

Austin Opitz never meant to fall for Yvonne Robinson. The girl was rich and spoiled, a lethal combination. But when he saw her sobbing in the hospital cafeteria with a plate of ice cream melting in front of her, he couldn't walk away.

So begins a strange friendship between two opposites: Yvonne, a recently diagnosed diabetic bitter about the mandatory change in her lifestyle; and jokester Austin Opitz, who covers up his own recent tragedy by playing class clown.

This is a story about teenagers getting a taste of life's ups and downs, and how they cope, despite tremendous odds.

Dying for Ice Cream is a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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DYING FOR ICE CREAM

By MaryJanice Davidson

Chapter One

Austin knew he shouldn't have set his alarm the night before. If he hadn't set the alarm, it wouldn't have gone off. If it hadn't gone off, he wouldn't have gone to school. If he hadn't gone to school, he wouldn't have flunked his grammar test. If he hadn't flunked his test, he wouldn't have stayed after school to sign up for tutoring. If he hadn't signed up for tutoring, he wouldn't have gotten stuck with Robert Langenfeld. If he hadn't gotten stuck with Robert Langenfeld, he wouldn't have

had to take the grammar geek to the hospital.

And, finally, he wouldn't be standing in front of the nurse's desk in the ER, waiting to find out how Geekboy was doing, wondering if he was going to make it home before midnight, and more than a little nervous about all the people around him who were bleeding, crying, or, for a chance of pace, bleeding and crying.

So he shifted from one foot to another and glanced over his shoulder more than once and cleared his throat for the second time to get the nurse's attention. Like every adult who had a kid standing in front of her, she took her sweet time noticing him. Finally, she quit pretending to study the chart in front of her and looked up.

"Yes?"

"Is my tutor all right?" he asked.

She frowned. Her name badge read, "Chris Anderson." On the opposite shoulder she was wearing a button that read, "Want to save a life? Ask me how!" He couldn't begin to imagine what the button was pitching, and wasn't about to ask.

Since she still hadn't answered him, he repeated his question, slightly louder. "My tutor? I brought him in a couple hours ago?"

"I'm sorry, it's been a crazy—what's he look like? Your teacher?"

Teacher! Ha, that was a good one. But Austin answered her readily. "Short. Up to my chin, maybe. Couple years younger than me. Glasses. Big ears. One blue eye, one brown. Freckles." Austin paused, thinking. "He was carrying a big calculator when I brought him in—he wouldn't let you guys take it."

The nurse's eyes lit up in recognition. "Oh, yeah! For someone with a concussion, he sure held onto that thing. I thought we were going to have to put him in restraints."

The thought of poor little Robert Langenfeld clapped in restraints, helpless to prevent various medical personnel from relieving him of his beloved Texas Instruments Calculator 3000, made Austin cringe.

"You're going to have to fill out some forms," the nurse

continued. "What happened to him?"

Austin sighed. "During our tutoring session, he tripped over his shoelace and fell down two flights of stairs."

The nurse's eyebrows—the exact thickness and length of brown caterpillars—arched. "He was tutoring you in a stairwell?"

"He was trying. I was trying to get away from him. Hey, I don't learn on my own time, okay?" At the nurse's frown, he added, "And don't look at me like that, I feel bad enough."

"Sorry," she replied, sounding anything but. "Your tutor's going to be here for a while, they're running some tests. You'll have to wait. Might as well fill out these forms while you're waiting." She handed him a truly intimidating stack of papers. He tucked them under his arm and swallowed a sigh. There were few things he hated more than waiting. One of them was filling out forms. On the other hand, he sort of had this coming. "Where's the cafeteria?"

The nurse gave him directions, and Austin went to find some chocolate milk. He took his time. After the cafeteria, he would have to find a phone and call his father. While his dad was a reasonable man, he'd insist on hearing the whole story, and Austin wanted to keep the news of his impending F in English to himself as long as possible.

Also, it was very important to get the heck away from that waiting room. The noise was bad enough, but he felt like a bugturd because Langenfeld was hurt. Maybe he should have tried harder to catch the kid, rather than concentrating on getting the hell out of the way of the falling body.

It's not like he couldn't have caught him. Langenfeld was clumsy and tripped over something on a daily basis—usually more than once—but Austin had the reflexes of a cat. Not just an ordinary house cat, either.

"Hey, kid, watch out for my cart!"

He felt a double-thud and then a dull pain in his left foot. He looked down, surprised to see a meds cart, pushed by a candy stripper, had just rolled over his foot.

"Sorry."

Now where was he? Right, right, reflexes like a cat. One of those big jungle cats, like the kind they showed on the

Discovery Channel. And he didn't just have good reflexes, he had a knack of knowing something was going to happen—

Dull pain in his nose; he stepped back, observing the elevator door closing faster than he had anticipated. Beside him, a robed patient about to step in the elevator looked at him with concern.

"That looked like it hurt. You okay?"

"Fine, I'm fine," he replied absently, and he was, because he had the knack of knowing something was going to happen seconds before it actually did.

So, basically, he had no excuse for not leaping nimbly down the stairwell and saving Langenfeld. There's he'd been, practically sprinting down the stairs to get away from the kid, ignoring Langenfeld's shrieked, "You flunked the quiz because you didn't know what a preposition was! I can help you!" Then, just as Austin was clawing for the doorknob: "Gerunds can be your frien—aaiiggghh!" Then a series of thuds.

Austin shivered, banishing the memory. Langenfeld had seemed okay, if a little dazed, but there was blood all over the place from where the kid had banged his head, and Austin had driven him to the ER, just to be safe. He'd have to do something extra nice for the kid to make up for it, too. Take him to a basketball game. Polish his calculator. Pass a grammar test. Something.

These dark thoughts brought him to the cafeteria. It was close to empty this time of day, which was why he noticed the girl right away. She was about his age, maybe a little younger, and really pretty. Gorgeous, in fact. Long red hair and skin the color of a vanilla milkshake. He couldn't see her eyes from here, but was sure they'd be green. She was the prettiest girl he'd seen out-side of the movies. One look at her, and poor Robert Langenfeld vanished from his thoughts.

She was sitting at one of the tables, looking at a big bowl of ice cream and crying. And she wasn't eating the ice cream, just staring at it and sobbing like someone had knifed her puppy.

Austin moved past her, toward the dairy case. He could still hear her crying softly. He looked around but there were only two other people in the cafeteria, and neither of them was paying attention. One of them, in fact, was asleep. If anyone was going to say anything to her, it would have to be him.

"Never mind, dude," he muttered under his breath. "None of your business."

Excellent advice. He'd gotten into enough trouble today, thanks very much. The girl—whoever she was—looked old enough to take care of herself. For all he knew, she was boo-hoing over a Friends re-run. Whatever the problem, it was none of his business.

Nope. None.

He gave up looking for chocolate milk and decided to just find a water fountain. Anything to get away from that soft, steady crying.

"Okayyyyy. . . we're just gonna walk out of here. Right past the girl and out the door. Let's go. And while we're at it, we're going to stop talking to ourselves."

While he was muttering to himself he was moving past the girl's table. He glanced back only once—but like Lot's wife, one look back was his undoing. She just looked so. . . pretty and pitiful. It broke his heart a little. It wasn't much fun to see someone in obvious pain. Especially since he'd had more than his fair share of pain this past year.

But he wasn't going to think about that.

When he got closer, he saw he'd been wrong about her eyes. They weren't green. They were an amazing shade of blue, like the sky on a cloudless day.

What was wrong with him? 'Like the sky on a cloudless day'? You'd think he'd been the one to take a blow to the head, not Langenfeld. Disgusted, he tried to notice something besides her fine looks, and noted the ice cream in front of her was chocolate.

"Um. . . hi. Are you—this is going to sound stupid, but are you all right?"

"Fine."

The girl didn't stop crying. Her ice cream was melting, and as if that had special meaning, the girl suddenly picked up her spoon and shoved it into the gluey mass.

He tried again. "Do you want a napkin or something?"

"No. Go away."

She was gripping the spoon so hard her knuckles were white. With a mental sigh, Austin pulled back a chair and sat down.

"Most days I'd do that. Go away—I mean, we don't even know each other, and I just had the day from hell and I'm tired and my dad's probably worried about me and my foot hurts from where the pill cart ran over it. You seem like you need some help. Do you want me to call a doctor?"

Her gaze flew to his face, her blue eyes wide with alarm. "No! God, no. The last thing I need is another doctor." She sniffed pitifully. "Just go away and let me die in peace."

He grinned at her melodrama. "You look pretty healthy."

"Well, I'm not, okay?" she snapped. "I've got diabetes. And I've got news for you, I'm not putting up with it. Forget it."

She brought up a big drippy spoonful of ice cream, opened her mouth wide, then paused long enough to glare at him. "Are you just going to sit there and stare at me?"

"I'm trying to remember my notes from health class," he said mildly. "Is diabetes the one where you poop uncontrollably, or when you can't have sugar?"

The girl stared at him for a long moment, then burst out laughing. He breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"It's the one where you can't have sugar, you idiot."

Funny, how she made "idiot" sound almost like "darling".

"I always get those two mixed up," he admitted. "So if you can't have sugar—"

"Ever."

"Right. If you can't have any, why are you sitting there with a bowl of ice cream the size of your head?"

"It's none of your business, really."

He folded his arms across his chest and hummed at the ceiling. His very pose told her he had nothing better to do than wait for an answer. She made an exasperated sound and said, "I told you. I'm not putting up with it. I'm not cutting out sugar and watching my diet and going to the doctor every

other damn day and sticking needles into my thigh three times a day, no way. No."

She brought a great, gloppy spoonful to her mouth.

"Wait!"

She waited.

"Um. . . I'm a little slow today, but. . . what's the alternative? To taking care of yourself, I mean?"

She glared at him again. "Go away."

"Listen, if it's dangerous for you to have sugar, then don't eat the stuff!" he said, exasperated.

"I told you," she ground out, "I'm not putting up with it."

He leaned across the table, spearing her with his gaze. "Put—the spoon—down," he said. "And no one gets hurt. Look, we can talk about this. What do you want? Money? A getaway car? There's no need to take a hostage. Especially when it's your own body."

She had started to smile at him, then looked outraged. "Don't make fun of me!"

"I'm not," he assured her. "I'm trying like hell to lighten the mood. I. . . don't!"

She brought the spoon to her mouth again. He knocked it out of her hand, startling both of them. She obviously hadn't expected that. And he hadn't been sure he was doing it until his hand was in motion.

"Jeez, I'm really sorry," he said contritely, wondering if he was going to burst into flames from the power of her glare. "I don't know what came over me."

"Go away." Her teeth were gritted so tightly, he could barely make out the words.

"I want to go away," he mourned. "I even tried. But I can't."

Defiantly, she grabbed the bowl and lifted it to her mouth. Austin sprang into action. He couldn't save Langenfeld, the poor geek. . . he would save her!

With that thought in mind, he jumped at her, knocking her to

the floor. The ice cream bowl crashed about four inches from his head and splattered everywhere. The girl let out a shriek and belted him with a small fist that felt like a rock. Pain exploded above his left eyebrow.

"Ow!"

"Get off me!"

"Kill yourself on your own time, dammit! But don't do it in front of me and then expect me to watch."

"I asked you to go!"

"Yeah, well, you didn't say the magic—owwww!"

Another small fist flew, and there was another explosion in his head. She was petite and delicate, but she had a left hook like an undercover cop.

"Look, I don't want to hurt you," he groaned, clutching his head where, he was sure, a large lump was rising.

She brought her knee up. Right where he wanted it least. Pain exploded through his lower abdomen, and for one long moment, he was afraid he was going to throw up on her furious face.

He slowly rolled over, wanting to huddle on the cafeteria floor, and she leaned over him. "I'm sorry," she said in a low voice, biting her lip. "I didn't mean to get you that hard. But you had it coming," she added.

"Ggghhhhhhhh," he said.

Abruptly, she was yanked off him. He slowly sat up, fighting the urge to clutch his privates, and saw a hospital security guard standing over them.

"Thank God you're here!" he groaned. "Another few punches and I'd have been down for the count."

"What's going on, kids?" The guard was tall, very tall, extremely tall. Austin decided the guard wouldn't be so big once he stood up...then he realized he was standing. Hunched over, but standing. The guard's left hand was bigger than Austin's whole head. Hell, the guard's middle finger was probably bigger than Austin's whole head. And the guard did not look happy. "Tell me quick, or you can tell the folks down at Juvie Hall."

