his life. Still too pale, making his eyes and hair seem even darker than they were, but he had a smile for us and I was mighty glad to see him.

“I can’t believe you got past security, the lot of you,” he said. Brenda went to him immediately and clutched his hand. “Andrea, Meredith—thanks for coming down. It’s nice to see you.”

“Is that our cue to say, nice to see you, too?” I asked flippantly. “You don’t look so bad, considering.”

“Considering the fact that you’re a great big dork, she means,” Terry said.

“Actually, I’m feeling better than I have in days, thank you both very much. This morning was fairly nightmarish, though.”

“I’ll bet,” Bren said.

“You really couldn’t move when you woke up?” George asked, interested.

“Not an inch. I was so weak, I could hardly yell for my mother.” He looked grim at the memory, then said, “They got me over here and immediately decide to start shoving needles into my skin.”

“Acupuncture?”

“No, blood tests. Meredith, where did you get that?”

Merry was flipping through his chart. “Hmm. The only stuff in the IV is vitamins and such to keep you



hydrated. And you're right about the needles ... looks like they're testing your blood for just about everything. According to this, you'll be happy to know, you're HIV negative.”

“That's a relief,” he said gravely, then grinned. “But I can't say, being a virgin heterosexual non drug-user, that I was losing sleep over it.”

“You're definitely not in a high risk group,” I said. Virgin? I couldn't believe someone hadn't jumped him by now. Of course, he was only sixteen but still...

“They're also testing you for spinal meningitis,” she said thoughtfully. I was pleased at how she was taking hold, taking charge. She despised hospitals and they usually freaked her out. Unfortunately, she had more experience with them than all of us combined, and she was showing us all how to be a Grown Up about the situation. “Lord, I hope that's a negative, too.”

“Why?”

“Causes brain injury and death,” she said absently, then colored as Brenda started to cry again. “Forgive me,” she said to them both. Kyle looked utterly calm, Bren was the one who was going to pieces. “I spoke without thinking.”

“I'm sorry,” Brenda gasped. “I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm sure you'll be fine...”

“You're a little shook up, I understand,” Kyle said softly. “It's actually kind of flattering...”

“Yet annoying,” Terry added.

“...to see my friends so worried.” He lanced Terry with a grim look and patted Brenda's hand. I wished he'd knock it off. I hated seeing her hand in his. His on hers. Whatever. Hated it.

“I'm going to go wash my face,” she said firmly.

“Good idea,” George said cheerfully. “Andy was right. You look awful.”

“This is ridiculous ... I'm not usually such a crybaby. Maybe I need to get more sleep or something.” She disappeared into the bathroom, muttering, and Terry took the chart from Meredith. They looked at it, heads together like horses at a salt lick, and I sat down next to Kyle.

“When do you think they'll let you out?”

“I have no idea,” he said. “And neither do they, unfortunately. I suppose they'll have to figure out what's wrong before they parole me.”

“That's usually the policy,” Merry said. “I'll say this though, it won't be much fun playing V&V without Shadowbyte.”

“There's my incentive to get out of here,” he said easily.

I thought about patting him comfortingly, but he didn't look in need of it. In fact, he looked perfectly relaxed. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was in his own bedroom, not cooped up in a hospital surrounded by doctors who hadn't the slightest idea what was wrong with him.



shook my head admiringly. Must be nice to be so collected all the time.

Brenda emerged, looking freshly washed and infinitely more with-it. “There! Listen, you guys, the nurse caught me and said we'd better get out of here. I guess it's almost suppertime, you lucky dog.”

“Ooh, suppertime! Bet you can't wait!” I said wickedly. “And maybe afterward a hoary old nurse, one with a mustache and warts, will give you a sponge bath.”

He made a face. “Thanks so much for coming, Andy. Really.”

I stood up, leaned over, and did what I'd wanted to do since I first laid eyes on him: kissed him. On the forehead, but you have to start somewhere. Besides, it's not as if we could start boning away on the hospital bed, not with my boyfriend in the room. “Get better soon. We'll come back and see you.”

Meredith patted his hand while Bren kissed his cheek. Kyle looked a little bewildered by all the attention but took it in stride. He didn't take it so well when Terry bounded up to the bed and gave him a big smack on the lips. “Mm-wah!” he cried. “You get better now, big guy, okay?”

“Okay, okay,” he said, making a big show of wiping his mouth. “Get out, please. And don't do that again, Ter, bleah.”

Meredith grinned at an unrepentant Terry. “Flirt.”

“Don't worry, babe, I saved some for you,” he leered, then pinched me on the ass as I passed him. “Both of you.”

“Do that again, schmuck, and I'll hand you your head.”

“Andrea?” We all looked up and to my surprise, Trisha was standing in the doorway, clutching an armful of books and looking tentative.

“Trish! What are you doing here?”

“I came with Jim for his physical therapy.”

I wanted to hide under the bed. Physical therapy! And all my fault. “Jeez, I'm sorry to hear that. How's his shoulder?”

“Oh, it's getting better.” She looked around at all of us. “What are you doing here?” And, unspoken: Who are all these people?

We explained, and introduced her to the group. She'd met them before, at the Thorwood, but had been so distressed at the time she probably didn't remember.

“I heard you all laughing and when Andy really gets going it's impossible *not* to hear her ... I'd know that guffaw anywhere ... so I poked my head in. What are you all doing?”

“Leaving,” the nurse said firmly, coming in behind Trish. “Now.”

We hastily complied. Trisha followed us out. “Do you have some time to kill?” Brenda asked. “We could



“To get a bite or something.”

“I've got two hours to kill,” she said unhappily. “Jim's going to be a while.”

I winced, but didn't say anything.

“My house isn't far from here,” Bren said with a wicked smile. “And with Kyle in the hospital we could use another person for V&V.”

“V&V? Sounds like some sort of sexually transmitted disease. What is it?”

* * * *

SHADOWBYTE had disappeared; no one knew where. The rest of us were left with the bodies of our would-be assassins and no clue what to do next.

“Murderer,” Agnostia hissed at me, conveniently forgetting I'd killed two men to keep them from killing her. I glared back and didn't bother to answer.

“Let's get out of here,” Anya said. “This is a death-place, now.”

We all agreed with that assessment and soon found ourselves outside. Shadowbyte's secret hideout was just outside the city. We could see the skyline on the other side of the park. There was a large white van parked crookedly on the grass and, as we emerged from the building, two more assassins jumped out, cocking guns and basically looking for trouble.

I sighed, we all sighed. No one was in the mood for this. But it would be suicidal to ignore the threat. I had reloaded my gun before we left the building and now flipped off the safety. Only one problem—these two had protective helmets on. Must've gotten the low-down from their buddies before we iced them. From head to toe, they were virtually impervious to flames, bullets, and mental domination. Plus, Anya had used up her telekinetic charge, and we didn't have Shadowbyte to split their armor like a couple of lobsters. Ninjaboy had the skills, but not the cybernetically-enhanced strength to put into the blows, and with their guns he couldn't get close enough to do damage, anyway.

“Oh, hell, what now?” Black Flame said irritably. I moved away from him; when he got angry or excited his control was for shit, and my costume wasn't made out of asbestos.

“Retreat?” Anya suggested. That sounded good to us, but there was nowhere to go except back into the building.

“We could jump them and try to steal the van,” I said. “I don't think we can get to Shadowbyte's cars, with the security in there the way it is, and it's a long walk to the city.”

One of them threw something at us. The object arched into the air and plopped to the ground, then began spewing some sort of gas. We scattered, having no idea if it was lethal or would just knock us out. No one felt like taking a chance. And then, from the trees to our left, a chilling howl rent the air.

“What was *that*?” Agnostia asked.

“I don't know, but I won't shoot it to save you, you can forget about that,” I snapped, the hair on the back



my neck trying to stand up. That howl—animal or human? Sounded like a cat in heat. A big cat.

A svelte, red-clad shape darted toward us from the trees. As it got closer I could see it was another player, dressed in a red bodysuit with—was that a *tail*?

She jumped toward the first one, hissing like an angry teakettle, and shattered the plastic face plate of his helmet with one blow. He staggered back and the other one turned to draw a bead on her. She was quick—she was *unbelievably* quick, arching out of the way so the man ended up pointed his weapon at his buddy. She slashed with her nails—she had claws like a mountain lion—and ripped through his armor without any trouble at all. Then she tore out his throat, picked the man up, and threw him at the other.

When the remaining bad guy ducked, she jumped at him. Another cat-quick blow, another spouting jugular, and it was over. It had taken about eight seconds of her time.

“Want some help?” I said weakly.

She padded over to us and we saw that she was barefoot. She moved lightly, licking the blood off her fingers and shaking her hair out. Dark green eyes, the color of wet leaves, glistened at us from her red mask.

We stared.

“Hello,” she said.

We were still staring.

“I hope you don't mind, but I was out catching my dinner and it looked like you needed some assistance.”

“Uh...” Anya started. We all looked at her hopefully, but that was as far as she got.

“My name's Felina.”

“Uh...” This time it was me. “Are you friend or foe? I mean, a villain or a vigilante?”

“I haven't decided yet,” she said pertly, and padded off, tail switching provocatively.

“Wait!” Terry cried. “Do you think you can give us a ride back to town?”

* * * *

“SOME DIABOLICAL bad guy,” Brenda snorted. “What are we going to do next? Hitchhike?”

“So *this* is what you've been doing every weekend,” Trisha said. We were back in Brenda's basement, surrounded by the usual mess of snacks, papers, pencils, and dice. “Huh. That was kind of fun. Almost...” She looked around at us doubtfully. “Almost cool. In a geeky sort of way, of course.”

Brenda handed her a sketch of Felina and she gasped. “You did this in the fifteen minutes we played? That's amazing!”

Bren flushed with pleasure. “Thanks. You can keep it.”



"I will." She folded it and tucked it carefully away in her purse. "I will, and thank you very much. What do you want to do now? Should we keep playing?"

"Naw. We don't want to get too far without Kyle, right, guys?" Terry asked.

We all agreed with that, and Meredith sat up straight with the air of someone who had just remembered something. "Brenda, I've brought back the clothes you lent me a few weeks ago—when mine got all wet, remember?" Unspoken: when I spazzed out on you guys, remember?

"Oh, right. Come on, let's go upstairs. Trisha, why don't you come with, you can see the rest of the house."

"Uh-oh," Terry muttered. "Looks like it's time for a hen-party."

"No cocks allowed," Meredith said, and looked mystified when we all cracked up. Then she got it and turned red. "Very funny. Plebians."

Upstairs in Bren's bedroom, Trisha took a deep breath and said out of nowhere, "I'm thinking about having sex with Jim."

"After his shoulder gets better, I hope," Brenda said.

"You're what?" I practically yelled. I shoved Brenda aside and took Trish by the shoulders. "Are you nuts?"

"Shhh! Let go of me. I just said I'm thinking about it."

"You're too young," Meredith said quickly.

"I'll be sixteen in a few months and I think that's going to be my early birthday present."

Meredith grimaced; I was a little more blunt: "Oh, gross! Must you share the disgusting details?"

"Shut up, Andy, let her talk," Brenda ordered. She closed her bedroom door firmly; Terry had the obnoxious habit of following people and eavesdropping. I couldn't believe how calm she was. Then again, she wasn't good friends with Trish like Merry and I were. "Now, I don't know you very well, Trisha, but from what Andy and Merry have told me, you're really in love with him," she said kindly. Brenda was always kind, and I could practically see Trisha un-tensing. I, by contrast, felt like a coiled copper wire. "I mean, you think this guy is the one, maybe even to marry, right?"

"Of course I do! I wouldn't even be considering sleeping with him if I wasn't in love."

"What's the rush?" I said.

"Jim's probably afraid Andy'll accidentally kill him one of these days," Meredith snickered, "so he wants to *carpe the diem*, as it were."

"What?"

"Seize the day," Bren translated.



I still don't see why there's a big rush," I complained.

"There isn't," Trisha said. "I'm just starting to think I'm ready, that's all. I mean, think about it. How many grownups go out with someone for six months before they have sex? Hardly any of them!"

"Good point, but we're not grownups," Brenda said. "And for your first time, you *should* take a lot of time to make sure."

"What does Jim say?"

Trisha paused and I got mad. "That bastard!" I yelled. "He's pressuring you, isn't he? I'll kill him! I'll sprain his other shoulder! I'll sprain his *head*! I'll—"

"Shut up, Andy," Merry and Bren said impatiently.

"That's the problem," Trisha sighed. "He doesn't think I'm ready. I tell him, yes, I think I am, but he wants to wait until I'm sure. It's annoying as hell. I know a little more about it than he does! I mean, it's my body. 'You're not ready yet, honey,' indeed." She crossed her arms over her chest and snorted irritably, which made me laugh. It always slew me when she did that.

Actually, I was a little surprised Trisha was being so forthright in front of Bren, who she didn't even know, but then I figured maybe she'd told us in front of Bren on purpose, to get the opinion of someone who wouldn't mince words to save a friend's feelings. Or to stop me from ripping all the hair out of her head.

"Okay, so maybe Jim isn't a bastard," I muttered.

"Maybe?" Trisha shouted.

"You have to do what you feel is best for yourself," Merry said.

"Oh, that's profound," I said sarcastically. "Got any other nuggets of wisdom, Obi-Wan?"

She ignored me. "But I think you should wait. Jim's not going anywhere, and neither are you."

"Yeah," I said.

"Do you have protection?" Bren asked. I was shocked. She was a Catholic, the quintessential Good Girl. I was sure she'd be arguing the moral aspect of Trish's dilemma, not the practical one. "Maybe you should think about getting on the Pill ... you have to take it for three months before it's reliable. That would give you time to think things over."

Trisha smiled. "Maybe I will," she promised, and Merry and I took our cue from her and didn't say a word about Trisha already being on The Pill. Apparently there was only so much she was going to share with a virtual stranger. "I'll think about what you all said—and what Andy yelled. Anyway ... I've got to get back to the hospital."

"Come back and play with us anytime. It was great having you here. Your character was a killer," Bren said, looking at Trisha's teeny frame and fighting a smile. "I never would have guessed, you know?"



I'm frigid," I announced to the group in general.

"Well. That certainly came out of nowhere," Meredith commented, ignoring Brenda and Trish's looks of amazement. "Thanks for sharing."

"I can't stand it any longer. How can you even *think* about having sex?" I cried. "How can Merry gasp and groan with El Vampiro?"

"Excuse me?" Trish said, grinning at Merry. "I haven't heard this story yet."

"I can't stand it, I can't stand any of it," I groaned. "I hate kissing him. It's so wet and disgusting and he always wants to and I *hate* it. I'm frigid. There, I said it."

"Do not despair. You're not frigid," Trisha declared. "It sounds like George doesn't know how to kiss. And—" She paused delicately.

"You don't have to say it. I don't know how, either. But neither does Meredith and *she* likes it!" I cried, aggrieved. "She's weird about every damned thing, but she's normal about kissing and stuff. It's not fair!"

Meredith coughed, and ignored my latter statement. "I like it because I'm attracted to Terry. I might even be falling in love with him, though we've never said those words to each other. But I do love being with him, and I look forward to our time alone together."

"Well, I don't care if I'm alone with George or not," I grumbled.

"Of course you don't. You're not in love with him, nor are you attracted to him," she said severely. "Why you're deigning to date him, and submitting to his pawings, is utterly beyond me."

"Real life is beyond you," I snapped.

"Maybe if you tried telling him to back off a little," Brenda began, but I shook my head.

"It's no good."

"It certainly isn't," Merry said severely. "I've heard her try to tell him to take it easy. He turns a deaf ear to her requests, and sulks when she won't kiss him. It's disgusting."

"No one's talking to you." I turned my attention back to Brenda. "I've even tried keeping my mouth closed but then my chin and lips get all wet."

"Gross!" they cried. Then, from Brenda, "That horny bastard. Tell him to knock it off."