"I'll tell you what's going on," the girl snapped. "This thug attacked me! I was minding my own business, having a little snack—"

"The hell!" he wheezed. "She's diabetic. She's not supposed to eat any sugar. I was stopping her from being stupid."

"You couldn't stop a . . . a . . . stupid person from being stupid."

"That's telling me," he mumbled.

"I've heard enough," the guard rumbled. Austin half expected the floors to shake.

"Me, too," he added. "I . . . hey!"

He felt himself seized by the back of his neck like a naughty kitten, and hauled toward the exit. His only comfort was that the girl who had gotten him into this trouble was receiving the same brisk treatment.

"You aren't supposed to touch us unless we're a danger to ourselves or others!" she shrieked. "I know my rights!"

The guard didn't trouble himself to answer. Just escorted—to put it mildly—the two of them to the nearest exit. He didn't throw them out, just gave them both a firm shake, then set them down on the sidewalk, stepped back, and disappeared back inside the hospital.

They stared at the slowly closing door, then at each other.

"Well, great."

"What is your name?"

"That's just great," she fretted. "I didn't even want to be there, and I went anyway, and I was just minding my own business, when I was brutally attacked."

"What is your name?" he said again.

"What difference does that make?"

He waited, staring at her.

"Yvonne Robinson, if you must know. And I don't want to know your name. You got me kicked out of the hospital!"

"I thought you were sick of seeing doctors all the time."

Yvonne opened her mouth to reply. . . then closed it and looked surprised. Slowly, she smiled.

"You're right. I wouldn't have dared left on my own, but getting thrown out—I suppose I owe you for that, if nothing else."

"Good," he wheezed. "Help me across the street. You can buy me a sundae. I'll eat it and you can enjoy it vicariously."

She laughed, the sound startling him and pleasing him at the same time. "I will, too. But only because I didn't mean to get you so hard."

"Get' me?" he groaned. "You racked me like you grew up with five brothers."

"It was a lucky shot," she admitted cheerfully. "I'm an only child."

"Great," he grumbled.

Chapter Two

Afterward, he couldn't get the girl—Yvonne—out of his mind. He should have. He should have forgotten her as quickly as he'd forgotten poor Langenfeld, stuck in the ER observation room without his calculator.

In the short few minutes he'd talked to her, he'd pegged her as vain, snobby, and self-absorbed. Listening to her bitch while he ate ice cream didn't change his opinion. He hadn't even wanted the damned ice cream—but she'd acted so nice after racking him in the privates, and watched so wistfully while he ate it—he couldn't say no. Now he wished he had.

The good news—the only good news—was that he'd beaten his dad home. So Dad didn't know a) that Austin had been to the Emergency Room, b) that he was flunking English, or c) that a girl half his size and weight had him on the floor trying not to throw up.

So that was all right. Trouble was, if everything was as okay as it could be, these days, why couldn't he stop thinking about that redhead? That nutty, spoiled, cute-as-a-button,

obnoxious, gorgeous redhead?

He decided he was getting a fever and took two aspirin, then waited to be cured. While he was waiting, the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hello, may I speak to. . . Austin, please?"

Cripes, what now? "This is." And no, he thought, we don't want to switch long distance carriers.

"I'm so glad to reach you!" whoever-it-was gushed. "This is Kirsten Robinson. . . Yvonne's mother?"

Oh, Lord, he thought. The silly twit's decided to press assault charges or something. Probably told her mom I tried to rape her. Well, I'll just counter-sue.

He slapped his forehead and swallowed a groan. "Eeeee. . . yeah?"

"I just wanted to thank you for helping our daughter. She's talked about nothing—no one—else since she got home."

"I'll bet."

"What?"

"Look, I'm sorry about knocking her off her chair, but I couldn't think of what else to—"

"Can you go with her to her doctor's appointment tomorrow?"

He took the phone away from his ear and looked at it, then said, "I'm sorry, this must be a lousy connection. I thought you said—"

"Her therapist has recommended she confide in a peer."

"Appear?" he echoed dumbly.

"Someone her own age. Because of the tremendous lifestyle adjustment, of course."

"Of course." Thinking: huh?

"But she doesn't want to talk to any of her friends about it. She doesn't want them to know. But you're safe."

"Safe as. . ." A condom, he had been about to say, but that probably wouldn't be appropriate. ". . . aspirin." Now he was beginning to get it. He was safe because he wasn't in her little crowd. And went to another high school to boot. He didn't count. So she would condescend to speak with him.

"Sounds tempting," he lied, "but I think. . . no."

"Oh, please, Albert!"

"Austin."

"She's been just impossible since she was diagnosed, and we're at our wits' end. She's always skipping doctor's appointments, and now she's threatening not to take her insulin."

"The redhead's being difficult? That's odd."

Sarcasm was lost on the woman. "Please, Alfred, you—whatever you did, you made quite an impression. She's hoping you'll be her. . . com-panion, I guess is the word." She paused. "We are, too."

He could feel himself crumbling and fought it off. "Look, I'd like to help you, but I—" Have a split personality. Have rabies. Have a wife and kids. Something.

"We'll pay you," Mrs. Robinson assured him.

"What?"

"For your time, of course."

How about my aggravation? He sighed. It was tough work saying no to a grown-up, that was one thing. Another—he couldn't get that spoiled little snot out of his head. Spoiled little gorgeous snot. The aspirin obviously wasn't working.

"I don't want to take money for being with your daughter. But thanks for the offer. I guess." He paused, then inspiration hit. "I don't suppose Yvonne's any good at English."

"She gets straight A's in everything."

The woman had actually sounded insulted, like he'd asked if Yvonne was any good at chopping the heads off rabbits and making necklaces out of the skulls. Or maybe Mrs. Robinson was annoyed because he wouldn't take her money.

"In everything, huh? Isn't that special. Well, if I've got myself a tutor, Yvonne's got herself a Rent-A-Pal."

"Oh, excellent! I'll tell her. She'll be so excited, Alfred!"

"Austin. And I'm excited, too. I can hardly freakin' wait."

Too late. He was speaking to a dead line. Yvonne's mother, once she'd gotten her way, wasted no more time. What a surprise.

He hung up the phone with a satisfying bang. None of those silly little cordless jobs in his house. Hearing a little 'boop' when you hung up on someone was no fun at all. He'd have to try and remember to be the first one to hang up, assuming the Great Mrs. Robinson ever troubled herself to call his house again.

He took another aspirin, on the off chance the ones he'd taken before had been duds. And waited for it to be time to see Yvonne again. And wondered what it would be like to touch the soft radiance of her hair.

And took another aspirin.

Chapter Three

They met outside the out-patient clinic for Jorenby General Hospital. It went about like Austin expected. She was waiting for him, sitting on the steps with her arms clasped around her knees, looking very woebegone, but when she saw him she leaped to her feet.

"You're late," she said accusingly.

"Fine, thanks. And you?"

She had the grace to flush a little. "I've been waiting for ten minutes."

"I'm not late," he said reasonably. "You're early."

"I just don't like to be kept waiting, is all."

What a surprise. Really." He shook his head and muttered, "Man, you'd better be great in English."

"Me not so good at it, but me will try."

Caught off guard, he laughed. He was trying not to stare at her, and failing. Spoiled and silly and a pain in the butt, she was still a knockout. Today her deep red hair was tied back with a blue ribbon the exact color of her eyes. She was wearing a blue T-shirt and denim shorts. Delicate white sandals completed the outfit. Even her feet were pretty. It was irritating beyond belief.

"Tell me again why I'm doing this."

"You don't want to flunk English," she said smugly.

"Tell me again why you're doing this."

"Heck if I know. You're not my type at all."

"This isn't a date, Yvonne." Too bad, he thought, then impatiently pushed the thought away. This was no time to get silly.

"Thank God. I've got enough on my plate right now without fending off a would-be suitor."

He could feel himself flush. "Hey, your mom asked me, it wasn't the other—"

"Let's not fight. C'mon, I want to get this over with."

"Couldn't have put it better myself."

Against his better judgment, he followed her into the clinic. As soon as she crossed the threshold, Yvonne tensed up. He could see it. Her mouth went all narrow and tight, and she cupped her elbows with both hands. Her shoulders hunched and she walked slowly toward the receptionist's desk. He followed, amazed at the transformation.

"Yvonne Robinson. I've got a four o'clock appointment."

The receptionist's mouth dropped open in exaggerated surprise. "You're here! I can't believe it."

Yvonne reddened. "I haven't missed that many appointments."

"Sign in, please. If you remember how."

That bugged him, for some reason. Not that Yvonne

probably didn't deserve a little ribbing, but. . . what did the jerk behind the desk know? It wasn't really her business how many appointments Yvonne kept or didn't keep. Either way, she got paid.

"Wow!" he boomed, and everyone in the waiting room looked up. "With such a pleasant staff, I'm shocked you don't like to come here, Yvonne. Really! If one of the employees here was so snotty to me, I couldn't wait to come back!" He grinned cheerfully at the receptionist.

Yvonne froze in the act of signing in, then looked up at him and flashed a smile of pure gratitude. He was as startled to see the smile as the receptionist was to hear his comment.

"You'll have to wait," she said triumphantly. "The doctor's running behind today."

"Ah, more clinic efficiency. What a cave of marvels this place is."

"And you are?"

"Guido, Yvonne's pool boy."

Yvonne grabbed his arm. "He's sort of my coach. We'll wait over here."

So saying, she pulled him toward a couple empty chairs.

"I think she likes me," he said cheerfully.

"I think you're a nut. Antagonize a few more health care professionals, why don't you?"

But she smiled as she said it, and he knew she was glad he'd spoken up. He was glad, too. It was nice to see her smile. Up 'til this moment, he hadn't been entirely sure she knew how.

Then he shook himself. This was a job, a chore, and something he hadn't much wanted to do in the first place. Best to keep that in mind.

Yvonne sat down and stretched out her legs. She closed her eyes and looked ready to take a cat nap. Suddenly uncomfortable—were they supposed to talk? Bond? Ignore each other?—he looked around for something to read. There wasn't much to choose from, so he finally settled on last year's Christmas issue of Highlights for Children. He's just about finished the crossword puzzle (34 Across: "What did the cow

jump over?" had him stumped) when the receptionist called them.

"Yvonne. You're up."

Yvonne's cold fingers suddenly gripped his, and he almost dropped the magazine. "Gaaaah! Jeez, your hands are cold!"

"Come on, he's waiting."

It was supposed to sound like an order. It didn't. It was more like a plea for help. The look on her face would have convinced him to get moving if her tone hadn't. Her face was bloodless, terrified. He practically jumped out of the seat.

"You're the boss. . . hey, don't pull so hard. How many times a day do you lift weights, anyway?"

"Come on, we'll be late."

"You've been skipping eighty zillion appointments and now you—all right, I'm coming, don't yank my damned arm off."

She led him to an exam room that looked like every other exam room he'd been in as a child. The stingy smell of a doctor's office was definitely in the air, that sharp, somehow cold smell that always reminded him of needles and smiling nurses.

Austin was ready for a long wait. That was the thing about doctors' offices—the nurse called you in about half an hour before the doctor was actually ready to see you—how stupid was that? Then you sat there in one of those dumb paper gowns, shivering and bored, because while the waiting room at least had some magazines to look at, the actual doctor's office never had anything. So there you sat, bored out of your mind, with nothing to look at but the clock or the jars full of cotton balls or your bare knees, which were getting goosebumps from the cold.

Finally, after about five years, the doctor would come in, all breezy, like he or she hadn't kept you waiting forever. And he'd ask you everything the nurse had already asked you and written down.

Austin figured they learned the Waiting Room Dance in medical school. Because every doctor did it. Every one.

He opened his mouth to explain this to Yvonne, when the door to the exam room opened and a strange man burst in.

He was tall and muscular, and so broad across the shoulders he practically had to turn sideways to get into the room. He had blonde, curly hair and dancing blue eyes, and grinned when he saw them. He was wearing faded blue jeans, tennis shoes, and a T-shirt with the logo, "He's dead, Jim." He looked like he had wandered into the exam room on his way to catch some waves. Or start his own garage band.

Austin stared. But Yvonne didn't seem alarmed at this large apparition, because she said dully, "Hi, Dr. Freeborg."

"That's the doctor?" he asked, astonished.

The man—doctor—stepped forward and held out his hand. He wasn't wearing a white coat. He didn't have a stethoscope slung around his neck. He could have been the water delivery guy. Austin wondered if it would be polite to ask for some identification.

"Hi. You must be Austin. Yvonne's mom called and warned me you'd be coming."

Austin's hand was swallowed by the doctor's large, hammy paw. "Warned?" he repeated.

"Well. They're bribing you, aren't they? You're here almost against your will?"