"I can't," I said, shocked. "He'll break up with me."

"You say that as if it's a bad thing," Meredith said dryly.

"He loves me. I can't do it to him. I'll just have to keep trying. Maybe it *is* me."

"No way," Trish said again. "He doesn't know how to kiss, and what girl likes to have a choking big tongue in her mouth? Blech. Believe me, I know of what I speak. He's pushing too hard."



“Maybe *you* should try initiating the kiss,” Meredith said suddenly. “You know, start out ve-e-e-ry softly kind of take control of it, instead of waiting for him to initiate. It's not really fair to George—I can't believe I'm saying this—to accept his embraces, not say anything to him, and complain to us later.”

“Traitor,” I said, but she had a point. Now if I could bring myself to start the kiss ... hopefully he wouldn't lose all control. I, of course, had a devastating effect on the poor boy's sexual drive. I set him on fire, practically! “I'll think about it.”

“And I've really gotta get out of here,” Trisha said, checking her watch. “I'll walk you out,” Meredith offered, just as there was a knock on the door. George stuck his head in. “You still here? It's boring down there with just Terry.”

“I never thought so,” Merry said with a sly smile.

“Yuck,” I said.

“Bye, Trish,” Brenda said, and I waved as she and Meredith left. George sat on Brenda's bed, stretched out, and patted the spot beside him. I sat down and leaned into him; he put an arm around my shoulders.

“Are you going to see Kyle tomorrow, Bren?” I asked.

She was frowning at me; I looked down to make sure my buttons were buttoned and my zippers zipped. “Um—yes. Yes, I'll head over after lunch. He wants me to bring him some books.”

“Oh. What's he like to read?”

She was still frowning. Actually, she was looking a little murderous. I didn't have a clue, unless just the thought of Kyle in the hospital was enough to put her into a foaming frenzy.

“What?” she asked, sounding distracted.

“I said, what does he like to read? What will you bring him?”

“Oh. Um. Science fiction ... the hard core stuff—Asimov, Heinlein, that sort of thing.”

“Not into fantasy, huh? I guess that makes sense ... he's got such a logical mind, he's probably not interested in fairy tales. Right, George?”

“Right,” George said impatiently.

Brenda pulled out a chair and sat, making herself comfortable. She looked defiant. Beside me, George sighed, an irritated hiss of breath.

“At least he doesn't look so awful,” I said. “I mean, I don't know what I was expecting, but he did say he was feeling better.”

“Maybe they'll let him go home soon,” George said. “Before he misses a lot of school.”

Brenda glared at us. She was really getting worked up about something. “Yes, well, I'll be bringing him his assignments each day he's stuck there,” she said angrily. “So he can keep up, if he wants to.”



Oh. Good.”

“We should probably get back downstairs,” she said abruptly, standing. “Come on.”

“We'll be along in a minute,” George said, tightening his grip on me.

“No! Come on, my mom doesn't like it when I have boys up in my room.” She went to the bed and pulled me up. I yelped.

“Hey! Take it easy, we're coming. What's your problem, anyway?”

“Nothing that a bash in the head with a two by four won't cure,” she muttered, practically shoving me out the door.

Later, after George and Terry had gone home, Brenda slammed her glass down on the table and burst out, “That creep! God, I could have killed him!”

“Who?” I asked, startled. Across from me, Merry looked equally alarmed.

“Your idiot boyfriend, that's who,” she said to (gulp) me. “The whole time he was in my room he kept waving me out.”

“What do you mean, waving you out?” But I had a pretty good idea. One of his arms had been around my shoulders, and I couldn't see his hand. Easy enough to make shooing motions at Brenda without me picking up on it. “He wanted you to leave?”

“Can you imagine the nerve?” Brenda cried. “Trying to kick me out of *my own bedroom* so he could make out with you! The whole time I was in there he kept waving, waving...”

I laughed—it burst out of me before I could stop it and Brenda looked supremely irritated. I held up my hands. “Sorry. I was just remembering how you pulled out that chair and sat down, got real comfortable and took your time about it, too. He must have been really pissed.” I laughed again.

“Good,” she said shortly, not amused.

“Hey, don't get mad at *me*.” My good humor was rapidly evaporating. “It's not my fault. I was perfectly happy to talk to you and I had no idea what he was up to.”

“He's such a jerk,” she said again, ignoring my words.

“Yes, but he's my jerk,” I said. “Now do you see why I can't break up with him? He'd go crazy without me.”

“Short trip.”

Chapter 9

I WALKED INTO the hospital lobby and came very, very close to just turning around, walking back outside, and waiting the hour or so for Meredith to pick me up. Kyle was being discharged in a couple



ays and we'd all been back to see him as a group twice since our initial visit. He was going to be okay; it turned out he had some sort of weird virus that saps strength and makes you tired all the time, something he probably picked up at school.

“Not spinal meningitis, thank God,” Brenda told me on the phone earlier that week.

“Sounds like mono,” I said.

“No, but I guess it was something like that.”

Anyway. He was getting out of the hospital Friday, which was good, and Meredith gave me a ride to the hospital on her way to see Terry, which was also good, and I would see Kyle alone, which was making me a nervous wreck.

Like the brainless, stupid, moronic ninny I was, I had agonized about what to wear, officially becoming the type of girl I despised. After an hour of soul-searching, I had decided on my favorite miniskirt, a cream blouse, and red flats. Then I realized I was dressing up for the slob and pulled on black stirrup pants, my “Come Along Quietly” T-shirt, and tennis shoes. But I couldn't resist throwing a few curlers in my hair for body, and taking some care with my makeup. Then I had nothing to do but wait for Meredith, who was late as usual. I could barely refrain from snapping at her as I hurried out the front door and into the car, not even waiting for her to get out and come up to the house.

Meredith, once I was in the car, had gently suggested I go back inside and take the curlers out of my hair.

So here I was, hair full of body but knees like spaghetti. I sat down in one of the lobby chairs to screw up my courage, and didn't even get settled before I was on my feet again. Dammit! I was not going to let myself be nervous, this was just a guy, *just a guy* and I had a boyfriend, anyway, someone who loved me and I'm just going to march in there, say hi, chit chat for a few minutes, and leave. No big deal, dammit!

I squared my shoulders and marched, full steam, toward Kyle's room, practically knocking a couple nurses off their feet. I banged the door open, probably startling the hell out of him, but he put down his book and smiled. “Andy! Hi!”

“Hello,” I gasped, breathing hard. I made an intense, internal effort to get a grip on myself. “Hello,” I said again. I noticed he was dressed, sitting up in bed with piles of papers, notebooks, and textbooks all over the place. “It looks like you're busy...” I was already backing out. “I'll just see you later.”

“Freeze!” he commanded. “I need a break, anyway. I've been doing this for hours and you're the first company I've had all day.” He looked over my shoulder. “Did any of the others come?”

“No, just me.” Did he sound disappointed? “Sorry.”

“Don't be silly. Come here and sit down. It was great of you to come.”

“Actually, Meredith had a date with Terry and I didn't have anything to do so I came with ... she dropped me off...” Oh, why did I say that? That could have been spit out a little more politely. “So we've got about an hour, anyway.”

“Less than that, I'm afraid,” he said. “I've got to go down for a few more tests in about thirty minutes, but we can talk until then.”



“Oh. That's good.” I sat, and then everything left my head. I couldn't think of a single thing to say. It would help if he wasn't looking directly at me. I was the focus of his attention and it was hard to concentrate. “Uh—you look good. Healthier, I mean.”

“Yes, I've even been getting some sun.” He grinned. “I try to go out into the solarium as much as possible ... I think I'm getting a tan.”

“Well, you're darker than me.”

“Everyone's darker than you,” he pointed out. “I've never met anybody with paler skin.”

“Terry says I'm fish-belly-white,” I said wildly. Why the hell were we talking about my skin? “Of course, he can't talk—he's almost as pale as I am.”

“Yeah, I've heard you refer to him as the Vampire King.” Now we were talking about Terry's skin. *Much* better. “But don't talk to me about him, I'm quite annoyed at him these days.”

“Why?”

“He penned in an order on my chart for a barium enema when you guys were last here,” Kyle said darkly. “I had to do some fast talking to get out of it.”

I choked back laughter because it was obvious Kyle didn't find it amusing. He looked at me narrowly, reading the internal struggle in my twitching lips and watering eyes. After a few seconds I got myself under control.

Silence.

More silence. He looked thoughtful, fingers drumming a tattoo on his chemistry book. I cast about wildly for something to say. “So. You're—uh—taking Chem this year, huh?”

He looked at the book in his hands, seeming surprised to find it there. “Yes. Yes, I am. It's great, I really like it. Much better than Bio. Chem's structured, there are rules...”

“Ye canna change the laws of physics, man!” I cried, then clapped a hand over my mouth. Fortunately, he laughed.

“Right, that's exactly right. Star Trek fan, huh?”

“Big-time,” I said. Then we got into an argument about who could kick the most butt on a galactic scale: Kirk, Picard, or Sisko. Not much of an argument, actually, because we both liked Jean-Luc better than Jim, though Sisko was a close second.

“I mean, he's so commanding, and who'd have thought a bald guy could be sexy?” I said.

“Exactly my thought,” Kyle said gravely, and I slapped his arm. “Ouch! Carefully, I've got so many tracks the kids at school will think I've become a junkie.”

“Sorry. But I have to say, Picard's a lot more condescending than Kirk. He's downright patronizing, lots of times.”



That's what makes him so effective," he said airily.

"It's what makes him a jerk."

"How can you say he's more arrogant than Kirk? Captain No-one-can-beam-down-without-me Kirk? At least Picard follows regulations once in a while. It's stupid to risk the commanding officer in mission after mission. Kirk should stay on the bridge where he belongs."

"All right, calm down, I agree with you. We're getting all worked up talking about two people who don't exist, did you notice?" And then I saw with joy/dismay that the time had really flown; it was almost time for his tests "Jeez, I didn't even notice the time ... I'd better go."

"I'm glad you came."

"Thanks." I leaned over to give him a sisterly kiss on the cheek goodbye—at least, that's what I think I meant to do. But when I leaned over he put a hand on the back of my neck and turned his face to mine, and I ended up kissing his mouth instead. Kissing his mouth for a good ten seconds, actually. Kissing him and smelling his clean warm scent, feeling his lips on mine, his mouth slacken, his other hand coming up to cup my chin, to coax my mouth open, not that I needed any coaxing.

It went on forever; it was over in an instant.

I pulled back and the look on his face was a mirror to the astonishment I felt. He opened his mouth to say something—probably to yell for help—and I wheeled around and practically ran out, too afraid to hear what it might be.

I spent the twenty-five minutes waiting for Meredith alternately guilty, hot with embarrassment, pleased that he had seemed to enjoy it as much as I had, shocked at how *much* I had enjoyed it, and overjoyed that I apparently wasn't frigid. "Hot damn!" I chortled aloud, startling the convalescents nearby. "Trisha was right. George *can't* kiss!" Then, "God, I'm such a traitor, what was I doing, what was I *thinking*?" People began to leave the area; I didn't care.

Meredith pulled up with a screech, scattering pedestrians, and I flung myself into the car.

"How's Kyle?"

"Amazing," I replied, then tried to get a grip on myself so she wouldn't get any funny ideas and grill me. The state I was in, I couldn't fend her off and I'd end up telling everything. "Drive on, James."

"He really knows how to kiss, huh?"

"Boy, you got that—shit!"

Meredith laughed so hard, I thought she'd kill us both. I screeched at her to pick a lane and stick with it, all the while completely furious at myself for being such an easy mark.

"So you kissed him! 'Boldness, always boldness and ever boldness,'" she quoted. "That's French. You ought to make that your personal motto."

"Sounded like English to me," I said rudely, staring fiercely at the road. I wouldn't look at her.



“What's wrong? Why are you so angry?”

“Because I'm an idiot, a complete moron and a cheating trollop, to boot.”

“All that, in the hour I left you alone? Goodness.”

“It's not funny! Easy for you, you *like* your boyfriend.”

“True enough,” she agreed. “Most people do, though. Like their boyfriends, I mean.”

“Oh, Merry, what am I going to do?” I cried. “I really like Kyle, *like* him, hah, I've been crazy about him since the day I met him but he's never said anything, never even noticed me, and George was always there and saying he loved me and writing to me all the time and wanting me to go out with him, and so nice to me, I mean he really loves me, so I agreed to wear his ring even though he's really starting to bug me...”

I took a deep breath and practically sobbed the rest out: “Which was stupid of me and not at all fair to poor George, who has no idea I liked Kyle, and Brenda really likes Kyle, too, so I'm sort of cheating on her *and* George, and I went to the hospital today just to have him to myself for a while, to be with him without Brenda hanging all over him, and then I kissed him—or he kissed me, I don't really remember—and it was wonderful, it was *amazing*, and now I don't have a single clue what to do!” I pounded on the dashboard in a tearful rage while Meredith made soothing noises.

“I'm sorry you're so upset,” she said when I had calmed down a bit. “But I feel constrained to point out that you're in a mess of your own making.”

“Thanks a lot,” I sulked. “Gee, I knew you'd understand.”

“I do understand how you feel. What I don't understand is how you let yourself get into this. While your pain is certainly real and I'm sorry for it, your situation was brought about by pride ... you *would* string George along, and for what? Because Kyle never asked you out? Have you considered that George swooped down on you so damned fast he never had a chance?”

My mouth popped open in shock. “God, that's a horrible thought.”

“For all of us. Now, as I see it, you can keep going out with George, keep trying to fend him off, and keep pining after Kyle, watching in agony as Brenda finally screws up her courage and asks him out...”

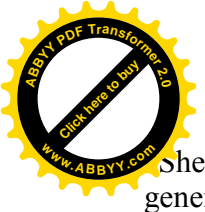
“Please stop,” I moaned. “I can't think of anything worse.”

“You fool! That's what's been happening,” she said impatiently. “Your other option is to break it off with George *immediately*, call Kyle on the phone, and demand he take you to the movies.”

“You're only pushing Kyle because you don't like George,” I said hotly.

“It's true I don't think the two of you are well suited, but if you truly cared for George I wouldn't tell you to break it off,” she chided me. “And you were right when you said this isn't fair to him. It *isn't* ... how would you like it if you found out he was dating you because he couldn't get who he really wanted?”

“God, shut *up*. You're making me feel like shit. And what about Brenda?”



She had her chance,” was the ruthless reply. (At times I thought Meredith would make a really fine general.) “Don’t get me wrong, I like her fine. More than that, actually. But she’s had months and months to do something about her feelings and hasn’t. You’re both sitting back and waiting for poor Kyle to do something, which isn’t very 90’s of you. You especially, Andy, I expected more from you. He’s *shy*, for heaven’s sake, am I the only one who notices these things?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I gnawed on a thumbnail and watched the scenery whiz by at about eighty miles an hour. Meredith was making a lot of sense, as usual (she sucked at taking care of herself, but always knew what was best for others), but I still had my doubts. “I don’t know that I should break up with George, though.”

“Like to keep a bird in the hand, hmm?”

“Sort of.” I grimaced. “I wish you didn’t make me sound like such a bitch.”

“I don’t make you *sound* like anything,” she said severely. “End it with him, Andrea. You won’t break his heart ... he doesn’t love you. No one could fall in love with someone, really in love, in two weeks. He sees you as a kiss receptacle, nothing more, even if he’s convinced himself it’s love.”

“I don’t think—”

“Perhaps he’s going with you for the same reason you’re going with him—it’s nice to have a girlfriend, someone you can do things with and brag to your friends about.”

The idea that George was going out with me just to have a girlfriend made a great, irrational rage sweep over me. My fingers curled into fists, even as I realized intellectually that my reaction was hypocritical.

“Maybe I’ll call Cobran, get his advice,” I said, trying for levity.

“Bite your tongue.”

My sister handed me the phone and I braced myself, expecting George. “Hello?”