"Believe me, he's getting more out of this than I am," Yvonne said glumly.

"What?" Austin cried, outraged at the gross exaggeration. "So far all I've gotten is insulted and pushed around."

She sniffed. "You're just being a baby."

"I'm not the baby in this scenario, sunshine. Whose mommy hired a keeper just to make sure she gets to her appointments?"

"You're not my keeper!"

"What am I, then, your dentist?"

Dr. Freeborg hooked a stool with his foot and dragged it over, then straddled it. "While we're on that subject—"

"Dentistry?"

"He means me skipping appointments, idiot."

"I know you are, but what am—"

"That's enough of that," Dr. Freeborg interrupted. "Next you'll be saying 'nanny, nanny, boo boo,' and I'll have to run screaming from the room. When was the last time you checked your blood sugar level, Yvonne?"

A sullen silence was all they got for an answer. Austin was looking at Yvonne. So was Dr. Freeborg. Yvonne was looking at the floor. There was a long silence, and then Dr. Freeborg spoke up. Austin figured he'd be mad, but he wasn't. The guy sounded gentle and nice and genuinely sorry Yvonne had to be in his office at all.

"Ignoring your diabetes won't make it go away. If it helps, Yvonne, you're not alone. Every one of my patients went through a denial phase."

"I'm not in a denial phase!"

Austin bit back a laugh, and she speared him with a look. Then, perhaps realizing how ridiculous she had sounded, she added sulkily, "Well, I'm not."

Curious, he asked the doctor, "How often is she supposed to check her blood sugar?"

Before Freeborg could answer, Yvonne jumped in. "A) Don't talk about me like I'm not here, and B) it's none of your business."

"Not only is it my business, it's apparently my job."

"He's got you there, Yvonne."

Whoa. A grown-up was on his side? Yvonne's own doctor was on his side? Austin fought the urge to say, "So there," and instead waited for Yvonne's rebuttal. It wasn't long in coming.

"Can we just get this over with, please? I know my rights. And the plain truth is, you can't make me watch my blood sugar, and my parents can't make me."

Austin opened his mouth. Dr. Freeborg shook his head slightly. Austin closed his mouth. The doctor looked at Yvonne for a long moment, then said, "As I was saying, Yvonne, what you're feeling is perfectly normal."

"Really. And how am I feeling, Dr. Freeborg?"

Austin winced at the cold sarcasm in her voice, but Freeborg didn't seem to notice. Or care. He just smiled a little and said, "You're pissed as hell. You think it sucks that you have to give up sugar and stick yourself twice or three times a day. Why you, right? What did you ever do to deserve this gross inconvenience? And you're not at all happy about the long-term effects."

Austin, still amazed from hearing a doctor talk like a real person, was distracted by this turn of the conversation. "Long-term effects?"

"Kidney damage," Freeborg said.

"Blindness," Yvonne countered.

"Circulatory problems," Freeborg added.

"Possible gangrene," Yvonne rebutted.

"Insulin coma," Freeborg said triumphantly.

"Um. . . fertility problems."

"Eeennnnnhh! Thank you for playing, but that's only if you're a man. Ha! I win."

"Okay, okay, you're both very smart," Austin broke in. "You both win."

"Hey, I'm the one who went to medical school," Freeborg whined. "I'm really smart."

"But these things don't have to happen, right?" Austin asked anxiously. No wonder she was trying to end it all with a bowl of ice cream, he thought. Maybe I would, too. "I mean, if Yvonne does what she's supposed to, does what you tell her—then she'll be okay. Right?"

"Probably. But it means a tremendous lifestyle change. Not to mention an attitude change. It's going to take a lot of discipline. And Yvonne is having a hard time accepting that."

"You're doing it again. Stop talking like I'm not here. And if you think all that lifestyle and discipline stuff is so great, Dr. Freeborg, then you do it."

"I have been," he said quietly. "I've been diabetic for over fifteen years."

Austin had heard the saying "you could have heard a pin drop". For the first time, he realized it was true. He could have heard a feather drop. Everything was dead quiet, and Yvonne had the grace to blush.

"I'm sorry," she said in a small voice.

Freeborg smiled at her. "I should apologize, too...I sort of led you into that one." He leaned forward, planted his elbows on his knees, and said earnestly, "Listen, Yvonne, your parents didn't just pick my name out of a hat. They're very worried about you. They thought having a physician who knows exactly what you're going through would help. Your therapist thought having a peer to confide in would also help." He paused. "Everyone wants to help you. Everyone wants to make this as easy on you as possible."

"Easy!" Yvonne choked. "Ha!"

"We're doing our part, Yvonne. Time for you to do yours. If you can."

Her eyes squinched shut, then opened wide, like she was trying not to let tears fall. "I can't. I'm sorry, I just—there's nothing good about having this horrible disease, not one good thing."

"No," Freeborg said quietly. "But there are worse ones to have."

She shook her head angrily. "I don't care about that! I care about what I'm forced to deal with, right now!"

"Yvonne..." Austin started helplessly, but her gaze was locked onto the doctor's, her eyes blue and blazing. He wasn't in the room for either of them anymore, and didn't know whether to be annoyed, or glad.

"I read that diabetics have a shorter life span than regular people," she said.

"True," Freeborg said calmly.

"That even if they do everything right, they could still go blind or get their legs cut off or drop dead of an insulin reaction."

"Also true."

Yvonne looked angrily triumphant. "So why should I follow

the rules? Why not live the way I want? Especially since no matter what, I'm going to die anyway?" She gulped breath. "I haven't even been to the prom, and you want me to examine my own mortality? I won't! It's not fair!"

A sob escaped before she could lock it back, and Austin saw that she wasn't crying. Only just. She slid down from the examining table and started for the door.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Freeborg. I have to go."

Without another word, she ran out, leaving Austin and Dr. Freeborg staring at each other.

"I'm sorry, Austin. Not such a fun afternoon for you, huh?"

"Don't worry about me, Doc. I've got it easiest of anyone in this room. Probably in the whole building." He stood slowly. "I guess I should go. It was nice to meet you."

"Did you have any questions for me before you beat feet out of here?"

Austin hesitated. He really wanted to go after Yvonne, but the afternoon had proven interesting—and showed just how little he knew about something that was tearing Yvonne up inside. Literally.

"Can I—um—do you have any pamphlets or anything?"

Freeborg brightened. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I have some excellent cruise brochures." He reached into a nearby drawer and withdrew a colorful fistful of pamphlets. He held one up proudly. "See? This is where I'm going on my vacation."

"Uh—"

"Oh. You meant pamphlets on diabetes."

"Normally I'd love to hear about your upcoming cruise on the Sea Princess—"

"Yeah, yeah. Here." Dr. Freeborg reached into a second drawer and withdrew a folder the width of the St. Paul Yellow Pages. "That should get you started."

Staggering under the load of paperwork Freeborg dumped on him, Austin hurried after Yvonne.

Chapter Four

She wasn't hard to find. She hadn't gotten very far before she'd broken down crying. He found her in the hallway between pediatrics and gerontology, which was kind of weird, when you thought about it. She was leaning on her forearms against the wall, sobbing so harshly he was surprised she could get a breath, much less keep crying. The sound of such pain made his eyes sting, and he had to swallow a lump before approaching her.

"Aw, come on, Yvonne. Don't do that. It's gonna be okay."

She wouldn't look at him. "No, it's not. It's never going to be okay again."

"Things could be a lot worse," he said lamely.

That got her attention. She was shocked out of her tears, shocked enough to whirl around and glare at him. He watched her knees, wary of another slam to the groin.

"Exactly how?" she asked angrily. "How could things be worse?"

"You're alive, and you've got people who care about you. It's diabetes, it's not the end of everything in the universe. I mean..." He lifted his hands in an I-surrender gesture. "Come on."

"Fine. Mock me, I don't care. I don't know why I wanted you to come, anyway. You can't even pass a grammar quiz, you don't know anything about anything, you can eat whatever you want as much as you want, and you're giving me advice on how to live?"

That stung, and he tried to keep his anger under control. "Hey, it's better than the advice you're giving yourself, lady. How not to live, that's about all you're interested in. That and having your own way all the time." He stopped as a thought struck him. "That's what it is, isn't it? You've been able to do exactly as you pleased your whole life. And now you can't, you have to change your diet and your lifestyle, and you don't want to, and you just hate that, don't you? That's why your panties are in a knot. You can't stand not having your own—"

She slapped him before he could finish. Slapped him hard, too—hard enough to jerk his head to the side. For a tiny thing, he recalled dizzily, she had a helluva punch.

Shocked, they stared at each other.

After a long silence, Yvonne said, "You're wrong. But I shouldn't have hit you."

"I'm right." He rubbed his cheek, which felt hot. He probably had a big red mark the size of her hand on his face. Terrific. He wished he could be mean enough to hit her back. But if he did, his dad would kill him, and worse, he'd never be able to look at himself in the mirror again. "And you shouldn't have hit me."

"Go away!" she shouted, hoarse with emotion. "And I mean it this time. I don't care how cute you are or how much I like you. I want you to leave me alone!"

"That's fine by me!" he shouted back, forcing himself to ignore her woebegone face, her tear-stained cheeks. "Have a nice life. Just a last piece of advice from your flunky, though—ignoring Dr. Freeborg's helpful hints isn't going to let you have your way. It's going to make all the things you're afraid of happen."

"I said, go away!" Her voice rose and cracked on 'away' and he flinched at the sound.

"Gladly."

He was almost out the doors of the medical center when he realized she'd called him cute. And said she'd liked him. This thought so startled him that he just about walked into the big glass doors. He went back, to find her and make her explain herself, but she was gone. He figured it was just as well.

But all night long he thought about her saying he was cute, and was glad for it. It hadn't seemed fair that the attraction was only one-sided. If it was even attraction—half the time he wanted to strangle her.

It was probably just as well she'd washed her hands of him.

Chapter Five

A week went by, and nothing much happened. On the outside, anyway—he went to school, came home and cooked dinner for his dad, did homework (sometimes), listened to music (always), watched Seinfeld reruns (depending on what

season they were re-running), went to bed. But he thought about Yvonne all the time. He wanted to call her. Why, he wasn't sure. To apologize? To hope for her apology? He didn't know, but thinking about her pain was making him crazy, even if he did think she was over-reacting. So he thought about calling her, but didn't have her number, and there were a million Robinsons in the phone book. Every time he thought about all that work—calling every single one and asking for Yvonne—he wondered why he wanted to bother.

And so he could talk himself out of it for a couple more hours, but then would be thinking about her again. Aspirin didn't work. Neither did NyQuil or Peptol Bismol.

He wanted to tell a couple of his buddies about her, maybe get their advice, but didn't know exactly where to start. With her looks? Sure, but then what? Because it wasn't just her looks, it was everything else. And he wasn't sure his friends would understand that. Hell, he didn't understand it himself.

And by looks he wasn't even sure he meant how she dressed and what kind of makeup she wore.

No, it was the way she looked—sometimes defiant, sometimes scared out of her mind. Always interesting. Mostly aggravating. But in an interesting way.

So he had mixed feelings, to put it mildly, and didn't know whether to be thrilled or scared when she called him.

"H'lo?"

"Austin? Is this Austin?"

He nearly choked on his apple. He'd been lazing around in the living room, legs slung across the arm of his dad's favorite easy chair, but her voice brought him bolt upright. He sucked the chunk of apple down his throat and for an awful moment thought he was in real trouble. Then it rattled down into his stomach and he could breathe. "Oh my God, why are you calling me?" he croaked. "You have no one else to torture?"

She laughed at that. Which gave him time to recover from the delighted shock of hearing her voice on the other end of the line.

"You're my victim of choice, these days. I wanted to—um—"

"This is a joke, right? You're not really calling to apologize

for being such a puke the other day, right? There's a hidden camera around here somewhere, right?"

Silence from the other end of the line. He'd meant it as a joke, but, too late, he remembered her pride.

"I was only teasing. And you don't have to say anything. I'm actually glad you called."

"Actually?" Now she was starting to sound peeved. "Why shouldn't you be glad I called?"

"Never mind. What's going on? Want company for your next appointment with Dr. Joe Cool?"

"Well. No. I'm actually—I'm calling—"

"To ask me out on a date, because I'm soooo cute?"

"No!"

"You don't have to sound quite so grossed out," he said dryly.

A pause, then she asked plaintively, "Why are you being like this?"

"Because I'm a little uncomfortable, and I make jokes when I'm uncomfortable."

"Well, it's a terrible habit."

"Thanks, Miss Manners, I'll make a note of it. Speaking of terrible habits, have you belted your keeper du jour yet?"