“I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Who is this?”

“Oh. Sorry. This is Kyle.”

“*Kyle?*” Oh, Jesus. “Hi. Uh—”

“I shouldn’t have done that. I called to apologize.”

“I wouldn’t say you’re the—” Guilty party, I was going to say, but he cut me off.

“I mean, I know perfectly well you and George are together and what I did was definitely in bad taste, and I wanted you to know that I was sorry and I hope we can still be friends.”

“Of course! Oh, Kyle, listen, it was as much my fault as it was yours,” I babbled. *Tell him you’re breaking up with George and ask him out, fool!* Shut up, inner voice. “I really don’t blame you and I’m not accepting your apology, because you don’t have anything to be sorry for, it was all my fault, really it



was, and I'm glad you called but it really wasn't necessary because it was all my fault. Okay?" Did I say I was all my fault? God, I was so *nervous*.

"Oh. All right. Uh ... I'm not very good at this so I'll just blatantly change the subject, okay?"

I grinned. "Good plan."

"Right," he said, sounding relieved. "I guess Meredith is having a party this weekend—"

"Well, duh. It's a party for *you*, to celebrate getting better and getting discharged. Everyone's coming and we're going to rent movies and pig out and stuff. Her parents are out of town until Monday."

"Okay. I was wondering if you could give me her number so I could call and get directions."

"Sure." I gave him the number and we hung up. I didn't mention the obvious—I was perfectly capable of giving him directions—because I assumed he was uncomfortable talking to me. Considering the fact that he had been minding his own business when I sexually assaulted him three hours ago, I couldn't blame him. Nice of him to call though. I was pleased. So pleased, in fact, that I went into my room, locked the door, and cried.

Chapter 10

"LET ME SEE if I understand you correctly," Shadowbyte said. "You left my building, found two more assassins, and watched as someone you've never seen before kills them. Then, instead of subduing her, or at the very least, getting her name and affiliation, you ask her for a ride to town. And then she disappears. Is that correct? Would you say I have it?"

We all looked at the floor. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Agnostia scuff a small foot at the tile. Anya cleared her throat. Black Flame was mumbling under his breath. And Shadowbyte stood, arms folded across his chest, the picture of barely restrained impatience. I kept waiting him to start tapping his booted foot.

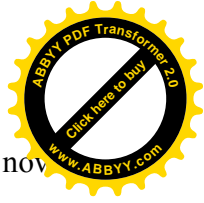
"Well?" he asked, icily polite to the last.

"It all happened so fast..." Ninjaboy said weakly.

"Yeah, she was really quick," Terry added. We all fell over ourselves agreeing with Terry: quick, oh yeah, she was quick, really quick, never saw anybody move so fast, nope, never did.

"And where the hell were *you*, anyway?" I demanded. "There's rubble and dead bodies all over the place and poof! Shadowbyte does a Houdini. So don't criticize us on how we handled yet another shock when you didn't even stick around." I stopped, pleased with myself. Ha! Guess I'd told him a thing or two. Crime lord, my rosy red butt.

He skewered me with a laser beam stare, a good trick since he was wearing sunglasses, and said gently, "Of course. You're so right. It's wrong of me to expect such things from you. Things like professionalism ... the ability to think on your feet, to make fast decisions that are still sound. All my fault. I do apologize. We'll speak no more about it."



“Well, good,” I said, inwardly bristling at his innuendos. I longed to plant my knife in his throat. “So now what?”

“Through the bodies left behind, and the two who were merely knocked unconscious and not killed outright, I have been able to discern the identity of their employer. I left—pulled a Houdini, as Stiletto so inelegantly put it—”

“You can be *such* a—”

“—to find and subdue the person responsible for the attempts on our lives. So the danger has passed.”

“It has?” Anya asked. “I mean, you did?”

“Then that means...” Agnostia started, looking somewhat alarmed.

“The truce is over,” Shadowbyte finished, and fired a kick at my head.

Pandemonium. I managed to throw myself back enough so that, instead of taking my head off, his boot just grazed my cheek, spinning me around and into Agnostia. We both tumbled to the floor. I heard Anya scream in agony as Black Flame dropped a sizzling hand to her shoulder, then she wrenched herself away from him and mentally shoved him into Shadowbyte.

This caused trouble for that psycho-cyber asshole, I'm happy to report, because Black Flame was heating up pretty good. I pulled out my exploding pen, twisted the cap off, and slid it across the floor to the two of them. Shadowbyte darted out of range and Black Flame became a five-foot nine ball of fire, the best protection for him against a sudden explosion. When the pen blew up it dissipated B.F. into a few hundred thousand sparks.

“It'll take him a while to put himself back together again,” I panted, shoving Agnostia off of me. “Go get Shadowbyte, Ninjaboy.”

“Who, *me*?” Ninjaboy was appalled. “Why me?”

“You're the ninja, that's why. No one else has martial arts training.”

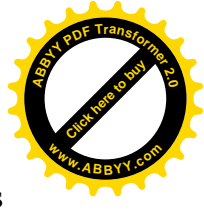
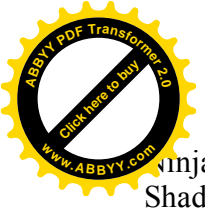
“I'll help,” Agnostia volunteered.

“Terrific. The blind leading the stupid. Knock yourself out. Not literally,” I yelled after them.

Anya, who had just climbed to her feet, ducked and two shurikens buried themselves in the wall behind her. She dived back to the floor and wormed her way over to me. “Next time there's some sort of cosmic bad guy who wants to get us all,” she growled, reaching my side, “I vote the Vigilantes leave town and let the Villains handle it, instead of forming a truce.”

“Hear, hear,” I said. “And where is that snake, anyway?” We could hear flat smacking sounds of blows being deflected and, occasionally, landing, and Agnostia trying to mentally dominate Shadowbyte at the top of her lungs. “We'd better head over there and help.”

Anya got to her feet again, when something vaguely round and basketball-sized hit her in the chest hard enough to make her stagger.



winjaboy's head. There was a crash as Agnostia jumped—or was helped—out the window. Then Shadowbyte was right in front of us, firing a punch at Anya that came up from somewhere around his ankles. She ducked and his fist went into the wall, past his elbow.

“Drat,” he muttered. He muttered again, impatiently, as I shot him in the kidneys. “Oh, that's very sporting,” he said sarcastically, extricating himself from the wall. I looked at my gun unbelievably. What, was I carrying blanks? Cyborg, my ass—the man was a robot. “Shooting a man in the back, and all that.”

“Don't talk to *me* about sporting, you treacherous asshole,” I snapped, stepping back, giving myself some fighting room. Or dying room. “You can't just declare a truce over and done with and then try to kill us all! Hell, two hours ago you shoved me into the carpet so the bad guys wouldn't blow my head off and now you're trying to kill me?”

“It's nothing personal,” he soothed, advancing. Anya jumped on his back and he shook her off like a fly, snapping her neck almost casually on the way down. And then there was one. “No indeed, nothing personal at all. But if I don't take care of you now, sure enough, you'll be causing trouble for me later. Also, I want to win this game, and the more of you I eliminate, the more points I get.”

He made it sound so nice and logical. I almost nodded in agreement before I caught myself. I shot him again, or tried to; he moved like lightning and the bullet buried itself in the wall behind him.

He reached out and took my gun from my nerveless fingers, tossing it aside. I was so shocked into immobility I didn't even think to go for the knife strapped to my left calf. How nice it would be to gut him from throat to balls! Not that I had a prayer of even nicking him.

“Nothing to say?” he mocked. “No pithy comment, no courageous last words?”

“Get bent.”

“That's better.” The blow came; I never saw his arm move. There was a walloping, splintering pain in my head and then there wasn't anything.

* * * *

WE LOOKED AT the numbers on the dice. “Shadowbyte strikes Stiletto across the bridge of the nose, driving the cartilage into her brain and killing her instantly.” Terry paused, put down his pencil, and added unnecessarily, “Kyle wins.”

“This bites!” George said rudely. “We can't all be dead. He *can't* have killed us all.”

“He didn't,” Terry said smugly. “I'm still alive.”

“We let you win,” Brenda told Kyle. “Felt sorry for you and all that.”

“Ha,” he said quietly, smiling.

“That's it?” Meredith demanded. “That's the end of the game?”

“This one, yes. Now we—all the dead people, I mean—have to make up new characters. Kyle and Terry,



obviously, don't have to.”



“George is right,” I announced. “This bites.”

“Sore loser,” Kyle said, grinning.

“Why don't I drive the cartilage into *your* brain and we'll see what kind of a mood it puts you in,” I said, annoyed, then had to smile at how silly I sounded.

“Why didn't Terry win, too?” Meredith asked. “He's alive.”

“Yes, but Kyle got tons of points for killing you all off.”

“How nice for him,” Brenda said sarcastically.

“I didn't kill anybody,” Terry continued, pausing to throw a paper clip in Brenda's hair, “and in fact only got a few points for not being killed by Stiletto's pen.”

We were in Meredith's dining room, the usual mess of papers, dice, and pencils on all sides, and Madonna's latest was on the CD player. The night, as they say, was young. No one had expected the game to end so quickly. It shouldn't have, but Merry and I were inexperienced players. We made silly mistakes, and that made it easy for Kyle to pounce and slaughter everyone. Terry had told me he'd once played a game that went on for a year, for heaven's sake, and this one had been going on a bare two months. So now we all just sat around and looked at each other.

“Is there any dip left, or did Terry pig it all?” I asked, getting up.

“Pig this, baby,” he said, extending his middle finger and gently waving it in my direction. “And there's plenty still in the fridge.”

“I'll help, Andy,” Kyle said, following me.

“What, I'm supposed to serve everyone? I was just getting a snack for myself. The rest of you morons can fend for themselves.”

“Your shining generosity of spirit is blinding us all,” Merry said.

In the kitchen, I didn't have the vaguest idea what to say to Kyle. As always, he was pleasantly, maddeningly polite. As always, I longed to do something to shake him up, make him raise his voice. Of course, planting a wet one on him while he lay helpless on his bed of pain must have shaken him up. But we were very definitely Not Talking About It.

“Good to be out, huh?” I asked, a stupid, senseless, obvious question. What did I expect him to say? ‘Gee, no, Andrea, I loved the hospital. I cried when they gave my room to someone else.’

“Of course it is,” he replied easily, handing me a bowl of pretzels. “I managed to keep up with my schoolwork, too, Star Trek discussions and other...” He paused for a second. “...interruptions notwithstanding.”

I almost dropped the bowl; instead I tightened my grip until I was practically hugging it to my chest, and



felt the blood rush to my face as I blushed.

“Well, I ... apologize for disrupting you. Interrupting you. Whatever.”

“Andrea,” he said, very seriously, “you may disrupt me whenever you damned well please.” Then he flushed and looked over his shoulder to where George and the others were sitting. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

I practically heard the sizzle as my mental circuits overloaded. What did he mean? Why wasn’t he—why was he—why didn’t I—

I wanted to die. I wanted to hit him over the head with this bowl of pretzels. I wanted to leave. I wanted to kiss him again. I wanted to—

“Andy?” George called. “Need any help in there?”

“No!” I said crossly. “I’m perfectly capable of handling this all by myself.”

Kyle raised his eyebrows at me in true Shadowbyte style; I glared and abruptly exited, nearly running over Terry on the way back to the dining room. He yanked the bowl from my hands, said, “Thought you might want to run away with this, you silly bitch,” pinched me in the ribs, and passed me on the left. Dealing with Terry always made me feel as if I’d been hit in the head with a putty boxing glove—not hard enough to hurt, but enough to make me unsteady on my feet.

“We’re putting one of the movies in,” Brenda said, and soon we were all settling down in the Devonshire living room, Meredith and Terry sitting down on the love seat, George practically breaking something to claim the bigger couch for us. Brenda and Kyle sat down with their backs against the coffee table, and I reluctantly went to my spot beside George.

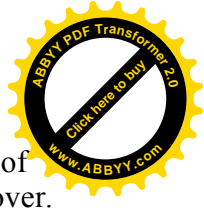
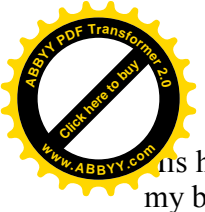
Soon I was lying on my side, trying to concentrate on the movie (We were watching Jurassic Park for the millionth time, an oldie but a goodie.) while George curled up behind me like a shrimp. There were soft sighs and murmurings coming from the appropriately named love seat as Meredith and Terry commenced cuddling, and in front of me Brenda had snuggled up to Kyle, who (absently, I hoped—or maybe politely?) put his arm around her shoulders.

His arm around her shoulders!

Completely unable to watch the movie, I watched the two of them like the proverbial hawk. If he leaned down and kissed her, I was going to kill him. Then I would kill her, George, and, lastly, myself. Maybe I’d take Terry along for fun. Meredith and Trisha I would let live.

Meanwhile, George’s hand had slipped under my sweater and was inching up past my stomach. I went rigid in a mixture of startlement and irritation. On the TV, the T Rex was disemboweling the lawyer on the toilet.

Up, up, up. His hand inched ever higher, and I couldn’t bring myself to do a damn thing about it. Talk about your moral quandaries: should I scream at him to keep his hands to himself, bringing everyone’s (especially Kyle’s) unwanted attention, or lie quietly and submit? Should I push him back toward the couch, squashing him, or would that make me lose my balance and fall? I could see it now, me going over the edge with a shriek and getting everyone’s attention. And how did I get myself into these things, anyway? Did I deserve this? Worse, was I supposed to be enjoying it?



his hand had kept moving up while I pondered these mental agonies; now it paused just at the center of my bra. I was trying not to gasp, while on the TV, the heroine was getting crushed beneath a Land Rover. I knew just how she felt. George wasn't actually going *into* my bra, his fingers were lingering right outside. His breathing had gotten harsher and harsher until he was practically panting in my ear, and, unbelievably, incredibly, he husked, "Am I getting you hot?"

Was he getting me hot? Was the Pope an Iranian terrorist? Was I going to pass Biology? Would I let him do this to me and live?

"Cut it out," I hissed, avoiding his question. "I'm trying to watch the movie."

The hand vanished. I lay rigidly, annoyed beyond all measure, and not just at George. I had definitely gotten myself into this, and I deserved every one of these awkward situations. I fumed silently, wondering how far I was supposed to go, how much petting and pawing was I supposed to endure, before I finally had the courage to call it off. I was going through all this for poetry and a class ring?

On the floor in front of me, Bren now had her head on Kyle's shoulder. To say I was completely miserable would be putting a good face on things.

Merry paused the movie at some point, giving us the opportunity to use the bathroom, get more snacks, talk ourselves out of murdering our boyfriends ... in a few seconds George and I had the living room to ourselves, and I braced myself for a confrontation.

"You know, Terry and Kyle and I are spending the night," he said.

"Yeah, I know. You guys are going to sleep in the living room and Bren and Merry and I are going to bunk down in her room." Duh. Hello? Why were we discussing sleeping arrangements? Why wasn't he yelling at me, or sulking, or trying to make out with me in the thirty seconds of privacy we had?

"Yeah, but no one gets her mom and dad's room," he said, grinning. He reached out and touched my leg. "Why don't we plan on sleeping in there?"

I stared at him. He apparently mistook my stunned dismay for trepidation, because he said, "Don't worry. I brought protection."

Oh, no. No way. Not this. That's it. The camel's back has been broken. There was a limit to what I would do to prevent waves, to keep my boyfriend happy, to keep that stupid class ring. But the limit had finally been reached.

"No way," I said and, to my credit, I managed not to shout it into his face and follow it up with a kick to the balls. "Uh-uh. Absolutely not."

He removed his hand from my arm and began to look mighty pissed. "Don't you love me?"

"I can't believe you're using that shit on me! We've only been going out for a month—"

"Two months."

"Whatever. And *you* think we're ready to sleep together? You were planning on it? You brought *condoms*?" That was a guess. He'd said 'protection'. Hopefully that didn't mean Saran Wrap and a rubber



and. “Are you out of your goddamned mind?”

“No, but I think maybe you are. Why else are we going out, then?”

“Not to fuck!” I said angrily. “Is that what you think?”

“Well then,” he said, honestly puzzled, “why?”

“Good question,” I said quietly. So he *was* using me, as I was using him. Well, it ends here, now. I opened my mouth, the phrase already formed in my brain: *George, it's over. Here's your ring. I don't want to go out with you anymore. Thanks for the boosts to my ego, they were frequent and appreciated. When you're not trying to get into my pants you're probably a pretty nice guy. Good luck. By the way, do you have Kyle's phone number?*

He cut me off before I could get a word out. “Hey, okay. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push you. I thought you wanted to, but it's obvious you're not ready. That's okay, I understand. It's just that you're so pretty, I want you all the time and it's hard to be told to wait, you know?”

Oh, no. Come on, stay a jerk. I can break up with you when you're being a jerk, not when you're going all soft and melty and telling me I'm pretty.

“That's okay,” I said stiffly, hating myself for chickening out. “I'm—uh—sorry I yelled.”

“I forgive you,” he smiled, leaning forward and giving me a big sloppy wet kiss. I submitted, but only for a couple seconds. The others had been gone an awfully long time, and I had my suspicions. I put one finger over my (wet) lips and crept to the doorway. I made talking motions to George with my fingers and, surprised, he said, “I'm glad we got this all straightened out.”

I leaped into the hallway and screamed, “Ah-HA!”

Brenda, Merry, and Terry all screamed and flinched back. Kyle popped out of the bathroom and into the hall: “What's going on?”

“Nothing much. Just catching some people doing stuff they shouldn't,” I said angrily.

“Boy, I'll say,” Terry said, motioning toward George. “At least you cut him off at the knees.”

“Shut up! It's none of your business.” Fortunately for Meredith, the phone rang and she ran from my righteous wrath to answer it. Terry and Brenda didn't get off so easily. “I'm sure you both have something to say to me,” I said coldly.

“I'm sor—” Bren began.

“If you don't want to sleep with him, maybe you should think about giving him head, then he'd get off your back,” Terry suggested.

I leapt at him and for a few glorious seconds actually had my hands around his throat. We both crashed to the floor and I rolled on top of him. I was cursing his mother, his sister, his dog, and he was giggling, fending off my punches and slaps. I got hold of his hair and tugged hard enough to make his eyes water; in retaliation he pinched the underside of my breast hard enough to make *my* eyes water. Things were



definitely starting to get ugly when Kyle leaned down and pulled me off him. I stomped down, hard, and just missed Terry's neck.

“Let go, Kyle, he's not bleeding yet.”

He shook me briskly and my teeth clicked together. “Both of you, calm down.”

“Andy, it's your dad.”

Kyle let go and I groaned and trudged to the phone, aiming a kick at Terry on the way. Dad never called unless I was in trouble or there was some sort of emergency. Probably the former.

“What's up, Dad?”

“Your grandmother's sick,” was the blunt reply. “We're taking her to the Emergency Room, and you need to come home and watch your sister while we're gone.”

This was maddening, for several reasons.

One, my sister was twelve, and perfectly capable of keeping out of trouble while my parents were gone. Dad refused to acknowledge this.

Two, my grandmother wasn't sick. She had the DT's again. I had never known the woman unless she was a) drunk, b) hung over, or c) in the clutch of the DT's. I loathed and despised her, not so much because of the drinking, but because she was a genuinely unpleasant woman. I had no idea how she'd managed not to screw my mother up.

Mom had insisted she move in with us a few months ago, and since then mine and my sister's lives had gotten a lot worse. One of Gram's most annoying tendencies was to think she was the disciplinarian, not my parents. So we were forever being told, while she swayed drunkenly, that we were grounded for six years. Pretty hard to take seriously. We spent most of our time ignoring her, and when we actually had to interact with her we made it short and not-so-sweet.

The irony was, as much as I disliked the woman, she hated me just as much. Thought I was willful and self-involved. The fact that she was correct on both counts didn't improve our relationship.

“I have to get someone to give me a ride, but I'll be there as soon as I can,” I said dully.

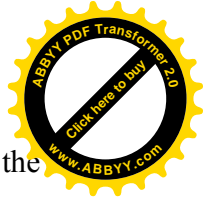
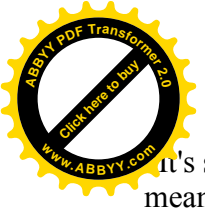
“Good girl,” Dad said, and hung up.

I turned to Meredith, who had followed me back to the phone. “Guess who's getting a free trip to the Emergency Room?” I asked bitterly.

“Oh, Andrea, no...”

“Oh, Andrea, yes. She ruins everything! If she has to drink so much, can't she leave me out of it? Leave my family out of it? I hate her!” I burst into angry tears.

“Everybody feels that way about their family at one time or another,” Meredith, who loved her grandmother beyond all reason, soothed.



It's so unfair. Your grandmother's about the nicest person I ever met and she's dying, and my gram's the meanest person and she's probably going to outlive *me!*" Everything rose up in me at once: my grandmother (yuck), George wanting to have sex with me (double yuck), Terry and Bren and Merry overhearing my humiliation, Kyle confusing the hell out of me, having to go home ... I put my head down on Merry's shoulder and bawled.

There was, after a time, a tap on my shoulder, and I turned to see Kyle hold up his car keys. "I'll give you a ride home."

My tears cut off like a switch had been thrown and I stared at the keys. Meredith took me everywhere. I had assumed she would drive me home, I never would have asked, never would have *thought* to ask....

"I'll get my coat," I murmured, and went to the foyer in a daze. George followed me.

"It sucks that you have to leave," he said unhappily. "We were gonna have a lot of fun."

Not as much fun as you had in mind, buddy boy. "Yeah, well, that's life when you live with my grandmother," I said shortly. I had made up my mind that I would *not* kiss him goodnight. Hadn't I suffered enough? "I'm all set, Kyle."

He nodded and shrugged into his own coat. The foyer was suddenly filled with Furies, all of them being very quiet and not looking at me.

"Will you guys cut it out?" I snapped, wiping my face. "It's no big deal."

"I hope your grandmother feels better," Brenda said. I gave her a look and she smiled slightly. "Well ... it wouldn't be nice of me to wish her dead just so you wouldn't have to get called home from parties."

"Guess not."

"You look terrible," Terry said cheerfully. He didn't look so good, either. His hair was standing up in all directions, his shirt was ripped, and there was a smudge on his forehead, casualties from our hallway scuffle, no doubt. "Really. All red-eyed and sniffly and pale. Paler than usual, I mean. Worse than fish-belly white. It's disgusting."

"Thanks." I leaned forward and tried to rub the smudge away; no good, it stayed put. "Better go wash your face."

"Call me later tonight," Meredith said.

"Okay. And thanks, Merry. Sorry I got your shirt all wet."

"It'll dry. And don't call me that!" she called after us.

Kyle followed me out, shutting the door firmly. "Careful on the path," he said absently. "It's icy."

"Great. The perfect end to a perfect evening." Inwardly, I was frantic. Did I really look as bad as Terry had said? Probably—the boy was known for his aggravating honesty. It's what made him and Meredith such a good pair. "How much you want to bet I break my leg?"



“Good point.” Kyle said. He stopped, came back to me, and put his arm around my waist, hauling me up against his side and practically lifting me off my feet. “Here. Hang on to me.”

“If I go down, buster, I'm taking you with me,” I warned him, pleased at how normally sarcastic I sounded. I was completely torn, emotionally. I didn't know whether to throw hot coffee in Gram's face when I saw her next, or kiss her leathery old cheek for getting me so close to Kyle. In five minutes our relationship (What relationship?) had progressed amazing lengths. He was driving me home. He had his arm around me! He was practically carrying me to the car! “So you might want to think about saving yourself.”

“If you start to slip I've got time to throw myself aside.”

He opened the passenger door for me, a first in my life, waited until my fanny was firmly in the seat, and slammed it shut. Luckily I pulled my fingers back in time (I had been reaching up to grab the seatbelt.) and managed to avoid digital amputation. He swung in on his side, slammed his door, started the car. There was complete silence until we got to town; as usual, I couldn't think of a single thing to say to him.

Then, “You and your grandmother aren't exactly close, huh?”

I shrugged. “I don't know her very well. I only met her this past year. She usually lives in Texas with my aunt.”

He nodded, wordlessly encouraging me to continue, and I found myself saying, “I shouldn't have said I hated her in front of everyone like that. I don't even know if I do hate her. It's just—this is going to sound terrible, since everybody knows alcoholism is a disease, blah-blah-blah—but she causes a lot of trouble for me. Inconvenience, you know? And she's mean to my sister and my mom.”

“Not to you?”

“She tries, but I usually dish it right back in her face. And then my parents yell at *me* for being disrespectful. You believe that? And she's never liked my dad, so she totally ignores him. And never mind that she's living in *his* house. You'd think she'd be nicer to my dad. She owes him a lot. My poor sister just tries hard to stay out of her way, but sometimes Gram makes her cry, and then I could just kill the old wretch.” I laughed bitterly. “What a freak show, huh?”

“Not everybody gets the Norman Rockwell family,” Kyle said, and I could have hugged him for understanding. I think he understood. Well, I could have hugged him for listening to me. Oh, who was I kidding? He could have pushed me off a cliff and I would have wanted to hug him. “It's too bad you have to get called home like this ... I can see how it would be upsetting. I take it this sort of thing isn't infrequent?”

I snorted. “Depends on what you call infrequent. Twice a month?”

“Why don't they—your parents, I mean—put her in a program?”

“Believe me, they *want* to. But she has to want to go, and she insists, usually after she's polished off her third bottle of wine, that she doesn't have a problem. I don't know why my mother puts up with her.”

“Because it's *her* mother,” was the quiet reply, and I squirmed.



I'll shut up now. You probably think I'm awful. There are times when I know I'm being a jerk.”

“I don't think you're awful.” A pause. Then he said the phrase I would play back in my head again and again that night: “I think you're pretty great, actually.”

Kyle, baby, you can drive the car off a cliff if you like, because I'll never be happier again than I am right at this moment. Go ahead. Kill us both. Really! I don't mind. “Ditto,” I managed. “Uh—I mean, you're a lot greater than I am.”

“Greater?” he said, amused.

“At least you don't want to stuff your grandmother into the oven and push broil.”

He laughed. I thought about how the phrase must have sounded and joined him, and then we were pulling into my driveway. Things looked pretty quiet, I assumed the ambulance had already taken Gram. My parents would have followed in the car.

“That your sister?”

I looked up and saw Belinda silhouetted in the living room window, waving. She looked very small to me then, and I started to feel real shame for my earlier actions. Dad didn't like calling me home anymore than I liked coming, and Belinda hated to stay by herself. And she was always scared when Gram had, in the words of my ever-tactful mother, a nervous episode. “She's teeny. I would have thought she'd be tall, like you.”

“She takes after my mom.” I unbuckled my seat belt and groped around the floor for my overnight bag. “I'd better get in there.”

“Do you want me to stay with you until your parents come back?”

Tempting. But I couldn't do that to him. “No, that's okay. At least one of us should get to enjoy the party.” I was reluctant to get out of the car and the moment was certainly stretching out. What to do? What to say? *How about 'Goodbye', you ninny?* “Well ... thanks for the ride. Really.” I coughed neutrally. “It was nice of you ... certainly a change not to fear for my life while in a car.”

“Meredith can be somewhat—ah—reckless.”

“Reckless. Ha. Yeah, that's one word for it.”

“I overheard you and George, earlier,” he said, looking straight at me. The porch light was shining down on us, bouncing off his glasses, and I couldn't read his expression though I was trying desperately. “I was in the next room and I heard...” He cleared his throat. “Heard you laying down the law. Good for you, standing up for yourself like that. I was a little worried that you'd—never mind.”

“Oh, God,” I groaned, covering my face. “Did everyone hear us? Is there a person in the county that doesn't know I Just Said No?”

“Don't be embarrassed.”

“Right,” I said shortly. I opened the door, sorry I hadn't managed to take this step about ten seconds



earlier. "I'm gone. Thanks again for the ride ... you've been a real sweetheart."

"You're welcome. I'll see you next weekend."

I closed the door and ran up the steps to the house. Belinda was glad to see me, and we watched TV and popped popcorn until Mom and Dad came back. I never did call Meredith; instead, I tortured myself by picturing Kyle with his arm around Brenda, watching the rest of Jurassic Park.

Chapter 11

"I WAS NOT sick. You're lying again, I always tell your mother, that oldest girl of yours would rather tell a lie than eat, that's what I tell her..."

I was sorting through the mail, doing my best to ignore Gram. (I never called her Grandma. Always Gram, like the teeny unit of weight.) I had made the gigantic mistake of asking her if she was feeling better, seeing as how the hospital saw fit to let her go home just that morning. In true Gram form, she was denying that anything was wrong. She wasn't an alcoholic, so how could she get the DT's?

Belinda had sort of sidled out when the Graminator started her rant *du jour*. Lin was afraid of her.

"I'm talking to you, girl."

"My name isn't girl," I said pleasantly, "It's Andrea. You know, your oldest and awesomest grandchild? *You* may refer to me as Her Serene Highness." From the hall, Belinda giggled before slamming her door shut.

"What? I don't understand you. You're always talking so uppity—"

"You should meet my friend Meredith, you think *I'm* uppity..." Here was a letter from George. A thin one ... felt like two pages at the most. How unusual.

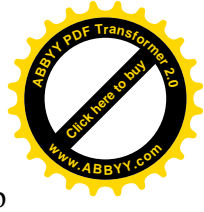
I was actually feeling pretty good these days, and the presence of George's letter did not make me feel as guilty as I thought it might. I had decided I would break up with him this weekend. The party was, for a change, at my house. Mom and Dad were going on a three-day fishing trip, leaving me in charge of Gram and Belinda.

I wished I could confront George right away, get this long-overdue breakup done with. Now that I had made up my mind to do it, I couldn't wait.

Well. That wasn't true. Now that Kyle had finally started showing an interest in me, I couldn't wait to chuck George over the side. But after giving it a lot of thought, I was nice to myself and decided that I'd be breaking up with George about now, Kyle or no Kyle. Still, I'd been using poor George for weeks, and now that the guy I'd wanted all along was showing signs of interest....

"You're right," I said to Gram. "I'm a rotten kid. Totally awful. If only Mom would listen to you."

She was so pleased I'd agreed with her (a first) that she couldn't think of any other mean things to say about me. So she started in on my sister. "And that little one isn't much better." She tottered to the kitchen cupboard and extracted a glass the size of a flower pitcher, which she took into the bathroom. Gram hid



in her booze under the bathroom sink. Like we didn't know she drank. When she first moved in, she would fill up the glass Mom kept in the bathroom, but I'd gotten into the habit of drizzling liquid soap into the bottom of it, doubtless ruining the piquant bouquet of the Gallo Jug. So now she used the kitchen glasses, correctly reasoning I couldn't booby-trap them all. "She's so flighty, that one. Always yap-yap-yapping ... never stops talking and giggling ... so immature."

"She's twelve. What's she supposed to be doing, working on her doctorate?"

"None of your mouth, you! You don't know what it's like for me to live in this house with two spoiled brats who cause nothing but trouble for their poor mother..."

"Belinda and I cause trouble?" Let me see if I had this right. "*We* do. For Mom."

Sarcasm was useless here. Everything went right over her head. The rant continued. Nothing could stop it, not fire, not plague. "...never talked to my grandmother the way you two talk to me, no respect for anything, just a couple of spoiled brats, always whining, whining, whining..."