"First of all, you're flunking English, so don't bother with French, and second, I'm about two seconds from hanging up on you."

"You're just p.o.'d because you can't punch me over the phone," he teased.

"I'm hanging up now."

"Okay, okay, you win. I'll stop being such a wiseass. Seriously, why did you call? And—I can't believe I'm saying this—actually, I already did say it, so I can't believe I'm saying it again—"

"Austin."

"I'm glad you called."

Another long silence from her end. He started to get scared she'd really hung up, when—

"You are?" She sounded incredulous, delighted. "Really?"

"I am, really, now why did you call? It makes me nervous, not knowing your agenda."

"Well. I was thinking about some of the things you said, and—what?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Someone's talking to me—yes, I'll be off in a minute. Just wait."

Parents, Austin thought. They ignore you all evening, but the second you're on the phone, it's, 'get off the phone, I need to call the office/neighbor/garbage man.' It never failed. "Your mom wants you to get off the phone?"

"No. My nurse does."

"Your—" He stopped as a truly horrible thought struck him. "Tell me your folks have hired a private nurse to follow you around and make sure you take your insulin. Tell me that's why you have a nurse there."

"I'm in the hospital." She sighed. "I wasn't watching my glucose level and. . . and now I'm in the hospital."

He took a deep breath and forced calm. "You let me ramble on with dumb jokes while you're calling me from a hospital bed?"

"You don't have to shout."

"I'm not shouting!"

"Jeez. You sound really mad."

"Which hospital?"

"Dare I hope that under that poor grammar and those terrible jokes, you might actually care about me, just a litt—"

"Which damn hospital, Yvonne?"

"Jorenby General."

He dropped the phone and went for the front door, hearing her voice, tinny through the phone, adding, "But don't bother coming by, Austin, visiting hours are almost over. Austin?"

Chapter Six

Luckily, Jorenby General was within biking distance. Unlike some of the guys in his class, Austin was a careful biker. He always watched what he was doing, signaled carefully—

His train of thought was broken by the sound of an air horn, and he nimbly swerved the bike out of the semi's path.

Now where was he? Oh, right—being a careful biker. He was so good, safety was an automatic reflex. That was excellent, because it let him sort of coast along on a mental cruise control, while he thought about Yvonne and all the things he was going to say to her when he found her.

"Hey, kid! Watch out!"

Now if he could get people to quit interrupting his thought process...anyway, he had plenty to say to the twit when he caught up with her. And if anyone needed a good talking to, it was that brat. And if anyone was the right guy to talk to her about responsibility and taking care of yourself and in general not acting like a jerk—

"Oh, my God! Watch out for the train!"

...it was him.

He fairly flew across the railroad tracks, dimly aware of a tremendous racket, like someone blowing a horn the size of Montana, and then he was clear of the tracks and biking directly at the hospital.

He yanked the bike's handlebars, bringing him over the curb with a jerk and up the first two steps of Jorenby General. He left the bike on the steps, pushed past the doors, and entered the lobby, where he met his first obstacle.

"I'm sorry, son, visiting hours are over."

He'd read nurses had to go to college anywhere from two to

six years, and apparently the main thing they were taught was how to tell people no, as nicely as possible. No, you can't see the doctor yet. No, you can't see your friend. No, you can't go in there without filling out some forms. No, we don't know when your friend will be out. No, you can't use the phone. No, you can't come in. No.

"My dad's a doctor here," Austin improvised, seriously out of breath from the bike ride. "I'm supposed to meet him." This wasn't the first lie he'd ever told a grown-up, and he imagined it wouldn't be the last, but his conscience was clear. This was a lie for a good cause.

The floor nurse looked at him and smiled a little. "Who's your dad?"

Austin mentally groped for Yvonne's doctor's name, and for a horrid moment couldn't think of it. Then it came to him.

"Freeborg! Uh. . ." He thought frantically for a first name and drew a blank. "Doctor. Freeborg. That's him."

"Well, you lucked out, kiddo, he's just now finishing up rounds. He. . . there he is."

She was right, worse luck. There he was, looking more like a drummer than a doctor, loping toward him. He still wasn't wearing a white coat, or carrying a stethoscope. He was wearing tan shorts, loafers without socks, and a green T-shirt with the logo, "Yeah? So's yer mother." And his timing was horrible.

The weird part was, Dr. Freeborg seemed totally unsurprised to see him. That was odd because Austin himself hadn't known he was going to see Yvonne again.

"Hey, Austin. I suppose you're here to see—"

"You!" he blurted.

"That's very flattering, but—"

The nurse leaned over her desk, the better to see them both. "Your son's been waiting for you, Mike."

Austin closed his eyes and waited to be arrested, killed, kicked out on his butt, or all three. But incredibly, Dr. Freeborg's eyes sparkled merrily and he spread his arms wide, looking not unlike a blonde condor.

"Son!"

And before Austin could stop him, or duck, or scream, Dr. Freeborg picked him up in a big bear hug.

"How's daddy's little angel?" Freeborg cooed.

Austin kicked futilely and the doctor put him down. "I'm fine," he said through gritted teeth.

Dr. Freeborg tousled his head. Austin could feel his face getting hot, and didn't know whether to hug the doctor for playing along, or belt him for embarrassing the hell out of him.

"Well, I suppose we should toddle on home. We—oh, darn! I forgot my stethoscope up on the Pedes ward. I'd better go with it."

"I'll go with you."

Freeborg grinned at him, obviously reading Austin's mind. "Nonsense, son, I'll just be a moment. You just stay here and be a good boy."

"But I really want to go with you, Dad."

Freeborg pretended to brush away a tear. "Is there anything more heart-warming than the love of a boy for his father, nurse?" he asked, looking meltingly at Austin.

Bored, she had gone back to filling out a form. That was apparently the other thing they taught nurses. "I didn't know you had a son," she said, not looking up.

"I don't," Freeborg said casually, dropping the act. "This is just a scam the boy's pulling on you so he can go up to the wards and see his friend."

In desperation, Austin grabbed the doctor's hand and started tugging him toward the elevators.

"Come on, Dad, let's go find your stethoscope."

"Sure, son, whatever you say."

The elevator doors slid shut, and Austin dropped the doctor's hand.

"Thanks. I think."

Freeborg laughed until he choked. "Sorry, pal. Couldn't resist." He sobered. "Don't stay too long. I'm glad you came down to see her, but she needs her rest. If you're still here fifteen minutes from now, I'll boot you out myself."

"Sure. Dad." He snickered in spite of himself, and Dr. Freeborg grinned at him.

"Yeah, you're the son I never had, all right. Or wanted. How many other lies did you tell that poor nurse?"

"Hey, you played along."

"I had to reward your ingenuity. Also, I was in a good mood because I'd won my bet."

"What bet?"

"I bet Yvonne five bucks that you'd be back. She didn't believe me. I doubled the bet and said if she called you, you'd come on the run."

Austin felt cold, all of a sudden. All his good feelings—toward the doctor, toward Yvonne, even toward the nurse—disappeared.

"She called me because of a dare?"

Dr. Freeborg understood at once, and smiled kindly. "No. She wanted to call you, but her pride wouldn't let her. By making a bet with me, she could call you and keep her pride."

"Oh." That was Yvonne, he knew. Proud as a queen. A short queen. He had to smile. "Thanks again, then."

"All part of the service."

Sure, Austin thought. A doctor who never wears a white coat or seems to have any doctor-type tools on him, who cracks jokes and plays matchmaker. Perfectly normal.

Dr. Freeborg escorted him to Yvonne's room and left Austin at the door, but not before threatening him with death by flu shot if he stayed late.

Austin took a deep breath and shoved at the door, hard. It was supposed to crash open and smash against the wall satisfyingly, startling Yvonne and getting things off on the right foot. Instead, the door was heavy, and sloooooowly opened, revealing him inch by inch to whomever was in the

hospital room.

Yvonne, sitting up in bed reading, looked up and her eyes got wide. "You're here!"

Irritated, he walked in and said, "Of course I'm here. Someone's got to yell at you, and I won the coin toss."

"No, I mean—how'd you get in? Visiting hours are over, and they're pretty strict about that."

"It's a long and humiliating story, which I'm not about to repeat. What the hell happened? Why are you here?"

"I don't want to talk about that." Her eyes were wide and she looked equal parts astonished and pleased. "I can't believe you came all the way down—"

"We're going to talk about it." He tried to thunder his statement, but his stupid voice was still changing and 'it' came out more a squeak than a roar.

Her eyes widened at that but, mercifully, she didn't laugh. "You can do a lot of things, Mr. Austin—err—whatever your last name is, but you can't make me do a thing I don't want to."

"Opitz. And you wanna place a small wager on that? I already know from Dr. Freeborg that you're a betting fiend."

"Opitz? Your last name is Opitz?"

"Don't go there. Are you going to tell me what you did to end up in that hospital bed, or am I going to have to beat it out of you?"

"Boy are you grouchy," she observed grouchily. "Guess you didn't get a nap today. Or maybe you're mad about having such a silly last name."

"Talk!"

She smiled. "I'd rather talk about how glad I am to see you."

Austin actually tapped his ear to make sure it was working okay. This was not lost on Yvonne, who looked disgusted.

"You want me to be nice, but when I am, you don't believe me."

Hmm. She had him on that one. He sat down on the edge of her bed and just looked at her for a moment.

"I'm glad you're glad I'm here. But I'm sure not glad to be here—I hate that you've done this to yourself. And for what? What did you accomplish by being such a willful twit?"

"Just when I was starting to like you again," she began sulkily.

He ignored her interruption. "Does it make you feel better to be physically sick in addition to being depressed?"

She looked away. He tapped her foot until she glanced at him again.

"What happened?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, come on, Yvonne," he said, amused. "I've seen you at your worst, remember. Rolling around the floor with your knee in my privates. There's not much you can do now to shock me."

She smiled a little, then shrugged. "You'll think it's dumb."

"No I won't," he said, not sure that was true.

"Yes, you will," she said seriously. "You think everything I say and do is dumb."

Matching her tone, he said, "Yvonne, that's not true. I just think wanting to hurt yourself is dumb."

She looked at him for a long searching moment, then shrugged again and said in a low voice, "I just. . . just didn't want to deal with it. Like I said I wouldn't, in Dr. Freeborg's office . . . remember? So I didn't check my blood sugar and had some cake and worked on the Stairmaster for an hour. On purpose. And I didn't care what happened."

He paused for a moment. "You're right," he said at last. "I do think that's dumb."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Uh-huh."

"I mean, I don't know a lot about diabetes, but that sounds like an invitation to trouble."

She laughed, a brittle, humorless sound. "Yes. I got all

sweaty and shaky and had trouble keeping my balance—my dad thought I'd been drinking! I guess some of the symptoms can make it look like you're drunk, but. . . I don't know. It wasn't much fun." She paused, gulped, and went on. "He was—they were very upset. I haven't seen my mom cry since...well. It's enough to make me reconsider my philosophy regarding chronic illness, is all."

He threw up his hands. "Hallelujah, she sees the light! And it only took an ambulance ride to the hospital to wake you up."

Yvonne reached behind her, grabbed a pillow, and tossed it at him. He batted it away while she said tartly, "Easy for you to talk—you can eat whatever you like. And do whatever you like."

"Oh, sure, just like every other teenager in America. . . not! And your about-face on this doesn't surprise me at all. You're not getting smart, you just hate being in the hospital."

"Damn right," she said with sweet sarcasm.

"Potty mouth.

She grinned at him. "You should talk! Don't you remember shrieking at me on the phone? Nice language."

"I was a little startled by your news. I admit that."

There was a long pause, and then Yvonne said, almost shyly, "I liked it."

She dropped her gaze again, looking at the blankets. When she looked up at him, it was to give him one of those rare smiles. "Did I tell you I was glad you're here?"

"Yep. Guess hospitals affect your short term memory."

"Ha, ha. Never mind the hospital—when do you want me to fulfill my half of the bargain?"

"What?"

"You know. English lessons. Diagramming sentences. Isn't instead of ain't. And everything else you don't know."

Right. He'd forgotten he'd originally been bribed—sort of—to spend time with her. She was being such a sweetheart, it was hard to remember he'd once—like yesterday—had doubts about hanging out with her.

"Forget it. My tutor's out of the hospital."

Her eyes widened. "You have another tutor who's also in the hospital?"

"It's a long story. Remember the night we met?"

"Of course I do," she said with exaggerated patience. "It was Monday."