"Do you have any brain cells *left*?" I asked with honest interest. "Or have you pickled them all? Not that I'm saying you've got a problem, goodness, no! By the way, you're down to two jugs in the bathroom. Saw 'em when I was putting the towels away. Better stock up."

She sputtered at me, turning an alarming shade of purple, and I pounded on her back. If she died on me, Mom would be way pissed. "Rotten little bitch," she gasped at last. "No respect ... don't know what I've been through..."

"Worse, I don't care," I said cheerfully. Infuriating my grandmother was a great way to start the evening. "Now, I'm only telling you this for your own good, you know, so pay attention. Focus your bleary senses on what's coming out of my mouth. I can't drive, *you* can't drive—praise all the gods—and Mom and Dad are gone all weekend. So if you run out of booze after Friday, you're stuck until Monday."

She stopped wheezing and actually looked alarmed. She stumped passed me and started bawling for my mother: "Carol! Ca-a-a-rol! Need you to take me into town! Carol! Right now, missie!"

"She's not home yet—duh. She doesn't get home until six." I picked up my letter and went to my room, getting accosted by Belinda on the way. She darted out of her room and threw her arms around me, squeezing tightly.

"You were great, you made her so mad, you shouldn't make her mad," she said to my neck. I gently extricated myself and suggested she go into the living room to watch TV. "Gram won't bother you. She's busy making out her survival list." I didn't envy my mother, being greeted with demands upon getting home to turn around immediately and buy this, this, and this. But then, she didn't *have* to have Gram living with us, did she? No way. So while I felt sorry for my mother quite a bit these days, I usually felt sorrier for myself, or Lindy.

But enough. Putting all thoughts of wicked grandmothers out of my head, I ripped open the envelope, preparing to read my last love letter from George ... after I gave him the heave-ho this weekend the only thing I'd get from him would be hate mail.

Dear Andrea,

The marks you see on this page are from my tears. Writing this letter has been the hardest thing ever, but



had to be done.

I want my ring back. I'm not saying I don't love you, because I will always love you. But it's obvious now that we have different goals and I really think we've grown apart. This decision has been hard for me, you'll never know how hard. This weekend when I come to your house for the party I would just like to get my ring back. And don't give me a lot of shit about it because I feel bad enough already. I just want to get drunk and try to forget everything. So please just give it to me, and I'd like my poems back, too.

This is what's best for me—for us, and it will be hard but we have to do it. So be strong and try to give me a pretty smile when I see you next.

Love, George

My outraged yowl brought my sister on the run. She took one look at my face and started to cry, but I was too upset to comfort her. I brushed past her, came very close to putting my fist through Gram's face when she blocked my way—instead, I very carefully moved her aside with hands that shook—and snatched at the phone, punching Meredith's number hard enough to make the tip of my finger go numb.

“Hello?”

“*He's breaking up with me!*” I yelled. “He broke up with me in one of his stupid letters!”

“I'm coming,” was all she said, and then I was ranting into a dead line.

Belinda had heard all of this—she could have been in the back yard and heard it—and said anxiously, “George is breaking up with you? Oh, Andy, that's awful! You must feel so...”

Cheated? Murderous? Stupid?

“...sad, are you going to be okay?” She put her skinny arms around me and I was actually surprised. She came up to my chin, now. She was getting big. “Do you want to go lie down?”

“I'm all right,” I said gruffly. “Sorry I scared you. Meredith is coming over and I'll talk to her about it.”

“Well ... okay, but come into my room if you want to talk some more,” Belinda Grouper, Preteen Love Doctor, said gravely. I promised I would and she was most attentive until Meredith arrived, offering to fix me toast, letting me have possession of the remote control, trying to get me to smile. I was touched. I hadn't been much of a big sister lately, being so caught up in Meredith's mental problems and my (groan) love life, and now that I needed her she was being perfectly wonderful.

Once Meredith arrived I took her to my room without delay and handed over the letter with a trembling hand. She scanned it quickly, wincing once or twice, and then flipped to the second sheet. I'd been so outraged after the first reading I'd never noticed the second page, and now I read it over Merry's shoulder.

Pain

Love is pain, pain is love

The agony I feel



like a spear through my heart.

Oh, why won't my pain end?

I thought we would touch the stars together

Instead I touch nothing but ashes

Oh, girl, I thought we would be so right

Then why did everything end up so wrong?

My once happy soul

Now in a pit of despair and agony.

“The final insult,” Meredith said. “I would judge this as the worst one yet. And breaking up with you via the U.S. Post Office is in the worst possible taste.”

Well, that was comfort of a sort. Pronouncing an action as being in ‘the worst possible taste’ was, to Meredith, slightly more dire than the threat of nuclear annihilation.

“I just can't believe this is happening,” I wailed. “I finally made up my mind to dump him and he dumps me *first!* God, I'll never, *ever* live this down.”

Meredith paused delicately, then plunged ahead. “The way I understand it, you're not suffering from a broken heart or anything...”

I snorted and made a rude gesture.

“...just fractured pride. Not that I blame you,” she added hastily, doubtless seeing murder in my eyes. “But it could be worse. You could have been in love with him.”

“True. But knowing that he beat me to it, that I won't get the chance to ... it's almost more than I can bear.” I covered my eyes and groaned again, and heard Meredith gasp.

“Oh my God! What happened to your hand?”

Surprised, I looked. It was bloody, the fingers in particular were quite stained.

“My ring hand,” I said stupidly. “Oh—the ring. I was so mad...”

I was mad, so blindly angry, that after I hung up from Merry I marched across the kitchen, yanked a filet knife from the drawer, and began cutting at the yarn sizing George's ring to my hand. I was so pissed I didn't bother taking the ring off before slicing and dicing, and the funny thing was, I didn't feel a thing.

Enough of the yarn had been cut so I could slide the ring off and then I had to fight the powerful impulse to flush it down the toilet. Satisfying as that would be, I couldn't let myself do it. After all, George still had my ring, and I wanted it back.



Ow, it hurts,” I said, surprised. My fingers began to belatedly throb. “Well, let me go wash up.”

Once the dried blood was washed off it didn't look nearly so bad. Filet knives are wicked sharp, so the cuts were clean but not deep. “And besides,” I told a horrified Meredith, “I wasn't trying to hurt myself. I just wanted to get the ring off so badly ... don't look at me like that. I haven't caught your psychosis.”

“I'll certainly have a good story for Dr. Cobran tomorrow,” she said.

“Don't you d—how's it going with him, anyway? You haven't brought me back to see him in ages.”

“It's going as well as can be expected. I've been on the same medication for a month, and I feel all right most of the time.”

With surprise, I realized that it had been days and days since I had to deal with a Meredith episode. She must be getting better. Maybe Cobran knew what he was doing, after all. Or, maybe not having to see her grandmother every day, watching her wither and deteriorate, helped her to feel better. “But never mind that,” she was saying, and I forced myself to quit contemplating her dying grandmother, and the effect she had on Merry's mental health. “What are you going to do about George?”

“Give him his ring back, of course. I can't believe he's still planning on coming to my house, though. Yuck.”

“Give his ring back ... yes, but there are ways and ways.”

I listened while she explained. Then, for the first time since I opened that envelope, I smiled.

* * * *

“HELLO, IS KYLE there?”

“This is.”

“Oh. Sorry, Kyle, didn't recognize your voice. I just called to thank you again for giving me a ride last weekend.”

“It was my pleasure. How's your grandmother?”

“Feeling ever so much better,” I said dryly. She had dragged my mother to the liquor store before Mom even had a chance to take off her coat. Now she was in her room taking inventory of her booze. “How are *you* feeling?”

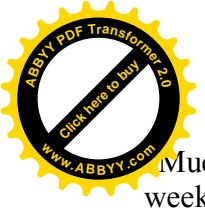
“Evah so much bettah.”

“Very funny. Oh—if you haven't heard, George and I broke up.”

Silence. Then, “You did? I'm ... sorry?”

“Ennhh! Wrong answer, but thank you for playing.”

“Okay, then, congratulations.”



“Much better. Anyway, I thought you might be interested to hear that ... are you coming over this weekend?” The true purpose of this call, naturally. Luckily, I was so sly and subtle Kyle would never catch on to my intent.

“I’m looking forward to it. Listen, supper’s ready so I’m going to have to let you go, but thanks a lot for calling. I can’t wait to see you.” Click.

Can’t wait to see me. *Me*. Not, Can’t wait for the party. Can’t wait to feed Terry a knuckle sandwich. Not, Can’t wait to see Brenda. Can’t wait to see *me*.

“Yes!” I was so excited I dropped the phone. My golden retriever, Belle, saw her chance, darted over, scooped it up, and ran away with it. “Damn cordless phone!” I wailed, and gave chase. I caught up with her in the living room and wrestled the phone away, ignoring my mother’s giggles and my father’s disgusted snort.

“What a great dog,” he smirked. “Can’t retrieve a duck to save her life but she can sniff out a phone from three hundred yards.”

“Oh, shut up, Dad.” I wiped doggie saliva off and got up to put it back.

“Andy, before you go—I got some snacks and stuff for your party this weekend, so you should be all right. But maybe you want to ask your friends to bring their favorites. I just bought chips and things.”

“Thanks, Mom. I told them it was BYOM.”

“Bring your own...?”

“Munchies.”

My parents knew all about the party. They trusted me completely, the poor slob. They figured I was old enough to be left alone, and too young to get into serious trouble. They knew I was still a virgin and didn’t drink, and assumed—rightly—that my friends would be the same way.

My dad had only two rules: no booze, and no boys sleeping in the same room as girls. “No one is getting pregnant in this house,” he declared.

“Oh?” my mother said tartly.

“Don’t worry about it, Dad. None of us drink, and none of us...”

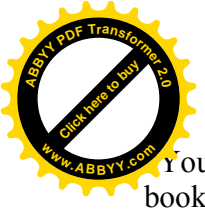
“Screw?” he suggested.

“Gross!” I scowled at him. “Your suspicions make me wonder about your adolescence ... exactly how did you and Mom meet, anyway?”

“Never mind about that,” Mom said primly.

“And remember, Andrea, you’re in charge.”

“Not Gram?”



"You're in charge," he said, looking at me with narrowed eyes. Mom's attention was suddenly on her book, and it was just him and me, locked in a staring contest.

"Right, Dad," I said sarcastically. "*I'm* in charge. Does Gram know this?"

"You're in charge," he said for the third time, and I finally got it. Gram might *think* she was in charge, might try to boss us around or kick my friends out, but Dad going to back me to the hilt—and come down on me hard if anything bad happened. What was earned would be given, and vice versa.

"I'll try not to burn the place down," I said, and his grin, exactly like mine, shone out at me.

* * * *

"LET'S SEE IT," Terry demanded.

I looked around, surprised. My parents were long gone, the party had been going on for about an hour, and I had gone to my room to gather George's poems. He had showed up about twenty minutes ago, studiously not looking at me, and hadn't come near me to ask for his ring. I decided to take the poet by the horns and hand over his poems, such as they were.

Everyone knew what had happened, of course, and no one was talking about it. Also a matter of course.

"Well?" Terry said, impatient with my blank look.

"See what?"

"Your hand. Meredith told me you really carved yourself up."

I took off the bandage and showed him. He studied my fingers for a minute. "Huh," he said, sounding disappointed. "Doesn't look so bad. Looks like a cat might have scratched you."

"It's no big deal. I was just so mad ... never mind."

"I heard all about it," he reminded me. "What are you doing in here? Hiding from him?"

"Not likely. Just gathering up his belongings like a good little ex."

"Why does he want his poems back? They're your property. You should keep them."

"Believe me," I said dryly. "I don't want them."

"Yeah." He grinned. "I heard about the poems, too."

"Nice to know Merry's been keeping my secrets."

There was a tentative rap at the door, and George came in. He didn't say anything, just looked at Terry. Terry, to my amazement, actually looked embarrassed as he slowly extended his fist, uncurled his fingers, and there was my ring.

I looked at it. They looked at me looking at it.



Terry said, "George would like you to give me his ring. Here's yours."

I threw a look of such sizzling scorn at George, cowering in the doorway, that he actually took a step back.

"Why," I asked Terry coldly, "am I surprised? Anyone without the balls to break up with his girlfriend face-to-face *would* impose on a friend to get in the middle of this." I snatched my ring from Terry's palm and slid it on my right hand. Then I took a folded piece of paper from my pocket and handed it to him.

"What's this?" Terry said, unfolding it.

"Treasure map. You want your ring back, George? X marks the spot."

Incredulous silence from the boys, and then Terry began to laugh. He staggered to George, handed him the map, and then his legs gave out and he fell to the floor, laughing and holding his belly.

George looked at me. Looked at the map. Looked at me again—no trouble making eye contact *now*, I noticed with brittle pleasure. "You bitch," he said, and left, presumably to get a shovel.

"Bitch? He's never used that pet name before." I sighed. "Guess he doesn't love me anymore."

Terry, who had actually started to sober up, went into fresh hysterics at this. I watched him writhing, amused. "I suppose," he gasped at last, "I should have defended you."

"Why?" I leaned down and helped him up. "George is right. I am a bitch. Burying someone's prized piece of jewelry isn't nice."

"An excellent point. Now why don't you go find Kyle, rip off his clothes, and molest him until he decides to go out with you?"

"Let's call that Plan B, shall we? And how much has Merry been telling you, for Christ's sake?"

When Terry and I joined the others, we discovered that George was off sulking (or digging—Ter and I had a private giggle about that) and everyone else wanted to go outside for a snowball fight. Belinda, who had been in awe of these flamboyant individuals since they showed up at her house an hour ago (Merry was the only one she was used to.) begged to join in.

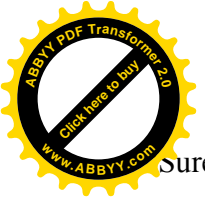
"I don't know," Kyle said, smiling down at her. She made a pretty picture; excitement had made her cheeks glow, and her blue eyes were sparkling. Belinda took after my mother in every way: cute face, red hair, easy-going personality, teeny frame. In fact, Meredith was positive one of us was adopted. "You're pretty little."

"Compared to you, maybe, but I'm getting bigger every day," she said pertly.

"Really?" Terry said, glancing at her chest with interest.

I hit him on the back of the head hard enough to make him yelp. "Not even as a joke," I growled.

"Aw, come on, you guys! I can play, too, can't I? Andy?"



Sure. But no crying if someone gets you a good one in the face.”

Belinda promised to be a stoic and we put coats on and went outside. The weather was actually pretty nice—low forties, sunny, no wind. The kind of weather that fools you into thinking spring's just around the corner, when the only thing around the corner is another blizzard.

For a minute we just stood around, enjoying the sunshine, then Belinda scooped up some snow and lobbed it at Kyle. It fell about two feet short of the mark and he grinned at her.

“Now you're in trouble,” he said, bending over and quickly putting together a small snowball. She shrieked and tried to run past, but he nailed her on the back of the neck.

“Ooh!” she screamed, clawing at her back and jumping up and down. “Ooh! Cold! On my neck! Ooh!”

“Stand still, Lindy, let me help you,” Brenda grinned, brushing her off. For her charity, she was ambushed by Terry, who clapped an amazing amount of snow on the top of her head.

“This snow is the perfect texture,” Meredith informed us. “Exactly the right amount of moisture.” She stepped aside and Brenda's snowball whizzed past. “It even flies fairly straight.”

“Great. Quit analyzing it and start packing it.”

“No, I feel my role is more that of an observer, rather than a—” Wap! Right in the face. She wiped her eyes and mouth and began sputtering angrily. “Wh—you—”

Terry, unrepentant, launched himself at me. I skipped back and fired a snowball at Kyle, which caught him in the side of the head. “Yes!” I crowed. “Vengeance for my sister, you big bully!” Then Terry kicked at my ankles, knocking me off balance, and three snowballs hit me at once: Belinda's, Kyle's, Meredith's.

“Whoops. Looks like I should have been in on that one,” Bren said. She was shaking the snow out of her dark hair and smirking at me.

“*Et tu*, Lindy? I defend your honor and this is my thanks?”

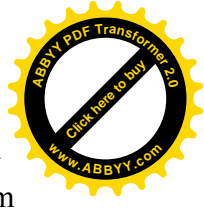
“Gotcha!” she crowed, then squealed as Terry tossed one. It splattered harmlessly on her coat, but she was already scrabbling for more ammunition. She spun and fired a snowball at Terry; he ducked and it caught Bren in the chin.

“Sorry,” Lin said gaily, then went sprawling in the snow as I gave her a shove. “Andy! Oh, you're gonna—get her, Kyle!”

I smirked. Get her, Kyle? Puh-leeze. And where *was* Kyle, anywa—

Wham! He hit me from behind like a diesel truck, and I thumped face-first into the snow beside Belinda, who was laughing so hard she lost her breath.

“Oof!” was the best I could do, spitting snow, rolling over and glaring balefully up at Kyle, who was cheerfully wagging his fingers at me. “You're gonna die. Soon as I can get up. Ooh, you're gonna get it.”



I'm petrified with fear, dear," he said, not looking terribly concerned. I observed Meredith and Terry sneaking up on him, so I lashed out weakly with a booted foot. This did no damage, but distracted him nicely. He stepped back, out of reach, and bent to give me a hand, the fool.

Terry and Meredith crashed into him, hard, and Kyle was slammed full-length to the ground. Except I was on the ground, so he crashed on top of me. Under different circumstances, I might have been delighted; as it was, I was too busy groaning to appreciate the hand Fate had dealt me.

"Sorry," Kyle wheezed. We were eyeball to eyeball. He was very heavy.

My mouth worked. Nothing came out. I tried to suck in breath and managed to husk, "...off ... get off..."

He rolled away and we lay side by side, both of us gasping like fish on land, trying to find the strength to get up.

Merry and Terry were looking unaccountably smug, while Bren and Belinda each grabbed an arm and tried to get Kyle off the ground. It was slow going.

"Hey!" I cried. "What about me?"

"Yes, what about you?" Meredith smirked, but bent to give me a hand. I got a nice scoopful of snow on the way up and let her have it right in the face. She dropped my arm and staggered back, but by then I could get to my feet without assistance. I looked around for Terry, but Kyle had already tackled him and was mashing snow into his face with cheerful efficiency.

"Bmmph—umphh—drumph—" Terry was saying, or something like that. He clawed weakly at Kyle's jacket.

"Now that's interesting," Kyle said conversationally, stuffing snow down Terry's coat. "What makes you say that?"

Meredith let loose with a banshee wail and jumped on Kyle's back. This knocked him off balance, but not much; he merely turned and pressed a snowball into her face. She shrieked and spat snow. Unfortunately for Kyle, this distracted him long enough for Terry to bring his legs up, hook his feet around Kyle's neck, and bring them down, slamming Kyle into the snow. Now *Terry* was on top, grinning nastily and shaking snow from his hair.

"Hmm," Kyle said.

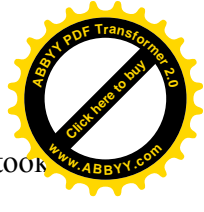
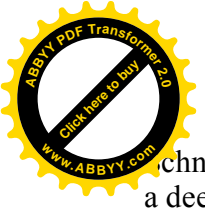
"Uh-oh," Brenda said, looking at me.

"What, uh-oh?" I scoffed. "Kyle's got it coming."

"Thanks," he said, blocking Terry's fistful of snow. They rolled around, tussling, while Meredith shrieked and danced about them. She did a lot more shrieking when Belinda's snowball splattered against her neck.

"Ha!" my sister crowed, scrabbling for more snow. "You guys are—hey, George! Want to come play with us?" Then, remembering George was *persona non grata* in my eyes, she looked at me guiltily.

George was standing on the porch, watching. For how long, I didn't know. He had a bottle of Peach



chnapp's in one hand and, while we observed, unscrewed the top, brought the bottle to his lips, and took a deep drink. His hands, I noticed with glee, were filthy, and he was wearing his (muddy) ring.

We stared at him in silence while he took another drink, probably thinking he looked cool.

“So that's what that is,” Kyle said thoughtfully. He and Terry had quit scuffling and were now standing, observing George's guzzling. “I saw the bag and he seemed awfully careful with it...”

“What, you didn't know he was bringing booze?” Terry asked, surprised.

“No-o-o...” He looked at me and shrugged.

“How did he get it?” Bren asked, fascinated. “No one here is drinking age. No one here is even close!”

“Who cares?” I said irritably. George's dramatic stunt cut zero ice with me. So he wanted everybody to know he was drinking because he was (supposedly) miserable about breaking up with me. Big deal. “He shouldn't have brought it to my house, that's for damned sure.”

“Actually, this presents a fascinating tableau,” Meredith said. “The four of us couldn't be involved in a more harmless, clean-cut activity—”

“Five,” Belinda said pertly.

“Sorry, Lindy. The five of us are having a snowball fight and over there is the lone wolf, sucking alcohol down his gullet. We might as well get white hats, and he might as well get a black one. It's kind of interesting, if you think about it.”

“It's not interesting. It's disgusting. He's pissing me off. He's—” I stopped, seeing my grandmother through the window, looking at George. I began to smile.

“Andy, Daddy said no beer and stuff,” Belinda said anxiously. She was practically yanking my sleeve in her agitation. “Those are the rules. You'll get in trouble.”

“No, I won't.”

“What are you grinning about?” Terry asked suspiciously. “You look like you just won the lottery.”

There was a crash and a bang as Gram tottered out onto the porch. She shook a fist at a very startled George and barked, “None of that in this house, young man. My son-in-law has very strict rules about teenagers drinking. He don't like it! Now hand it over!”

Cowed, George gave her the bottle. She clutched it to her scrawny chest and threw me a look of smoldering triumph, then turned to go back in the house. George swore and stomped off the porch, heading for the back yard.

The Furies had managed to wait until Gram was out of earshot before bursting into laughter. Belinda looked at them in amazement, at me, staggering through the snow, I was giggling so hard.

“The really funny part is,” I gasped, “she thinks she's ruined our fun. My fun. She's overjoyed because she thinks I'll be pissed.” I paused. “You know, I feel closer to Gram right now than I ever have in my



ie.” We all howled anew, Lindy joining in as she finally got it.

Chapter 12

“ANDREA, DO YOU think Terry and I could sleep in your parents’ room tonight?” Meredith asked quietly.

I dropped my boot and stared at her, aghast. We were in my room, changing into dry clothes. After Gram and George had disappeared, the snowball fight had started again, until we were all soaked.

“Don't look like that. It's not what you think.”

“I think you're out of your mind, that's what I think, and you've got the psychiatric bills to prove me right!” I said loudly, ignoring her shushing gestures. “You and Terry have been going exactly as long as me and George and you can't think you're ready—”

“I don't, we won't, calm down. I just want to—you remember what you told me about Trisha's bed and breakfast plan? You said she just wanted to go to bed with someone she loved and wake up with him. No sex. Just being able to feel close, and warm ... that's what I want for myself, and for Terry.”

Oh. That was different. Even understandable, in a gross kind of way, as long as... “You promise you're not going to have sex?” I asked suspiciously.

“Of course not, and do you hear yourself? You're hardly the one to be my moral guardian.”

“Be nice, or you and Terry can sleep on the porch.”

“Allow me to humble myself and beg for mercy,” she said dryly.

I ignored her sarcasm. “Well ... if you really want to sack out with the little gooberhead, I don't care. And what my parents don't know won't hurt them. But I gotta tell you, if you and Terry sleep together—literally sleep together, I mean—the others are probably going to jump to the wrong conclusion.”

She shrugged. That was vintage Meredith. She'd never cared rocks what people thought about her. “I'll take that chance ... while we're on the subject, I wonder what Trisha's decided, if she's made up her mind whether or not to sleep with Jim?”

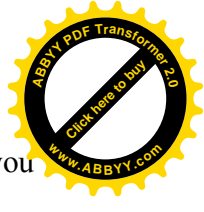
“Last I heard, she and Jim had decided to wait until the anniversary of their first date—that's in six months or so.”

“Hmm. Not a bad measuring stick ... she'll be sixteen by then and if they're still going out by then I guess she really does love him.”

“They might stop by tonight, you can ask her about it.”

“Ask who about what?” Terry said, coming in without knocking, as usual. “Damn! I was hoping I'd catch at least one of you naked.”

“It'd be the last thing you ever saw,” I warned.



“Yeah, before my eyeballs melted from the sight,” he retorted. “Bren's got an idea for a good game, you two coming?”

“In a minute. Andrea said we can sleep in her parents' room if we wanted.”

“Hey, great!” he cried, his eyes positively gleaming with lust.

“Behave yourself,” I warned.

“He will,” Merry said smugly.

In the living room, everyone was sitting cross-legged in a circle, except George, who was sitting on the couch with my poems. Terry, Meredith, and I sat down and joined the group.

“It's called the sleeper,” Bren was saying. “My brothers showed me how to do it.”

“Anything those degenerates try is nothing I'm interested in,” Kyle said grimly. “And what's fun about passing out from oxygen deprivation?”

“What? That sounds cool!” Terry enthused.

Bren demonstrated the sleeper on Meredith, who seemed agreeable to being a guinea pig. She knelt behind Merry and put a forearm around her (Merry's) throat. Then she increased the pressure. I watched in alarm as Meredith's face got redder and redder, until her eyes rolled up in her head and she slumped in Brenda's arms.

“Holy shit!” I practically screamed, jumping to my feet. I was prepared to do any number of things—call an ambulance, kick Brenda's ass, do mouth-to-mouth on Merry, but none of it was necessary. She was already coming around.

“Wha?” she said, sitting up. She put a hand to her head. “God, I'm dizzy. That was extremely weird.”

“And extremely stupid,” Kyle said. “Do you know how many brain cells you probably killed?”

“Me next!” Terry shouted.

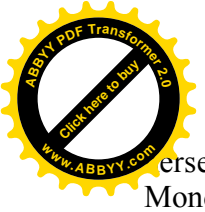
I was still standing, still not quite sure what to do. This didn't violate Dad's no drinking, no screwing rules, but only because he hadn't imagined we would be strangling each other into unconsciousness. As I'd said earlier, he didn't know the Furies. And a good thing, too.

Well, Meredith seemed okay. As okay as she ever was, anyway. I sat, reluctantly, and watched Brenda apply the sleeper to Terry.

“Idths nod working,” he gurgled as she increased the pressure on his neck. His normally white face got very red and then he, too, was down for the count.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Terry was already sitting up and grinning. “Merry's right, that does make you dizzy. It's cool, though.”

“What's it like?” I asked, privately glad Belinda had decided to go to her room and watch a movie by



myself. That's all I needed, my little sister begging to be knocked out and then telling Dad all about it on Monday. "Does it hurt?"

"Naw. It's weird, though. You can feel all the blood rushing around in your head, and then it gets louder and louder until you can't hear anything else, and the next thing, you're lying down and everybody's laughing at you. And you're dizzy."

Meredith was demanding to be oxygen-deprived again. This time, Terry tried it, under Brenda's supervision. "Put your arm across, like this," she said. "Yeah. So when you squeeze, you're cutting off her air." Kyle was shaking his head in amused disgust. "Then keep squeezing until she goes kind of limp and boneless..."

"And keep it up until she's dead," Kyle said dryly. "It'll probably only take another fifteen seconds or so."

Brenda glared at Kyle. "Doomsayer. Anyway, Ter, let go as soon as she's out. It's easy! No, not like that, your arm's across her mouth ... that's better."

"She's right," Ter said as he cradled a now-unconscious Meredith. "It *is* easy." He bent down and kissed her nose while we made retching noises; she was already waking up. "Well, Andy?" he asked, grinning. "Want to fulfill one of my fantasies? Come on, let me knock you out."

"Uh..." I was torn. Kyle was right. It couldn't be good for us. But I wondered what it would feel like. "I think your fantasy is to knock me up, not out. Aw, what the hell. I can spare a few brain cells." I crawled over to him and he positioned himself behind me. I felt his forearm lock across my throat and managed to resist the automatic instinct to pull away.

Then my air was gone, but it wasn't as scary as I thought it would be. He was sure right about the blood in my head, though, all that rushing around sounded very very loud and things were so white and the blood was pounding and everything was white, so white, blinding white, and I...

...was sitting up. "Did it work?" I asked, bewildered.

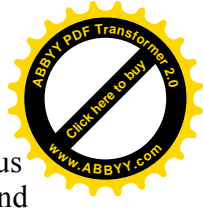
"Did it!" Brenda said. "You went down like you'd been shot. Faster than Meredith, even."

I was puzzled, and still dizzy. I didn't trust myself to get up and walk back to my place on the floor. "Huh. It didn't feel like I went to sleep or anything. Everything just got loud, and white, and then I was lying down."

Then it was Brenda's turn. Meredith tried to apply the sleeper but couldn't get the hold right, so Terry had to do it. Then George, who hadn't said a word until now, demanded to try.

Brenda wouldn't go near him. She was still pretty pissed about the shooing out of the room trick, and the booze, and the way he broke up with me. In fact, I think she was more teed off at George than I was (What a pal!), so Terry did it. George, coming out of it, did something none of the rest of us did—he shook all over. It almost looked like a spasm. It was actually kind of...

"Gross," I commented, watching my ex twitch like a gutted trout. Then he was wide awake, and going back to his couch. I had finally noticed what he'd been doing up there while we performed oxygen deprivation rites on each other.



He would read each poem, then crumple it up and throw it on the floor. I presumed this was to show us all how jaded and cynical he had become about love. If he thought this would hurt me, his crushing and crumpling poems bemoaning my beauty and tenderness, he was wrong. It didn't hurt. The only emotion I felt was anger. Anger that I had been cheated out of telling him to his face that it was OVER, and anger that he was being such a child. I mean, *he* broke up with *me*. I was the one living in total humiliation, not him. So what did he have to be miserable about?

Brenda had her own opinion about why George had broken it off. She thought it was because he had finally realized I wasn't going to sleep with him, that I wasn't going to let him do anything to me beyond kissing. Terry had the same opinion, but put it a lot more bluntly: "When he found out he wouldn't get laid as long as he was with you, his love died a pretty quick death."

I thought they were right. It certainly explained a lot: the constant demands for attention, the continual maneuverings to get me alone so we could make out, the sulkiness when we didn't make out, the complaints when I left early, or he had to leave. Yes, indeed, things were getting awfully clear to me. Better late than never, I figured.

After we had all been unconscious two or three times (except Kyle), we voted to put one of the movies in. It wasn't terribly late but a lot had happened in a short time and we all felt like being lazy. I went down the hall and rapped on Lindy's door.

"We're putting *Zorro* in," I said, opening the door.

She was on the phone, and put one hand over the mouthpiece. "Good! I'll be right there. Go ahead and start it, 'kay?'"

I nodded, shut the door and turned, bumping into Kyle. He put his hands out to steady me. "Sorry. I was just looking for the bathroom."

"It's the next door down," I said breathlessly, and despised myself for it. I felt like a heroine in a romance novel. But his hands were still on my arms, his face was very close to mine, and I loved how it felt, how he looked, how he smelled. George had worn some sort of overly-masculine Dior cologne, which smelled all right but wasn't really him. Kyle smelled crisp and clean, like soap. Which was a good trick, actually, because we'd all gotten pretty wet in the snowball fight. He should smell like damp flannel if nothing else. And, oh shit, he was talking to me. Pay attention, Andrea!

"What?" I practically gasped.

"I said, are you all right? You're looking at me..." He paused and carefully released me, stepping back a bit. "You had a funny look on your face."

"Did I?" I asked idiotically. I was thinking seriously about kissing him. He was so nice, even if he didn't like it, or me, he wouldn't be mean about it. He might even kiss me back, to be polite. "I guess I was thinking about something else."