"Well, I was here because one of my classmates fell down the stairs and had to go to the ER. They kept him overnight, but he's back in school now, and he's helped me on a couple quizzes. But once I pass this class, I'm never using a gerund again. Or a preposition.

"Sure you won't. So you're being my—how'd you put it?—flunky? Just for fun?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it fun," he said dryly. "This is my second trip to a hospital in eight days."

"So why bother with me?"

She was smiling, but her tone was serious. He scooted up further on the bed and reached for her hand.

"I have no idea. You're the prettiest girl I've ever known. . . and the most aggravating. I figured I was well rid of you after what happened outside Freeborg's office. But I felt terrible when I found out you were in the hospital."

He leaned forward and kissed her. Not a big sloppy kiss like in the movies, but not a fatherly peck, either. She never closed her eyes; just looked at him, and kissed him back. He knew this because he peeked.

When he pulled back she was still smiling.

"I don't think that Dr. Freeborg would have let you up here if he knew you'd be molesting me."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Wanna bet?"

Chapter Seven

Yvonne was released from the hospital a day later, after

several lectures. He knew this because she came over that night and told him all about it. He was so surprised when he opened the door and saw her standing there, he almost fell off the porch.

"Lady, we don't want to buy any Mary Kay."

She glared at him, fist still raised from knocking, and he instinctively ducked. "That's some lame sense of humor you've got there. Can I come in, or do I have more of your stand-up routine to listen to?"

"Can't we do both?"

He stood back and watched her enter his home. His home—that had a funny kind of sound to it, even now. His parents had bought this house just two years ago, so excited to finally stop, as his dad put it, "pouring money down the rent rat hole". Before the accident, his mom had been thrilled to have her own yard at last. Even if Austin, as she knew, was too old to go out and play.

And because his parents were happy with the house, he was. In truth, he could have lived anywhere. Where he slept and ate had never much mattered to him. The people around him—that was what was important.

Yvonne glanced around the small colonial. The living room was filled with late afternoon sunlight; thanks to Austin's anal-retentive vacuuming (at the sight of a single stray fuzz, he would vacuum the entire room), the carpet was cream-colored and spotless. The sectional couch looked cozy and inviting. "This is nice. I could nap on that couch right now. Did you grow up here?"

"No. Something to drink? Sugarless Kool-Aid? Diet Coke? Ice water?"

"Do you have any milkshakes? I take mine with extra syrup."

He grimaced. "Ha, ha. Come on, I'll get you some iced tea."

She followed him into the kitchen and watched him pour her a glass. She declined lemon, was denied sugar, and drank it all down in four huge swallows. He watched, amazed. She barely came up to his shoulder, but she guzzled ice tea like she'd been in a desert the last few days.

"More, please. I'm thirsty all the time, these days."

"Because of the—"

"Yes, yes. My folks got me out of the hospital early, but I had to promise to follow all the diabetes rules, no sugar, check my glucose three times a day, blah-blah-blah."

He carefully refilled her glass, then put the pitcher back in the fridge. "Check your glucose?"

She made a face. "I have to prick my finger—yuck—smear a drop of blood on a piece of paper—double yuck—then stick the paper in a machine and, depending on what the machine tells me, give myself a shot or not. It's like some sort of nasty lottery.

"Well, when was the last time you did it?"

She looked appalled. No, more than that—she looked horrified. "I'm not doing it now. In front of you."

"How come? I don't care—I think it's kind of interesting. And if you get used to doing it in front of other people, maybe you won't be so uptight about it all the time."

She looked considering for a moment, then shook her head so hard her hair went into her eyes. "No. I couldn't. I'd be too embarrassed. And it's gross. It's disgusting."

He rolled his eyes. "For God's sake, I've gone deer hunting with my dad every season for six years. One little drop of blood isn't going to bother me."

Her mouth popped open in horror. "You hunt deer?"

"It's just one little drop, but you still can't bring yourself to face it, huh?"

"Little defenseless deer?"

"Because you're a chicken. A red-haired, spoiled chicken."

"Cute deer who never hurt you at all?"

"I only shoot the ugly ones."

"You're horrible!"

He tucked his thumbs into his armpits and began flapping his arms. "Bok-bok-bawwwwwwwwwk!"

"Deer killer!" she shouted over his clucking.

They glared at each other across the kitchen tile for a moment, when Austin had a fantastic idea. In the comics you always saw a light bulb go off over the character's head, and in this instance it really did seem like a flash of light, it was that sudden and illuminating.

"I'll make a deal with you. I'll skip the hunting trip this season, if you check your glucose right now."

She snorted. "That's the most ridiculous thing I ever—"

He pointed his finger at the fridge, pretending to look down an imaginary sight. "Blam! Ka-blam, blah-blam-blam! Look, Dad, I bagged Bambi!"

"All right! God, I can't believe you. . . where's my bag?"

She'd left her purse by the door, and went to get it, grumbling all the way. "As if this wasn't enough of a pain in my butt, I had to get a new purse, one big enough to hold the IDS Tower."

Still grumbling, she sat down on the couch and opened her purse, which was only a little bigger than her head. Austin thought about pointing that out, but kept silent. Instead, he sat down beside her.

He supposed in five years, she would do these things with neat efficiency, but now she was a little clumsy. She fumbled for a small box, and a tube that looked like it might hold toothpicks. Then she took out a light blue plastic wand, pulled at it, and then exposed a tiny baby needle, the point no bigger than a pen point.

"Aww, it's so cute!"

"Shut up, please," she said, sighing.

"Sorry."

"I don't see why you have to make fun of this. I really don't."

"Quit stalling," he said, not unkindly.

She opened his mouth to retort, then shrugged and looked at her hand. "God, I hate this. First I stick my finger."

She held the blue wand against her first finger and just sat

there for a long moment.

"What's the problem?" he asked.

"The problem is that I hate this part. Didn't you ever get your finger stuck at the doctor's?"

"Yeah."

"Didn't it hurt like anything?"

"Yeah. But the doctor usually just went ahead and did it, instead of talking about it for ten minutes."

She scowled. "Now imagine the doctor told you to stick the needle in yourself. Could you do it so easily?" She looked triumphant at his abashed silence, then closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

The silence stretched out. "Anytime, Yvonne."

Her eyes flew open. "Look, I agreed to do this in front of you, but I did not agree to you bugging me every second. I'm still new to this, okay? I'm still—"

"Okay, okay. You win." He held up his hands. "Continue at your own speed. I won't say another word."

She settled herself again, then closed her eyes and muttered, practically whispered, "Eeny meeney miney moe..."

Oh, boy, Austin thought.

". . . once I do this, then I can go. . ." She cracked one eye open to see if he was laughing at her. Austin, knowing his laughter would give her the perfect excuse to put everything away and flounce out, thought of dead puppies, flunking every subject this quarter, his mother. Anything to keep from laughing. It must have worked; she saw his face was a stone, and continued. Nerving herself, she pressed the little button at the top of the blue plastic thing—it really was like a pen—and flinched.

"I hate this!"

But she was already opening the tube that he thought might hold toothpicks.

"Damn, I should have opened this before I stuck myself."

"I'll get it for you. Don't bleed on the carpet, I already vacuumed twice this week." He popped the top off and saw it contained several tiny strips of paper.

Yvonne reached over, plucked one out, and stuck her bleeding finger on it. "Isn't this the most irritating thing? Imagine having to do this three times a day for the next seventy years."

"You're gonna build up some callus on that finger."

Startled, she laughed so hard at that he had to grab the strip away from her, before she accidentally crumpled it.

"Now I remembered why I came over. You make me laugh. Sometimes. Mostly you bug me."

"Is that why? Or were you just sick of being cooped up in the hospital?"

"Well, I was. Do you know, my parents said if I wanted to go over to any of my friends' houses, I had to go to yours?"

"How come?"

"They've got this nutty idea that you're a good influence on me."

"And they've never even met me! For all they know, I could be the next Marilyn Manson."

"Tell me about it. They have no idea you biked all the way down to Jorenby General so you could smooch me."

"Did not."

"Did so."

He grinned at her, remembering that kiss. It had been a nice one, all right. An experience he definitely wouldn't mind repeating.

"What next, Dr. Frankenstein?"

Dr. Frankenstein was frowning in concentration. "Next I stick the tab into this little jobbie here. . ."

She opened a small box and took out a metal thing that looked a lot like one of the shuttlecraft in a Deep Space Nine episode. She slid the bloody paper into it and waited.

"Do I smell something burning?"

She ignored him and, after a moment, took the paper out, looked at it, then looked at the little booklet that came with the reader. Or, as Austin planned to refer to it, the Shuttlecraft Galileo.

"Well?" he asked. "What's your fortune say?"

"I'm in good shape for now. No shot yet." She smiled, relieved.

"Well, great. Was that such a chore?"

"I don't see you volunteering to do it."

He thought about that for a moment while she put her toys away. "I know I make fun of how you're dealing with this. And the truth is, I don't know how I'd handle it if it was me. But you're smart, you can do this. And wouldn't you rather have a nice life outside the hospital, without ice cream, than ignore the doctors and your parents and your own body, and eat whatever you want and be sick all the time?"

"I already decided that was a bad idea," she said crossly, stuffing the shuttlecraft back in her purse.

"Yeah, but it took a hospital stay to wake you up. Why can't you just be grateful for all the good stuff you still have?"

She looked down at her lap and didn't answer him. He nudged her knee with his own.

"Hellooooooo? You in there? Thinking deep thoughts?"

She looked up at him at last. Her eyes were very big and very scared. "Are we friends, Austin?"

"Friends who will kiss sometimes?"

"Uh. . . sure."

"Then friends we are," he said grandly. He dramatically threw his arms around her, squeezing her until she squeaked, then kissed her cheek with a loud smacking sound. "Best friends!"

She was struggling against him, but not very hard, and giggling.

"Get your hands off me, you degenerate. Thanks for not taking this seriously, by the way."

"Sure we're friends. Kind of weird, since we didn't even know each other two weeks ago. But I think it's safe to say we've been through a few things together."

"You tackled me barely five minutes after we'd met."

"Well, you were being an idiot."

"Let's get back on track, all right? We're friends and I'm glad. . . I guess. . ."

"Why, thank you. Thank you very much!"

"But you're the only one I can talk to about this. And even with you, sometimes I feel funny."

He leered. And hated himself for it. But the more serious things got, the nuttier he acted. He couldn't help it, like he couldn't help going down to the kitchen at two a.m. and wolfing down last night's leftovers. But because he couldn't tell her this, couldn't tell her serious moments between friends did more than make him nervous, they terrified him, he leered instead and said, wiggling his eyebrows, "You feel funny cuz it's hormones, baby."

"Will you be serious? I'm saying I can't deal with this because I can't talk about it. Can you imagine me bringing this up on a trip to the mall? "Say Heather, Shawna, Tammi—I've got juvenile diabetes, so I'll just duck into the ladies' and jam a needle in my arm while you shop. See you in the Juniors section!"

"Shawna?"

"Are you listening to me?"

"What the hell kind of name is Shawna? And why would you care what a Shawna thinks?"

I care what a lot of people think. Unlike some people, I have a reputation to consider."

"Oh, please."

"Well, I do."

"You think your shallow friends will drop you because of

this? Why? You're still beautiful and rich. That's pretty much all they require, I'm sure," he said sarcastically.

"You don't understand the slippery slope of popularity."

"That's not all I don't understand."

"It's bad enough that I'm really smart. That's almost enough to keep a person from being popular."

He snorted. "Yeah, that whole 'functioning brain' thing is a real turn-off."

"I just don't want to lose the things I've worked for. I think I figured if I ignored it, I wouldn't have to face it, think about how I was going to deal with it." She sighed. "But all that got me was a quick trip to the emergency room. I have to face it. . . and I hate it. . . and it's not fair! Jeez, I never even liked ice cream all that much, but now that I can't have it, it's all I want! I never did anything to deserve this! Why should I get sick?"

She burst into furious tears, and he wasn't exactly surprised. He figured these particular tears had been a long time coming. They weren't sad tears, or ow-I-hurt-myself tears. They were I'm-pissed-why'd-this-have-to-happen-to-me tears, and they were scalding in their intensity.

He did the only thing he could think of. Put his arms around her and held her while she sobbed.

After a while she quit crying and snuggled against his chest, occasionally hiccuping softly. She seemed content to stay where she was, and he was happy enough to have her there. He badly wanted to kiss her, so much so that his hands shook with it, but made himself stick to holding her. In the movies, the suave hero would have smooched the heroine in a nanosecond. In real life, he had the vague idea heroes didn't smooch girls when they were upset and just looking for comfort. So he held her, and clenched his fists to stop their trembling, and that's how his father found them, twenty minutes later.