Kyle leaned in a bit closer to me. I stared up at him, utterly entranced. He looked so *adorably* serious. "Andrea," he said softly, "I..."

"Yes?" I squeaked.

There was a blast of air as Belinda whipped her door open. She looked very surprised to see Kyle and me



standing there. “Oh. Hi. Has the movie started?”

I loved my sister, would have killed anyone who dared harm her, but at that moment I could have applied the sleeper to her for a good half hour without remorse.

“Yes, but there are a bunch of previews to get through,” Kyle told her, straightening up, leaning away from me. I couldn't say anything. Just sort of drool helplessly and look dazed.

“Oh. Good. Come on, Andrea,” she said, giving me a funny look. I followed her to the living room like a chastened puppy. “I didn't mean to interrupt you guys.”

“No biggie,” I managed, beginning to recover from the Hallway Encounter. What had he been about to say? To do?

“I like your friends. They're nice to me. Janet's big sister never lets her come to parties.”

With an effort, I pushed Kyle out of my thoughts. “It's your house, too.” I didn't mind having Belinda there. She could be obnoxious at times, but no more so than I, and she was a pretty good little sister. Old enough not to be a pest, young enough to still be charming. “What am I supposed to do, kick you out in the snow? Pen you in with the dogs?”

“Janet's sister doesn't let her play with her friends, either,” she continued, ignoring my question.

“Play with—you make us sound like preschoolers.”

“The snowball fight. I got to play, too. It was fun, even if I did get all wet. That Terry's mean! He was always getting me. Once I got a snowball right in the *mouth*.”

“Get even. He's sleeping here tonight. Throw a bucket of water over his head when he's asleep. Or drizzle maple syrup on his face. Or put the dogs in his bed. Or...” Then I remembered where Terry would be sleeping tonight. I didn't want Lindy leaving any booby-traps for my dad to discover later that week. “Or nothing,” I finished lamely.

Once in the living room I perceived a problem. Where to sit? Terry and Merry had one couch, George was still sitting on the other. Brenda was on the floor, doubtless waiting for Kyle. I quashed a flare of irritation at that thought and tried to concentrate on the seating dilemma. George's couch was pretty big, room for three, at least. But I wasn't going anywhere near him. Besides, crumpled up poems were all over the sofa cushions and on the floor.

So I plunked down next to Brenda. Belinda went back to her room and brought out her pillows, handing me one and settling on Brenda's other side with the other. Kyle came in, glanced around, and sat down next to George, brushing crumpled poems off the cushion without comment. Nobody said anything.

The movie lasted about nine days. I was grossly uncomfortable on the floor, pillow or no pillow. Plus, I had seen *Zorro* four times so all the surprise twists were ruined for me. *Plus*, I could feel George glaring at me from across the room. I wished he hadn't come. Why *had* he come? Just to get his ring back? Or to go on a private bender? I snickered to myself. The only one going on a bender this weekend would be Gram. She'd disappeared with the Schnapp's during the snowball fight and we hadn't seen her since.

As soon as the credits were rolling, I jumped up and proposed we go outside for a walk and get some air.



it's supposed to get cold by Monday," I said. "We should probably enjoy the nice weather while we can." Besides, I couldn't stand being in the same room with George another minute; I wanted distance, *now*.

"No snowball fights!" Brenda said. "I only brought one change of clothes. I don't want to get those wet, too. Think I should bring my camera?" She'd gotten a Polaroid One-Step for her birthday two weeks ago and had snapped off a dozen or so shots in the last few hours. There were great ones of Meredith getting a snowball in the face, Terry looking demonically gleeful, me sprawled helplessly in the snow, Belinda getting a piggyback ride from Kyle.

"Naw," Terry said. "Won't work as well in the dark. Besides, whenever you're around with that thing I feel like Sean Penn."

"Too bad you don't—"

"—look like him, ha, ha, Andy. God, you're getting so predictable."

"Predict this," I retorted, and flipped him the bird.

Belinda giggled. "I'm stayin'," she announced.

"Well, *you* weren't invited," Terry sneered.

"It's too cold out. I'm gonna call Janet." She glared at Terry and flounced out, carrying her pillows.

I went back to my room to find my gloves, and by the time I got out to the porch no one was around. The thought of Furies creeping around in the dark was not a comforting one. I looked around nervously, straining to hear them, and when Kyle stepped out of the shadows I nearly shrieked.

"Want to take a walk?" he asked quietly.

"You scared the hell out of me! I mean, sure, that'd be nice." I forgot about being scared. Had Kyle been waiting for me? Or just loitering? Or, worse, waiting for Brenda?

We fell into step and I jerked my head toward the path. "Come on, we'll walk to the pond. It's pretty at night. Where'd everyone disappear to?"

"George didn't come, Brenda decided to call her mom before coming outside, and Terry and Meredith went down to the garage, for what sinister purpose I can't imagine."

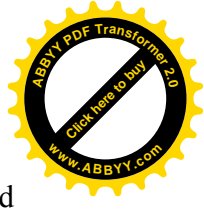
"Probably checking to make sure George put the shovel back," I snickered.

"Did you really bury his ring?" he asked curiously.

"Yeah, but I left him a map. It wouldn't have been hard for him to find. It was Meredith's idea."

"Oh? Such a diabolical way of expressing displeasure ... that stunt had you all over it."

"Well, it's not like she had to talk me into it or anything." Our boots were crunching on the path, and now we had reached the pond. "Pretty out here," I said after we looked for a few seconds.



an understatement. The moon was high, and almost too bright to look at. It was one of the crispest, clearest nights I could remember, and so quiet the only thing I could hear was our breathing. The pond was man-made, but you sure couldn't tell. It was roughly egg-shaped and the ice was covered by about a foot of pristine snow. In the moonlight the snow was glittering like a hundred thousand diamonds.

"It's like something out of a book," Kyle said softly. "Wow."

"Yeah, I really love it out here. But it's never looked so amazing." I took a deep breath and said it. "Must be the company."

No response. I bit my lip and thought, *if this was a movie, he'd kiss me*. Just take me into his arms, and the music would swell, and he would kiss me for a long, lovely time while the pond glittered and the moon rode high. But it wasn't a movie, it was real life, and he was just standing there.

I sighed. He didn't look at me, didn't ask what was wrong. He was probably memorizing the landscape for later analysis. He was so distant sometimes.

Meredith said, "Kiss him, you ninny."

I jumped and looked around. Meredith was nowhere in sight. I knew that the voice had been of my own manufacture because Kyle hadn't reacted at all.

"What are you waiting for?" I demanded. "You know perfectly well he's shy. Kiss him. If he doesn't like you, at least you'll *know*."

She was—I mean, I was right. But, oh, God, I was so scared. How could I just turn to him and plant one? Should I put my arms around him like they do in the movies? Should I ask him to do it? Would he get scared and push me into the pond?

"Anyone who could force salt water down my throat, watch me puke, clean it up, and then chew out my psychiatrist ought to be able to kiss one high school student, even if he is taller than you are."

"Shut up," I mumbled.

"Excuse me?" Kyle asked politely. He hadn't stopped studying the landscape during my internal mutiny, but now he turned to look at me. "I'm sorry, were you talking to me?"

"Kyle." I took a deep breath and reached out. Touched his arm. "Kyle, would you please kiss me?"

It was out and I couldn't take it back. We stared at each other for a long moment and I could feel my face getting red. Then he smiled and stepped closer to me. He put a gloved finger under my chin, tipped my face up, and then his lips were on mine. My knees immediately decided to transform from bone to Jell-O and I nearly staggered. This was better, if possible, than the hospital kiss, and I was again struck by the difference between Kyle and George. There was no choking tongue here, my chin wasn't getting slobbered on, I wasn't resisting the urge to pull back. It wasn't a mouth fight. Instead there was his mouth, his lips on mine, his hands cupping my face. I was clutching the front of his coat and kissing him back with every ounce of pent-up longing I could muster; he was responding with equal passion. And after the kiss ended I rested my hot face against his chest, still clutching at him, and he held me tightly.

About fifty years later, he spoke. "I have a confession to make."



looked up at him.

“I lied when I called you and apologized for kissing you in the hospital. I wasn't a bit sorry.”

“I kissed *you*.”

“I think not. I think—”

“I think you should kiss me again.” And he did so, with thorough leisure. He was really, really good at it. I could have kissed him for a year. I *would* kiss him for a year. I—

I pulled back. “Why didn't you kiss me earlier?” I demanded, trying not to sound shrill. I quashed the urge to stomp on his foot. “I don't mean earlier tonight, I mean earlier in our *lives*. I was so *nervous* and I thought you didn't like me, all this time I thought you didn't like me ... at least in that way ... but you—”

“Before, there was George,” he said reasonably. “And even now, you've only just broken up. But that didn't change the fact that I wanted to be with you. That's why I waited to walk with you; I finally had a chance to be alone with you, but I couldn't kiss you—I wasn't sure what your feelings were. Besides, like I said, you only got your ring back today. I wasn't sure you were ready to be anything but my friend. That's all right, though,” he said hastily, seeing the look of amazement on my face. “I'll be your friend as long as you like.”

Friend? Forget that. “I never loved him,” I said steadily. Then I fumbled about, trying to explain why I had done such a thing, taken a ring I didn't want, taken a boy I didn't want. “I only went out with him because—because you didn't seem ... I mean, you never said—”

“I figured that since you were with George you weren't interested in me.”

“God *damn* it!” I said loudly, ignoring his flinch. “Meredith was right. She said—never mind. I'm going to kill her.”

He laughed shakily. “You don't know how many times I played that hospital kiss back in my mind after you ran out. I was going crazy trying to figure out what you meant by it. And feeling guilty because you and George were going out, and...” He trailed off. “Well. Let's just say, I didn't know what was going on, and it was driving me nuts.”

“Me too. And I *did* know what was going on. Sort of. You're a great kisser.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you always so polite? That drives me crazy. I find myself wanting to shock you, to see if I can shake you up, I've always felt that way, since the day I met you.”

“I would love it if you tried to shock me,” he said, giving me such a tender look that I stretched up and kissed him on the chin.

We stayed down at the pond for a long time, talking and hugging and kissing and talking some more. We were both reluctant to go back up to the house, to break the spell and see George, to face Brenda.

“I'm not sure what to do,” I said at last. “I mean, I'm a free agent but I don't know if it's wise to jump



Immediately into another—”

“Hold it, hold it. I love kissing you and holding you—oof! Not so hard. I think you're—you're funny and pretty and smart, and I've wanted to get close to you for a long time...” He had me by the shoulders, was looking at me with calm intensity. “...but I'm not going to just hand over my ring, although this would certainly be a nice place for it. We haven't known each other very long. I'd like that to change before we make any major decisions ... or commitments.”

I basked in his praise ("funny ... pretty ... smart...") for a few seconds before responding. “And I don't think I want a ring. Anybody's ring, at least for a while. George rushed me, but it wasn't entirely his fault. I went along with everything.”

“I want to see more of you.”

“Okay.” I unzipped my coat. He burst into laughter and snatched it shut, squeezing me so hard I gasped.

“Very funny. Keep it on, it's not *that* nice out. I mean, I want to go out with you, maybe catch a few movies and like that.”

“Yes. Like that. I want that, too.”

“And ... we'll just see what happens.”

That sounded marvelous. That sounded too good to be true. It *was* too good to be true. George's feelings didn't matter to me, but...

“What should we—what about Brenda? Will you date her, too?” I controlled my voice with a mighty effort and it didn't quaver, not a bit.

“I'm—she's a very good friend. But I don't see her ... that way. Do you know what I—?”

“Yes! Yes, I know exactly what you mean.” Relief was making me light-headed. He just wanted to be friends with her! *Thanks, God, I owe you one.* “Thank you for explaining. I was just curious.”

“Let's leave things as they are for now,” he said. “For tonight, I mean. If the time comes when I have to say something to Brenda—”

“No!” I lowered my voice. “No. You're right, we'll let things go for now. But I want to be the one to tell Bren. If there's anything to tell. We're just going to date for now, right?”

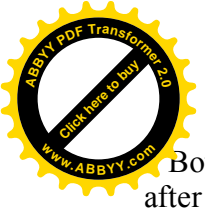
“Right.”

“And kiss,” I said slyly.

“Oh, yes.”

* * * *

I PRACTICALLY floated into the house. It was after midnight. Meredith and Terry looked up from their cocoa; no one else was around.



"About time you two got back," Terry said suspiciously. "We were getting ready to send a St. Bernard after you." Behind me, Kyle chuckled and hung up our coats. I ignored Terry and said, "Merry, can I talk to you for a minute? I want to explain about Mom and Dad's electric blanket."

She got up with a knowing look and followed me. I prattled, "See, it's dual control, and it's kind of tricky..." I yanked her into my room and shut the door. "He kissed me!" I screamed in a whisper, jumping up and down.

"Well, duh. Your face is so rosy and your eyes are positively *gleaming*. It's a little unsettling, actually. We all knew what you two were doing."

I stopped jumping. "You did?"

"No one here is stupid, Andrea," she said kindly. "People don't hang around a frozen pond for two hours unless they're keeping warm somehow."

"Do you think Brenda..."

"I think George was saying very unkind things about you, and Brenda nailed him with a verbal brick or two. Then she went to bed. I don't know where George is."

"What was he saying about me?"

"Oh, the usual. I think he regrets breaking up with you, the poor creature. He was saying things like, 'my ring's barely off her finger and she's throwing herself at another guy', and 'she's just trying to prove she doesn't care that I broke up with her', and other idiocy. Then he made comments about your sexual morals, specifically implying that you didn't have any. That was when Brenda told him he was a—how did she put it? A sneaky, sly SOB with only one thing on his mind. She also said she had done a 'jig of joy' when she heard the two of you broke up. Then she went to bed."

"Huh," I said, surprised.

"Meanwhile, *you* were down at the pond seducing the man she loves."

"Do you have to put it that way?" I snapped. "Damn you and your ruthlessness, anyway. Besides, he just wants to be friends. With Bren, I mean. He doesn't think of her that way."

"Lucky for you."

"Don't I know it. But we've decided to let things lie for a while. We're going to date and stuff, see what happens."

"And stuff, huh?" She tried to leer, but the expression didn't work on her face.

* * * *

I COULDN'T SLEEP. Knowing Bren had been sticking up for me while her heart was breaking had me wracked with guilt. I wasn't ashamed, though, which was even worse. I didn't regret kissing Kyle, I was just sorry I had waited so long. But I felt bad that things had to be this way. I wished she didn't like Kyle the way I did. And I wished we didn't have to hurt her.



but we were fooling ourselves about letting things lie. We knew we would be seeing a lot of each other and that would inevitably lead to going steady. At least that was *my* goal, and woe to Kyle if he interfered—his job, I had decided, was to accede to my wishes. I was done being passive, waiting for him to make the first move.

Sadly, somewhere in there lurked a confrontation with Brenda. We could put it off for a while, but it would always be in the background. Kyle and I couldn't have any sort of relationship without telling Bren exactly how we felt, and who in their right mind wanted to build a romantic relationship on the broken heart of a dear friend?

Chapter 13

I PICKED UP the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi, Andy. It's George.”

Cold silence from me.

“Still pissed, huh?”

“Still—” I was too enraged to tell him what I thought. I hung up on him.

My father looked over at me from the paper. “George?”

I nodded. I had told them everything. Well, almost everything. Gleeefully I explained how George and I broke up and he brought peach Schnapps to the house, Schnapps duly confiscated and drank by the Graminator. My dad was utterly pissed on my behalf, for two reasons: “No one treats my daughter like that!” And, “That little son of a bitch brought booze into *my house?*”

“I never liked him,” Mom sniffed. “Much too short for you.”

“And he was always trying to kiss me and stuff. It was gross.” My parents nodded approvingly, not having a clue that I had already decided that Kyle was going to relieve me of my virginity once I had his ring on my hand. “I'm glad to be rid of him, believe me.”

The phone rang again. My dad picked it up, winking at me. “Hello,” he rumbled. Then, “Young man, my daughter doesn't want to talk to you, ever. Furthermore, if you call here again I'm going to have a chat with your parents about why it's not polite to bring alcohol to a party hosted by a fifteen-year-old ... I'm sure they'd be very interested in that story. Good bye.” He hung up with a bang and we grinned at each other.

Later, I called Merry and relayed what my father had said.

“I would think George needs to come up with a considerable apology to get into your good graces again.”

I was smug. Everyone knew George was sorry, that he wanted me back. I had no idea why. If he was sorry so soon after breaking up with me, why'd he dump me in the first place? And who cared? “He can apologize until he faints, but it won't do him any good.”



This wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that Kyle has finally gotten around to showing interest in you, would it?"

"If Kyle told me to drop dead, I still wouldn't go out with George again," I said truthfully. "Besides, Kyle's ruined me. I'm not putting up with mediocre kisses ever again."

"That good, huh?"

"You wouldn't believe it," I said dreamily.

"Spare me the hideous details. What time am I picking you up Friday?" We were gathering at Brenda's house again, to start a new game of V&V.

"Well, Terry said something about all of us meeting at his place, picking up a few movies, and then going to Bren's. So why don't we plan on being at Terry's around six—you can get here by five-thirty, right?"

"Without a problem. Dr. Cobran's on vacation. No therapy this week."

"Oh. Will you be okay?"

"Oh, yes," she said airily. "I'll just double up on medication if I start to get depressed."

"What? You idiot, that's the stupidest—"

"I'm only kidding. God, you're so literal sometimes."

"Yeah, but at least I'm not a dork," I said, and hung up promptly, so as to get the last word. The phone rang under my hand and I snatched it up. "You're still a dork, so don't think you can get the last word, big jerk!"

Silence. Then, "Andy, what are you talking about?"

Ulp. "Oh. Kyle. Sorry. I was expecting Meredith to try something."

"I understand," he soothed.

"Don't patronize me!" I yelled. "You don't have the faintest idea what's going on and don't pretend you do!"

"Of course, of course." He was laughing. "I have to make this short. How are you getting to Terry's on Friday? Do you want me to come pick you up?"

Oh. Drive thirty minutes to get me, and then drive me to Terry's, drive me home at the end of the evening, and drive another half hour back to his house? Pretty nice offer. "That's really nice of you," I said sincerely, "but Meredith is giving me a ride."

"Oh. Well, let me know if you want a ride home."

"Thanks, I might, actually. Merry and Terry—"



I hate the way that sounds.”

“You and me both. Meredith and Terrance usually like to go off together after V&V and I wasn't looking forward to being a third wheel.”

“Well, maybe you and I will go off together.”

I allowed myself a delicious shudder. Unfortunately, that would really rub Brenda's nose in it. The four of us leave, sticking her with George? Hey, wait a minute. George... “Don't you usually give George a ride home?”

“He hasn't called me.”

Ah. Well, no news is good news. “Whatever. But thanks again for the offer.”

“No problem. I'll see you Friday.”

“Six o'clock,” I said, and we hung up.

My mom looked up from her book. “New guy already, sweetheart?”

“The one I've been interested in all along,” I said smugly. “He offered to give me a ride to V&V but Merry's bringing me.”

“He must really like you.”

“Oh, yeah.”

* * * *

A VERY SUBDUED Meredith picked me up Friday night. “Grandma's getting worse,” was the first thing she said.

“I'm sorry.” I paused in the act of buckling myself in. When I rode with Meredith, buckling the belt was an automatic, you better believe it. “I'm really sorry about that. Would you rather not go out tonight?”

She shook her head. “No, I want to go. I have to get out of that house. Mother and Dad, when they're not moping around, are always asking me to go back to the nursing home and visit her.”

I made a face. “That's gotta be awful.”

She shrugged. I cast about for something to say to cheer her up. “You know, Merry, I think you're getting a lot better. I mean, you hardly ever flake out anymore ... when you come pick me up I'm not always automatically wondering what hellish encounter awaits.”

“That must be an enormous relief,” she said sarcastically, putting the car in gear and starting for town.

“You know what I mean. And it *is* a relief, actually. I was thinking about it the other night, when everyone was at my house. When you dropped that bomb about wanting to sleep with Terry in my parents' room. How'd that go, by the way?”



Oh, it was wonderful,” she said, visibly brightening. “I liked it a lot. We didn't do anything, of course, just kissed and snuggled and went to sleep. Well, he went to sleep. I laid awake, wondering if I was sleeping on your mother's side or your father's.”

I laughed. “That's enough to keep anybody awake. But like I was saying, the last time you did something awful was when you ate everything in the medicine cabinet, and that was weeks and weeks ago.”

“Yes. An eternity.” She paused, considering. “You're right. I am getting better, a little. I'm very glad it's noticeable to you. It's probably a combination of therapy and medication.”

“And meeting the Furies,” I teased.

“You know, I think that's a possibility,” she said seriously. “Certainly I can't loll around feeling sorry for myself if I have to think up a new character for V&V, or pick Terry up for a date, or get ready for a party. Maybe having more friends really makes a difference.”

“See, they drive most people crazy, but they're helping you get sane.”

“That makes a statement about my character, one I'd rather not pursue just now.”

I laughed again. I realized lately that I had been living weekend to weekend. I no longer cared what went on in school. Monday through Friday were days used solely to plan the next V&V party. Things were downright dull around CFHS these days, except for the two weeks I made sure I stayed the hell out of Jim's way. I hadn't wanted him to wrap that sling around my throat.

Before, when Meredith was sliding toward her breakdown and no one knew except Trisha and me, when she was still going to CFHS with us, my school days were an agony of suspense and excitement, and the weekends dragged. Now it was the other way around. It might be different next fall, when Meredith came back to school, but for now all I cared about was seeing my friends on the weekends.

“Your gram's not in the hospital, is she?”

“No, but soon.”

“Well, let me know because I'd like to visit her. She's really nice.” I thought again that it was so unfair, Marie dying and the Graminator perfectly healthy when she wasn't trying to pickle herself.

As usual, Meredith's car gobbled the miles between Cannon and Hastings, and soon we were pulling into Terry's driveway. Kyle's car, I noticed happily, was already there.

“I hope Skipper isn't back from the vet,” Merry mumbled, opening the front door without knocking, and heading without hesitation down the stairs. I guess she knew her way around pretty well. “I loathe the creature.”

“Skipper?” I was looking around while trying to keep up. What I could see of the house was perfectly normal; they must keep the coffins in the basement.

No coffins, but Kyle and Terry were there, hunched over a chess board. They both grunted at us without looking up.



"You're still in check," Terry needed.

"Mm-hmm." Kyle, I noticed proudly, didn't seem too worked up about it.

A shrill yapping diverted my attention. Meredith cursed under her breath and moved out of range, leaving me to Skipper's tender mercies.

Skipper, I saw with disgust, was a miniature collie, so sleekly brushed that his hair was standing out on all sides, making him look much like a brown and tan cotton ball with legs and a sharp snout. He was running around in circles and barking shrilly. Then he jumped toward my face.

I ducked and he went sailing over my head. "Yar-yar-yar—yark!" as he hit the wall.

"Hey!" Terry said angrily, jumping up, the chess game forgotten. "You're supposed to catch him in your arms. Poor Skippie," he cooed, gathering the big brown cotton ball to his chest.

"Catch him? Not likely. Keep it away from me. Are you aware that any creature weighing less than twenty pounds is really a cat? You want a dog? Get a Labrador. German Shepherd. Retriever."

"Hi, guys," Kyle said mildly.

"Poor baby." Terry was still cooing. It was disgusting. I scowled at Skipper. Meredith was scowling at Terry. "She didn't mean it, Skippie, she loves you, doesn't she?"

"She'd like to make a coat out of you ... Skippie," I replied. I hated small, yappy dogs. So did Meredith. Actually, Meredith hated all dogs.

"What's the delay?" she demanded. "Terry, put that creature down this instant if you expect a kiss hello. Should we go get movies?"

"Kyle and Andy can go," Terry said. "You stay here. I've got some stuff upstairs I want to show you."

"I'll bet," I snickered. He jabbed a bony elbow in my ribs and I grunted obligingly.

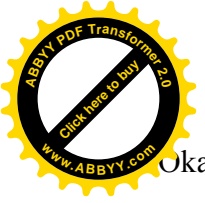
"All right, we'll go. Back in a while, guys." Kyle headed upstairs, I followed. Once outside he hugged me so tightly my feet left the ground. "Missed you this week," he said at last, putting me down.

I tried not to gasp for breath as I answered. "I missed you, too. You look great." He did. He was dressed in jeans, a black turtleneck, black socks, loafers. He zipped his coat and I couldn't admire his lean, dark-clad form anymore. I added truthfully but senselessly, "You smell great."

"And here I thought you liked me for my brains," he teased. "But no, you're just an olfactory hussy."

"Very funny." He put an arm around my waist and we walked companionably to the car. I loved having his arms around me. As the teenage romance heroines liked to say, 'it felt so right'. But I knew what they meant. Guess clichés got to be clichés because there was some truth in them.

Picking movies out at Blockbuster, I held up a copy of *Eyeballs of the Damned III* and was surprised when he said, apropos of nothing, "Let's do something tomorrow night. Just the two of us."



“Okay.” I grinned. “Okay, great! Like what?”

“Dinner at my brother's. I told him all about you, he really wants to meet you. We can go to a movie after, if you want.”

“So, just the two of us means just the three of us?” I teased.

“I meant, just us two Furies,” he said seriously. “Not the whole pack.”

“Fine. Tell your brother I'm looking forward to it.”

His smile disappeared abruptly. “So ... we have to tell Brenda.”

My own smile had also vanished. “I know. I was thinking about it the other night. We can't really go anywhere until this is settled.”

“I feel so—it's not as if she and I ever dated ... I've never even kissed her.”

“I should hope not,” I said icily.

“But I have to tell her something.” He paused, frustrated, and I knew how he felt. Exactly how he felt. When someone had feelings for you that you couldn't return, you felt guilty, even though it was nobody's fault. “Immediately.”

“No. I have to,” I said firmly. “She's been my friend the longest and I owe her this.” I meant what I said, but I dreaded having to do it. “I'll take care of it tonight.”

* * * *

EXCEPT I couldn't do it. I kept waiting for a chance to get her alone, and an opportunity would come and I didn't move. We were enmeshed in creating new characters for V&V and Kyle kept looking at me questioningly. It was getting late and I still hadn't gotten around to it.

“Where's George tonight?” Terry asked casually.

“He said he had other plans,” was Kyle's mild reply.

I didn't say anything, but I was overjoyed at not having to look at George. I didn't care if I ever saw him again. Trisha tried hard to stay friends with all her exes (their numbers were legion) but I had declared George public enemy number one.

“Anybody want more popcorn?” Bren asked with forced brightness. She'd been a bit tense all evening, which was probably why I was so hesitant to approach her. “I'm heading up.”

“I'll come with,” I said. Once we were on the stairs, I asked quietly, “Can I talk to you a minute?”

She looked at me wordlessly, then shrugged. “Sure. Come on up.”

We went to her room and she closed the door. I took several deep breaths, so nervous I was trembling inside. *Get it done. Say it and be as nice as you can. Don't hurt her feelings because you're nervous and*



want this over with.

“Bren, I—we—I have something to tell you.” She was rummaging around in her drawer for something. Not having to look her in the face made it a little easier. “Kyle and I, we—that is, I—oh, fuck. Look, I’ll start at the beginning. When Merry and I first started coming to the V&V games ... what’s this?”

She’d handed me one of her Polaroids. Dark, not a very good picture. A bunch of lit candles on a bench or something. One of the candles had been circled with a red wax pencil.

“That’s the candle I lit for you and Kyle at church last Sunday,” she said softly.

I felt my mouth drop open. I looked at the picture. Looked back up at her. Now there were two Brenda’s. My vision tripled, wavered, blurred. My face was getting wet.

“Andy, don’t. Don’t do that. When you went down to the pond, I knew. I think I even knew before that,” she said sadly. “He wants to be my friend, that’s all he’s *ever* wanted from me. That’s not your fault. Not his, either. He wants you, and I’m happy for you both.”

“That can’t be true,” I choked. “Not even you could be that nice.”

“But it is true.” She smiled a little, the smile trembled. “And I am that nice. Aren’t you always telling people I’m the nicest person you know? I have a reputation to live up to, y’know.”

“You knew?” I yelled, still crying. “You *knew*? I’ve been miserable for months! I went out with George because—you were—Kyle was—”

Her smile widened. “Are you going to cry, or be mad at me? Better make up your mind.”

“I’m going to strangle you,” I said, hugging her as hard as I could. “Bless you, Brenda. You always understand.”

“No, but I usually try,” she said, pulling back, looking at me soberly. “I really am happy for you, you know.”

I did know. A lot of people would say it and not mean it. Brenda never said anything she didn’t mean. “I couldn’t have a truer friend,” I said. “Neither could Kyle.”

“You’re just saying that because I set something on fire for you.”

“Now, explain this to me.” I wasn’t Catholic. Actually, I wasn’t anything. The only one in our family who went to church was Lindy, and that was because all her friends were in Sunday school. Dad and I usually went hunting on Sunday mornings. “You lit a candle for us ... what does that mean?”

“It means, not only do you two have my thumbs up on going for it, you’ve got His.” She pointed to the ceiling. I nodded, fresh tears stinging my eyes. (I assumed she didn’t mean her brother, Jon, whose room was overhead.) I was so relieved I thought I was going to faint. “So whatever happens, you’ve got my blessings, and His, too.”

“Oh.” Weird. I wouldn’t have thought God gave a rat’s patootie *who* I went out with, him being rather busy with famine and war and stuff. But I appreciated the sentiment. “That’s nice, that’s really nice. Can I



“Keep this?” She nodded and I tucked it away. I took a deep breath, let it out. “Anyway. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Neither of us wanted to go out until we’d told you.”

“I know. And I appreciate it. I love you both, you know.”

“Yes, I do know. I—I was so nervous about telling you—”

“I could tell. You usually aren’t so quiet,” she said dryly. “And Kyle couldn’t even look at me.”

“And here you knew about us all the time! As soon as I get over being relieved I’m gonna choke you.”

“Wash your face, first. You look terrible.”

We went to the bathroom and took turns washing our faces. I had cried the hardest, which surprised me. I was sure Brenda would have cried gallons when I told her. Actually, I didn’t tell *her* anything. She had told me. I still felt off-balance, like someone had yanked at the rug I was standing on. Not hard enough to make me fall, but enough to make me want to grab something in order to keep my feet.

I touched the picture in my pocket, inwardly shaking my head at how things had worked out. Never in my wildest imaginings had I imagined it would go this well.

“Going to stare at your reflection all night, or help me pop some popcorn?” she asked, poking me in the ribs and leaving the bathroom.

Wiping my face, I thought about the past few months. I had gone through a boyfriend, Trisha had decided on a lover, Meredith had fallen in love. I had fallen in love, but not with my boyfriend, Brenda had fallen in love, but didn’t date. The Graminator moved in, I—with all my weekend jaunts—had practically moved out. Meredith’s grandmother was going into a decline while Meredith was getting better. All this, in a bare twelve weeks! And we would be in high school for three more years!

I shook my head and smiled. I had no idea what was coming up, but with friends like the Furies, I was up for whatever fate had in mind.

“Hello? Earth to Andy?”

“I’m coming,” I said, giving my reflection a thumbs up and following Brenda to the kitchen.

MaryJanice Davidson

A self-described “Air Force brat,” MaryJanice Davidson lived all over America while growing up, finally settling in Minnesota where she lives with her husband, Anthony, and daughter, Christina.

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