Chapter Eight

He drove her home, over her protests. She wanted "the driver" to pick her up, said it would be no trouble. He disagreed—it sounded like plenty of trouble to the driver. Besides, he wasn't quite ready for the evening to be over. So

he gallantly escorted her to his battered Ford Taurus (once dark green, now the color of moldy pea soup) and started the trip to her house.

"Your dad's nice. He looks just like you!" she marveled. "If you had salt and pepper hair, instead of black."

The engine caught on the fourth try, and he gratefully pulled out of his driveway. "Yeah. Mom used to call us her twins. He's a good guy. All you hear these days are about kids who fight with their parents, run away, take 'em to court. . . you know?"

"Sure. Didn't anyone tell you? It's the millennium, so we're all enlightened. Also, any sort of emotional problems we have are our parents fault, everyone knows that." She sounded scornful, and he grinned.

"Yeah, right. Anyway, I never got that. I always got along great with my parents. Especially since. . ."

He paused, then decided he wasn't quite ready to go into that with her now. "He works hard. I try not to be a pain in his ass, you know?"

"Amazing. What can I do to get the same consideration?"

"Check your glucose three times a day," he said promptly. "Nix the sweets. Eat sensibly. Live forever."

She smiled a little at that last. "A life without French Silk Pie is no life for me."

He let that pass. "When's your next appointment? Or, to put it another way, our next date?"

"Yes, this is some odd relationship we've got going. Day after tomorrow."

"Dr. Freeborg's office?"

"Yes. They did a lot of tests in the hospital and he's going to talk to me about them." Her mouth thinned with displeasure. "Remind me to bring something to read."

"Oh, now don't start. I'm planning on paying attention, even if you don't."

"Of course. That's why I keep you around."

He didn't know what to say to that, and in the end didn't say anything.

"What do you think of Dr. Freeborg?" she asked after a long silence.

"He's cool. Weird, but cool."

"Oh, he's a strange one, I agree with you on that. But at least I don't feel like he's patronizing me when I'm in his office. He puts on a good show—it's almost like he cares."

"He does care, dork."

"I don't think so, not really," she said seriously. "He hardly even knows me. I'm just a patient in his file list."

"What, somebody's got to know you for years and years to like you?"

She shrugged and didn't comment.

"How does that explain me, then?"

"That's exactly what I've been trying to figure out. It must be because I'm pretty."

They were at a stop light, so he sighed and rested his head on the steering wheel. "Oh, Lord, here we go."

"Well, you've said yourself sometimes you'd like to strangle me. So it must be my looks."

He was having trouble believing they were having this conversation. "That's some great modesty you've got going there."

"It's stupid to pretend I'm not pretty, all right? I'm not saying it's anything—the light's green—I'm proud of or anything I did—I got lucky, I had good genes, God blessed me, whatever." She paused, then went on briskly, "I don't care about my looks either way, so I'm objective about them. I'm just trying to figure out if they're why you like me. Green light."

Irritably, he shifted into first and pulled through the intersection with a jerk that made their seatbelts lock briefly. "Oh, definitely. I'm only in this because you've got skin like milk and super-model hair. The bike ride to the hospital was so I could stare at your milky skin some more. Me watching

you stick your finger was a real turn-on for me. It's your looks, your looks, your looks. They help me put up with the inconvenience of your wit and intelligence and spirit and gobs of money."

There was a very long pause.

"All right," she said quietly. "I may have deserved that."

"Y'think?"

"I'm sorry. It's just. . . like you said, we didn't even know each other two weeks ago. Red light. And now you're being nice to me, like you like me or something, and I can't see what you're getting out of this. It makes me nervous. Red light!"

He jammed on the brakes. "I saw it, calm down. FYI, you're mom's slipping me a hundred bucks a week."

"She is not! She said you wouldn't take money."

"Kidding. I was only kidding. And by the way, are we ever going to get to your house? Which state do you live in?"

"It's just up ahead. Turn left by the lions. After the light changes!" she added hastily.

"Ah, yes. The two life-size statues flanking each side of your driveway. Oh, this is going to be a peach, I can tell."

"I can't help it if my parents are rich."

"Yeah, but couldn't you at least have done something about the lions?"

"They came with the house," she said, and giggled.

Chapter Nine

Austin dropped Yvonne off at the mansion and went home himself. With typical stubbornness, Yvonne had gotten irritated when he'd called it a mansion. She said just because a house had eight bedrooms, five bathrooms, and two kitchens, didn't mean it wasn't a home like anyone else's. He invited her back to his place to count bedrooms and kitchens sometime, to which, of course, she'd said nothing. Just glared. But she waved when he pulled away; that was something.

His father was waiting for him when he got home, which wasn't at all surprising. The poor guy had walked in on him and Yvonne, and probably had a few questions. So, instead of heading for the kitchen to see if there was a roast turkey lying around, he tossed his keys on the end table and plopped down on the couch next to his dad's chair.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hi, kiddo. Your girlfriend get home okay?"

Time to nip this in the bud, Austin figured. "She's not my girlfriend, Dad. But we did establish tonight that we're friends who like to kiss."

"Well, I'm happy for you." His dad put Redbook aside—his mom had subscribed, and after mom's accident he never got around to canceling her subscription. "Want to talk about it?"

Austin smiled. He could smell a son/father chat a mile off. "Am I allowed to say no?"

"Of course. Your private life is none of my damned business, as long as you're not breaking the law. Or getting someone into trouble."

Austin nodded. His father was a little weird that way. He never pushed. If a guy didn't want to talk about something, he didn't have to. It had been that way even before what happened to Mom.

Trouble was, when Austin really did want to talk about something, he practically had to drag his dad into the conversation. Luckily, this was not one of those times.

"Thanks, Dad, I appreciate that. But I meant to tell you about Yvonne a couple weeks ago. When we first met."

"Is she the girl from the hospital?"

"How'd you know that?"

"Her mom called to get your social security number. Seems she wanted to pay you for spending time with her daughter."

"What?"

"I made a mental note to talk to you about that," his father added wryly.

"I guess so. God, no wonder Yvonne's so insecure. . . her own mother keeps trying to buy friends for her."

The whole story came out. Meeting Yvonne in the hospital. Getting thrown out. That weird conversation with her mom. Going to Dr. Freeborg's office. Going to the hospital again. And tonight.

"Sounds like you really like this girl."

"Sometimes I do," Austin admitted. "Sometimes I think she's the greatest girl I've ever known. Other times I fantasize about smothering her. Repeatedly."

His dad grinned. "Sounds about the way I felt when I met your mother. God, that woman could drive me crazy. But she was the finest person who ever lived...don't you ever forget that, Austin."

"I won't." He wouldn't.

His dad went into the kitchen, and Austin followed. Dad grabbed a Coke, tossed it to him, then grabbed one for himself. "Do you think Yvonne will be able to get a handle on her diabetes, or will it always be the other way around?"

Austin shrugged. "I don't know. Tonight she seemed like she was going to follow the rules. Tomorrow. . . with her, who knows?"

"However it works out, I want you to know I'm really proud of you. A lot of boys your age can only think of one thing when it comes to girls—"

Austin, in mid-swig, nearly choked. "Aw, Dad, jeez, don't talk about that stuff."

"I know that sex isn't easy to talk about with a parent—"

"Gross, stop it!"

"—especially your own parent—"

"Dad. I'm begging you. No more. When I have any questions about birds and bees, I'll call you, I swear to God. Okay?"

"Just so you know I'm always willing to listen," his father continued, unperturbed. "I know my hours are long since your mother. . . ah. . . since the accident. I'm trying to help us

make it on one income, when before there were two. So I have to put in the hours, but that doesn't mean you don't come first. It does mean I'd want to listen any time you want to talk."

"I know, Dad. And I don't care about the hours you work, as long as you don't mind."

His father sighed. "Well, it's not how I pictured your teenage years, but sometimes shit happens that we can't help."

"Amen, brother."

They clinked Coke cans, and each took a big swig. His dad stifled a belch against the back of his hand and continued. "Anyway, I got a little off track, but I wanted to tell you again that I think this is a great thing you're doing. And I get the feeling you like Yvonne on her own merits." He paused, seemed to be finished, then reluctantly continued. "But I have to ask, Austin. Are you getting involved with this girl because of what happened to your mother?"

Austin set his Coke down hard enough to cause brown fizz to surge out of the can. "No. No! This has nothing to do with Mom," he insisted, honestly amazed at the conclusion his father had drawn. "The two situations are totally different."

His dad raised his eyebrows and handed Austin a paper towel. "If you say so. But there's no shame in reaching out to someone else, especially if it helps you deal with your own pain."

"Dad, come on. That's enough. I really don't want to go down this road tonight, okay?"

"Okay. But you'll have to go down it someday, son. Hiding from the truth can only hurt you."

"Yes, and I must use the Force to defeat Darth Vader. . . come on, Dad, this is getting a little on the heavy side."

His dad shook his head. "God, you're just like your mother. No serious stuff, please, there's fun to be had."

"Well. There is."

Dad rolled his eyes. "Go to bed."

"But first, a small snack..."

"God, I just went grocery shopping! What are you, part termite?"

"That's not a nice way to talk about your only son. And we're out of milk."

"Again?" his dad yelled, and pretended to bop him with the Coke can. Austin laughed and dodged away, relieved they were off their previous, much more horrid topic of conversation.

Chapter Ten

The talk with his father had left Austin feeling equal parts mad and sad. Mad because why did they have to talk about it anyway? What happened to his mom was done, over, and all the touchy-feely stuff in the world wasn't going to bring her back.

Sad because, even though it had been almost a year since it happened, he still felt like crying when he thought about his mother.

So in a way he was glad it was time to take Yvonne to see Dr. Freeborg. Not only for her sake. For his—he needed the distraction.

They agreed to meet in the lobby of Freeborg's office. Yvonne's mom had called him the night before to thank him especially—this was the first time Yvonne had kept two doctor's appointments in a row. Her parents were thrilled because she seemed to be making an effort to learn about her illness and keep herself well.

Austin appreciated the thought, but it was still a weird conversation. For one thing, Yvonne's mother still called him every "A" name except the right one, no matter how many times he corrected her. For another—

"Hello, earth to Austin! The receptionist called me. We're up."

"Sorry. Just thinking about something else."

"When you're with me I have to insist you concentrate only on me."

She didn't smile when she said it, but her eyes were

sparkling. He was pretty sure she was kidding.

Dr. Freeborg was waiting for them, missing a white coat as usual. Wonder of wonders, he was holding a stethoscope. Not wearing it around his neck or slung casually around his shoulders like doctors did on TV. No, Dr. Freeborg just hung onto the thing awkwardly, almost like he didn't know what to do with it.

"Can I get you kids anything? A 401(k)? Some stock tips?"

"Unless you've got a cure for diabetes in one of your pockets, there's not much you can give me that I want."

Dr. Freeborg reached into his back pocket and pulled out a lollipop. "Are you suuuuuuuure?"

Yvonne looked disgusted. Austin took the pop, unwrapped it, and stuck it in his mouth. "I'm not one of your terrified kindergartners here for a flu shot, Doctor."

"Sorry. When my pediatrics patients get older, sometimes I have trouble getting a handle on my bedside manner."

"Hey, thith ith a good thucker!"

Dr. Freeborg looked smug.

"Not t'tell you y'r job 'r anything—"

"I can hardly understand you with that thing in your mouth," Yvonne said, exasperated.

"Can too. Thtop making trouble. And howcum y'r offering candy to a diabetic, Doc?"

"Because my mom made me stop offering butter to people with high cholesterol."

"That's mean," Yvonne said, shocked.

"Okay, bad joke. That's a sugarless lollipop."

"Thith ith thugerless?" Austin gurgled. It was tart, tangy, delicious! It tasted like a cross between raspberries and strawberries and was a jolly bright red. He could have gobbled a dozen.

Yvonne stomped her foot. "Will you take that thing out of your—"

"As I've been trying to explain to Yvonne," Dr. Freeborg said smugly, "there are plenty of things she can still eat. And if she wants candy, she can have it."

"Sugarless candy?" she sneered. "Why not offer me coffee without coffee beans?"

Austin crunched the remainder of the lollypop. "You're too young to drink coffee," he said with his mouth full.

"Says who?"

He shrugged. "TV."

"Look, Dr. Freeborg, I appreciate these little 'when life hands you lemons, make lemonade' pep talks, but can we just talk about my test results?"

Without removing the lollipop from his mouth, Austin smacked her on the back of the head, Three Stooges style. Yvonne's hands flew to the back of her head. "Hey!"

"That's for being such a brat. He's being a nice guy and trying to help you. If you don't want the help, fine, but don't be a jerk about it."

"You can wait outside."

"A) If I did that, one of those kids out there would probably sneeze on me—could a few more of your patients have head colds, Doc? And B) I'm not going, and you're not big enough to make me."

"No, but Dr. Freeborg is."

"Ha! Him and what army?"

"Excuse me, kids, but have you noticed I'm still in the room?"

"Sorry."

"I'm sorry, too, Dr. Freeborg. Austin brings out the worst in me." She paused. "And he was right. I was rude. I . . . I apologize. And if you touch your ear again to make sure you're hearing right, Austin Opitz, I will make Dr. Freeborg kick you out."

"Yeah!" Freeborg said. "So there."

Austin shrugged, but inwardly he was pleased. An apology out of Yvonne! What was next? World peace? Pulling a B in Algebra? "So they make all kinds of sugarless stuff, that's what you were saying?"

"Please don't get him started," Yvonne begged. "Yes, they make sugarless stuff. Yes, there are plenty of sugarless cookbooks that our cook could buy."

"Or, you could cook yourself," Austin pointed out.

She laughed. "Oh, right, that's a good one! Me! In the kitchen!"

"Hilarious," Austin said dryly.

"But I can't help wanting what I want. And I want French Silk Pie, which is my favorite dessert in the whole wide world, and virtually impossible to make without sugar. Case closed."

"So says she, so say we all. Roll up your sleeve, please. I've got a blood pressure cuff around here somewhere. . . ."

"My tests, doctor. What did my tests say?"

"Besides that she's an insufferable snob with brilliant blue eyes, that is. Got anymore of those suckers?"

"Top drawer to your right. I like 'em, myself."

"Hey, that's right!" Austin opened the wrong drawer, saw what looked like a thousand rubber gloves, and shut the drawer with a grimace. The next one had what he wanted—he grabbed a green lollipop. "You're diabetic, too. What stuff do you eat?"

Yvonne groaned. "Fool! You've played right into his hands!"

As Dr. Freeborg inflated the blood pressure cuff around Yvonne's arm, Austin couldn't help but comment, "Wow, I'm actually going to see you use medical instruments and everything. Wish I'd brought my camera."

"I know what you mean," Yvonne added. "It's a rare and wonderful thing."

"Pipe down, you two. I'm trying to find out if Yvonne's got a pulse."

Yvonne giggled at Dr. Freeborg's mock concentration.

"Seriously," Austin persisted, "what stuff do you eat, Doc?"

"Tofu, raw carrots," Yvonne said, "and for fun, the occasional sugarless lollipop.

"You've been going through my garbage again," Dr. Freeborg said mildly. "And I happen to love raw carrots. Deep breath, please."

Suddenly uncomfortable—Yvonne was getting a doctor's exam, after all—Austin stammered, "Uh, should I leave?"

"Not until I say so," Yvonne said. "Don't you dare leave me in this horrible place by myself."

"Thanks," Freeborg said wryly. "Don't fret, Austin. I'm just getting her vitals for the chart. Won't take another minute. That's assuming I can find my watch." He paused, listening. "And to answer your question, Austin, I eat what I'm hungry for. Within reason. Deep breath, please. No, not you, Austin."

Dr. Freeborg released the blood pressure cuff and continued. "I'm a little luckier than some diabetics. I can indulge in pie or cake now and again, provided I keep a sharp eye on my glucose. Over the years I've gotten to know my body pretty well."

"Sure," Yvonne said bitterly. "Easy for you, you're a doctor—"

"Open wide for the thermometer, dear." Dr. Freeborg popped the thermometer in her mouth before she could finish. "Now where was I before my patient interrupted me for the millionth time? Oh, right, glucose. Well, if I pay attention to my body's signals, I can sometimes go for days without sticking my finger. I know how I feel when I need to lay off the sweets. And I know how I feel when it's time to stop exercising and take it easy. It takes time, but it can be done. And provided Yvonne's diabetes doesn't worsen—"

"Gmmph! Mmm-ffimmmm-mmphff!"

"—there's no reason she can't do the same."

"But that's great!" Austin said excitedly. "Yvonne, you know you hate sticking yourself. If you can learn to listen to your body, you won't have to be a slave to those little strips of confetti you carry around in a toothpick box."

Dr. Freeborg removed the thermometer from her mouth, and she didn't hesitate to stomp his excitement to smithereens. "It's not a toothpick box. And what Dr. Freeborg is talking about takes years. Plus, he's got knowledge I don't have. Years and years of school, for God's sake!"

"So? You don't think you can learn anything he can? He's having trouble reading a thermometer, for God's sake!"

"I am not. It says right here her temperatures a hundred thirty seven."

"What?"

"See?" Austin said triumphantly. "You could learn. You could do it."

"My mistake," Freeborg said, squinting. "Ninety-eight point six. And Austin's right."

"You're not as dorky as you pretend, are you, doctor?" Yvonne asked, her eyes twinkling at him.

"I am, so. Now, about your rest results. . . I know I left your chart here somewhere—"

"It's behind you. On the counter," she added with a sigh.

"Right. Here we go." Dr. Freeborg sat on the wheeled stool, braced his feet, and pushed off. He rolled briskly across the room, planted his feet on the far wall (which, Austin just now noticed, had several footprints on it), pushed off, and caroomed back across the room. "Test results," he said, rolling to a stop. "Well, you're definitely female."

"Ha, ha. I have laughed. Can we get on with it, please?"

"Well, your little stunt didn't cause any lasting damage."

"What stunt?" Austin asked, wondering if he should grab another sugarless lollipop.

"Don't answer that," Yvonne sighed, "he'll just yell at me."

"My patient has asked that I not tell you she didn't check her glucose level for a couple days, had some ice cream, then jumped on the Stairmaster for about an hour.

"Oh. I already yelled at her about that."

"Thanks for not telling him, though," Yvonne added sarcastically.

"Anyway, you didn't do further harm to yourself, which is great. And everything else looks great, you passed all your tests with room to spare."

"Everything else looks great? You mean, besides having a life-threatening, eventually-crippling, chronic disease?"

"You're so half-empty."

"What? You'd better not be talking about my head."

"You heard me. Some people think the glass is half empty, others think it's half full. You're definitely a half-empty girl."

"Uh-huh. What glass might this be, Austin?" she asked.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"Does this glass ever. . . ah. . . tell you things?" she asked with saccharine concern.

"Cut it out!" he yelled. "I know you know what I mean."

"I know it's pretty easy to be judgmental on your side of the fence."

"Jeez, why drag me along if you don't want to hear what I'm going to say?"

"Drag you? Like you'd stay away!"

"Ha! I'd—"

"Stop!" Freeborg yelped, waving the chart at them. "My ears are bleeding. Fight later, let's finish here, first."

Neither of them said anything to that, just glared at each other. After a long moment, Dr. Freeborg went on. "Yes, Yvonne, as you said, except for the chronic, life-threatening disease, you're in perfect health."

"Well, goody."

"Also, you're beautiful, smart, and rich," Austin added. "Poor baby!"

"You be quiet," she said coolly.

It was hard to tell, by her tone, if she was pleased or pissed. He decided to back off for a while, just in case.

The silence stretched out as both of them looked at Dr. Freeborg, who was fanning himself with Yvonne's chart. After a good thirty seconds, Yvonne finally broke.

"Well?"

"Oh! When you said be quiet, I thought you were talking to me. What else did you want to know?"

Yvonne sighed and slumped back on the examining table. Dr. Freeborg looked at her innocently.

"How long have I got?"

"Oh, aren't we being just a little melodramatic?" Austin asked, amused.

"I'm just trying to get him back on track," she said defensively.

"Me on track?" Freeborg yelled. Then, "Well, if you take care of yourself, there's no telling how long you've got. On the other hand, a flying monkey could pick you up tomorrow and drop you from a great height. There's no way to know. In other words, you're in the same boat as the rest of us. All you can do is the best you can."

"What about exercise? You said that's why I landed in the hospital last time."

"Ennnnnhh! Thank you for playing, but that's not what I said. And you know it. You got sick because you did all that other stuff and then hopped on ye olde Stairmaster.

"Yeah, Yvonne."

"Oh, hush up."

"Hey, you want to exercise? Great, we want you to. But like everything else, you've got to do it in moderation. Sure, you can't jog thirty miles in one day without a break, but there's plenty of things you can still do."

"Such as?" Yvonne folded her arms across her chest and waited.

Freeborg shrugged. "Skiing. Skating. Walking. Running. Hopping. Jumping. Eating. Cooking. Driving. Falling in love. Falling out of love. Going to school. Para-sailing. Rock-climbing. Talking on the phone for hours. Going to medical school. Fighting with your parents. Scuba-diving. Walking the d—"

"All right. Enough. I get it."

"Just a few suggestions," Freeborg said innocently.

"I suppose you do all those things."

Dr. Freeborg grinned, and Austin realized he was young, for a doctor. Probably not even thirty yet. That was a weird thought, that doctors could be closer to his age than his parents were. "I've been known to."

"How did you take the news?" she asked, honestly curious.

"You mean when I found out I was doomed to a life of sugarless lollipops?" He shrugged, unperturbed. "I guess I'm luckier than most. I was already interested in medicine, so I wanted to find out as much about diabetes as I could. And I was never a fan of sweets. I'm strictly a meat and potatoes man." He paused thoughtfully. "Going vegetarian, now that would be tough. But getting diabetes probably helped me attain my goal of becoming a doctor, faster than if I'd never gotten it."

"Huh," Yvonne said thoughtfully.

"Um. . . Dr. Freeborg, if you don't mind another personal question. . ."

"Fire away. I have no shame."

"What did you mean when you said you were luckier than most?"

"Yvonne and I are both lucky," Freeborg said seriously. "Sixteen million people are walking around right now with diabetes. But only eight million know they've got it."

Austin digested that in silence. Sixteen million! It was a hard number to get his mind around. And half that number was very sick and didn't know it. It was more than a little frightening. "What happens to them?"

"They die," Yvonne said flatly, and shivered.

"Some do. Some just feel awful all the time, and don't know why. Some don't find out they've got it until their vision starts to go, or the start having kidney trouble. Yvonne was thirsty all the time, and her bruises were slow to heal. That tipped us off."

Austin tried to be casual, but he was horrified. "You mean Yvonne could have gone blind or. . . or worse before they figured out what was wrong?"

"Stop making it sound like a narrow escape, Austin."

But she took his hand as she said it, and squeezed gently.

"You are lucky," he said, awed.

"Sometimes I think so."

And she squeezed his hand again.

Chapter Eleven

What with one thing and another, two weeks went by. Yvonne was back at her school, presumably passing the time with her shallow friends, and it was business as usual at Austin's school. Quarterly report cards had come out and he'd managed to haul his sorry D in English up to a not-too-shabby B-minus. This was partly due to Langenfeld's tutoring, and also because Yvonne corrected his grammar every chance she got.

They still met after school to go to her doctor's appointments, but since Yvonne had been "behaving"—i.e. checking her glucose and taking her insulin—the appointments were going to stop. In fact, Dr. Freeborg had given them both party hats and kazoo's on her last visit, and threw confetti on both of them. Yvonne pretended to be disgusted, but Austin—and probably Dr. Freeborg—knew she wasn't.

It was after this last appointment that Austin got his idea. He could handle the part at the book store himself, but for the rest, he needed help. Which was why he and his father were in the kitchen, messy and out of sorts, when he could have been watching Baywatch.

"How many cups of flour?" his dad asked, clearly feeling

harassed.

"I don't know, the book flopped closed. Let me look it up again."

Austin's idea, which his father thought was adorable and Austin himself thought was the worst idea he'd had, ever, was to make Yvonne a sugarless French Silk Pie. This was next to impossible, even with the sugarless cookbook.

He didn't know what had possessed him to try such a crazy thing. He'd never cooked a thing in his life, and his father wasn't exactly the Galloping Gourmet, either. His mother had always. . . .

Austin put that thought out of his mind. "It says here two cups, sifted. Where the heck is the sifter? And why do I have to sift it? Sifted flour looks exactly—exactly—like flour that has never been near a sifter. I swear to God!"

"Easy, pal," his father soothed, swiping at his nose and leaving a smear of butter on his face. Austin would have laughed, except he had butter on his own face. And flour. And sugar. "We'll get it. Don't worry."

"We'll get it, all right," Austin said grimly. "A one-way ticket to the looney bin is what we'll get."

He let go of the book to get the vanilla, and the new, stiff cookbook flopped closed again. Austin bit his tongue, hard, so he wouldn't swear in front of his dad.

"Better put something on that book to hold it open," his dad suggested helpfully.

"Yes. That. . . blasted, darned book keeps closing, and I find it. . . irritating."

His dad laughed. "I guess so. Your face is purple. A few 'damn's' aren't going to cross my eyes, Auss."

"Why, thank you, father. I shall remember that." He picked up the full can of condensed milk (whatever the hell that was) and slammed it down on the open page. Why hadn't he just gone to Marie Callender's and bought a sugarless pie?

Eventually Yvonne showed up, and he found he was more than a little nervous. He and Dad had worked hard, but the pie had come out looking a little funny. Looking a lot funny, frankly. Yvonne had a hired cook at home to tempt her with

all sorts of sugarless goodies. She probably wasn't going to think much of this effort.

Still, he'd gone to the trouble. Damned if wasn't at least going to show it to her. If she hated it, she hated it, but at least he'd followed through.

When the doorbell rang, his dad had already left to go to the store again. Austin met Yvonne at the front door, took her coat, then followed her into the kitchen.

Upon entering, she wrinkled her nose. "Phew! What's burning?"

"Nothing. Anymore. Hungry?"

She patted her stomach, which was perfectly flat. "God, no, I'm stuffed. I couldn't eat another thing if you held a gun to my—what is that smell?"

"Oven cleaner. Listen, I made you something."

He had her attention at once, he saw. She swung around and looked at him, and her eyes got big and hopeful.

"You remembered!"

"Huh?"

"Our anniversary."

"Our what?"

Her eyes were shining and she was smiling, a big sunny smile that warmed him to his toes. "We met exactly a month ago tomorrow. You're early!"

"That's me. Early Austin. Yep. A whole month. Can you believe it?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I can't believe we're still speaking. What did you get me?"

"I didn't get you anything."

Her face fell. She actually looked crushed! He was shocked. He had no idea things like presents and anniversaries and things he might or might not have gotten her were important to her. It was weird. Cool, and a little scary, but weird.

"That's okay," she said quickly. "But why did you say—"

"I made you something."

He crossed the kitchen tile to the fridge, opened it, and withdrew the pie. He set it down in front of her. He'd frosted it with sugarless whipped cream while it was still warm, so the cream was sort of runny, not fluffy like the picture. But it looked edible. In fact, considering the hell he and his father went through to produce the damned thing, he thought it looked pretty good.

"It's French Silk Pie," he said proudly. "I made it myself. My dad helped a little."

He stood there and waited for her praise, her cry of delight, her exuberant thanks. She might hug him. Hell, she might kiss him. Just thinking about the wonderful possibilities put a hopeful smile on his face.

"What are you grinning about, you bastard?"

That wiped the smile off in a hurry. "What?" He was honestly shocked. "What's the matter? Don't you—"

"I thought you were my friend!" she cried. "I thought maybe you were my boyfriend. And you do this! God, I hate you. I wish we'd never met." She plunged her hand into the pie, scooped up a mass, and flung it at him. He flinched back, but not before a generous glob hit him in the eye. He scrubbed his face with his hands and looked up, fully expecting to see her exit furiously.

Instead, she stood there with her hands on her hips, glaring at him. Tears of anger shimmered in her eyes, but didn't fall. "Well?"

He had no idea what to say. None.

"Uh. . . what?"

"Aren't you going to apologize?" she demanded.

He felt his mouth pop open in surprise. He thought he'd been confused before, but now. . . "Apologize."

"For being so cruel."

"Cruel," he repeated dumbly, utterly confounded.

She stomped her foot. "Yes! You're the one who keeps telling me I should take better care of myself. You almost had me believing you. And then you do this."

"Made you a sugarless version of your favorite dessert?"

"That's right, you bastard, made me a—what?"

A glob of French Silk was sliding down his face; he flicked it away and raised his eyebrows at her. He was getting an idea what the problem was. Finally.

"Yes, Yvonne, a sugarless French Silk Pie. Which, by the way, took hours."

She closed her eyes. "Oh, God."

"Precious time I could have spent studying for my chemistry test."

She opened her eyes. "Oh, Austin."

"And what's my thanks? A patented Yvonne temper tantrum and an eyeful of chocolate. Not to mention—"

She flung herself at him. He tried to fend her off, wary of another unprovoked attack, but quit trying when he realized she was kissing him. Kissing him and crying and patting his face and kissing him some more.

Now this was a little more like it.

"You wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful boy!"

"Less wonderfals," he said happily. "More kisses."

Things were getting quite chocolatey—the pie was all over her face, too—when his father walked in. His dad took one look at the mangled pie, at Yvonne smothering his only son with chocolatey kisses, raised his eyebrows, and put down his briefcase.

"So. The pie was a hit?"

Chapter Twelve

"I can't believe you'd think I could be such a jerk."

He was driving her home. It was later that evening, and they both still had chocolate in their hair.

"I said I was sorry. It just never occurred to me that you—"

"Could be thoughtful?"

She gave him a shy shrug. "That came out wrong."

"That's not the only thing."

He was grumbling more for the sake of his pride than anything else; after the first couple of chocolate kisses, he'd stopped being mad. He'd had trouble remembering he'd been mad, frankly.

"I did say I was sorry, Austin," she said contritely. "And I really, really am."

"But you haven't said how utterly delicious the pie was," he said slyly.

In the near-dark, Yvonne winced. Austin, who had been watching for it, wasn't surprised, or mad. She'd been right to wince. Hell, she would have been right to retch. The pie had tasted like chocolate-flavored sawdust, topped with sour cream.

"It was. . . really, it was. . . just. . . really good. I liked it a lot."

He laughed. "You're so cute when you lie through your teeth."

She opened her mouth to deny the charge, then closed it and laughed with him. "I am sorry. I tried to like it."

"Well, Dad and I aren't the best cooks in the world. I'll bet if I gave the book to your cook, though, she could make something yummy."

"You bought a whole book?"

He snored. "Are you kidding? That was the easy part. There's a hundred of them in the cookbook section. Tons of sugarless cookbooks and How To Cook For Diabetics and Diabetics Are People Too and What To Eat If You're A Gorgeous Redheaded Diabetic—"

"Stop! You're making that up."

"You're right. There's no such book as Diabetics Are People Too."

She sighed. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Uh. . . that a rhetorical question?"

She snorted. "Get it out of the gutter, pal."

"Party pooper. Just because you're a diabetic doesn't mean I'm not hoping you'll put out."

"Austin!" She'd practically shrieked his name and then started laughing so hard, she bent forward until her seatbelt locked.

"Just what is so funny?"

"You. Leering at me. It's irritating but flattering."

"Tell the truth," he mock-scolded, then held his breath, waiting for her answer.

"Well." She considered. "Mostly flattering. I hate to break this to you, but I'm in no rush to jettison my virginity."

"Then I guess I'm not, either," he said glumly.

"You mean you haven't. . . err, done that yet?"

He stared at her in amazement. "For God's sake, I'm only sixteen. The closest I've gotten to, to use the technical term, Doing It, has been getting French Silk Pie all over myself while kissing you."

Yvonne turned in her seat so she was fully facing him.

"Really?" she asked with honest curiosity. "I always thought boys were sexually precocious."

"Not this boy," he said ruefully, glad it was dark enough so she couldn't see the color flaming in his cheeks. "And where'd you read that, Teen Beat?"

"Masters and Johnson, actually." She giggled. "My mom bought me a copy and said if I had any questions after I read it, to ask. I could tell she was praying I wouldn't have any questions."

He snickered at the thought. "Well, I might be precocious, I

don't know. But I promised my mom I wouldn't have sex until I was in love and at least seventeen."

"Really? You talk to your mom about sex?"

Too late, Austin realized this was not a subject he wished to explore with Yvonne. Not sex—he didn't mind talking about that so much, even if it was a little embarrassing telling a girl he really liked that he had next to no experience. He did mind talking about his mother.

"Hey," he said breezily, "you almost let me miss your turn."

"Sorry. I thought you knew where I lived. I haven't met your mom yet, what's she like?"

"I have to go."

They pulled up to her house with a sudden screech of brakes. Yvonne looked at him, eyes wide. "I—right now? I was hoping you'd come in for a while."

"Can't," he said shortly. "Thanks for the invite, but I gotta get home. I spent the afternoon baking and I have a lot of homework."

"Well, all right, thanks for the—"

He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek, a quick, dry kiss, the kind she usually got from her grandmother. She was barely out of the car when he pulled away.

Chapter Thirteen

Austin didn't hear much from Yvonne over the next few days, but that wasn't so unusual. They went to different schools and had different responsibilities.

Dr. Freeborg had given him a pocket calendar a few weeks ago, and when Austin saw the next day was special, he began making plans. He left a message with one of Yvonne's housekeepers that he'd really like it if she came over after school on Friday.

He was waiting for her when she knocked on the door.

"It's open!" he yelled, hurrying into the living room.

She stepped in and closed the door behind her, and he was struck by how wary she looked. She glanced at him, then looked around the room, saw the balloons, banner, and cheerful decorations, and her eyes got big.

"Happy Diabetes Awareness Day!" He blew on the noisemaker, and it made a cheerful PHOOO! sound.

"What. . . what's all this?"

"It's Diabetes Awareness Day," he explained patiently. PHOO! "Weren't you listening?"

He ran over to her and pelted her with confetti. She was too astonished to duck.

"You decorated and bought party favors and—"

"Whoops! Almost forgot." He produced another party hat and put it on her. She stood still and let him, too astonished to move. "So! What'd you get me?"

"I. . . nothing."

"That's some holiday spirit you've got there," he teased.

"I thought you were mad at me."

He could not have been more surprised if she had said she thought he had purple hair. "Mad at you? I think you're the cat's meow, you know that. Why'd you think I was mad?"

She was still watching him warily. "Because of the way you were in the car the other day. I thought I'd said something to make you mad."

"Oh. That. Well, you didn't," he said briskly. "I don't even remember what we were talking about."

Still she watched him. "Your mother. We were talking about—"

"You were wrong, I'm not mad. Come see what I bought you—"

"You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Being abrupt and trying to change the subject." She paused,

took a deep breath, and said it. "Austin, where is your mother?"

"She's dead," he answered shortly.

She nodded, as if she'd expected the answer. "I'm sorry, Austin."

"Forget about it. I practically have."

"I'm sure that's not true."

"I don't like to talk about it. I try not to even think about it."

"What. . . how did it happen?"

"I don't want to talk about it." He felt funny. Tight in his chest. But his face and fingers felt cold and pale. He could see she wanted to ask more, and was thinking better of it. Well, good.

"All right. But if you ever do want to talk—"

He waved a hand. "Yes, yes, you'll be there for me, very good."

She jerked back at his tone. "You don't have to be such a snot."

His eyebrows shot up and now he did smile. But it wasn't a nice smile. "Excuse me? The spoiled princess is telling me not to be a snot?"

"I'm not a princess and when you act like a snot, don't be surprised if you're called on it."

"Considering the source," he said silkily, "I'm very surprised."

She decided to let that one pass. She wanted to stay on track, not fight about who was a snot and who was spoiled and who wasn't.

In fact, part of her wondered if perhaps he were being nasty on purpose, to drag the subject away from his mother.

"Look, all I was saying was—"

"I heard it the first time," he said shortly.

"—that if you wanted to talk," she continued doggedly, "I'd

be glad to listen."

"Well, I don't."

"It's just that you've done so many great things for me, I'd really love the chance to help you sometime. Just so you know."

He couldn't believe how nice she was being. So caring, so understanding. The one time he wanted her to be a brat, and she was foiling him by being mature and loving and he was determined to get her off track, once and for all. Later, they could make up. Later, he would treat her like a queen. For now, she was too close. Much too close.

He took a breath. "Well, if I did have deep emotional issues to discuss, you'd be the last person I'd discuss them with."

He couldn't have hurt her more if he'd slapped her. It was like he had slapped her—she stared at him in wounded shock. He thought he'd be relieved to finally distract her. Instead, he was fairly sure he was going to throw up pretty soon. He hadn't felt this horrible since the day of his mother's funeral.

"Why?" she asked, her voice small and wounded. "Why would you say something like that?"

He went for the kill like he'd been born to cruelty, inwardly horrified at himself but going ahead with it anyway. "Oh, please, look at yourself! You threw a six month shit fit when you found out you had to cut your sugar intake."

"It was a little more complicated than—"

"Actually landed yourself in the hospital, your temper tantrum was so drawn-out. And God help anyone who tried to help you. Your parents tried, and you closed up. Then they found Dr. Freeborg, who you have to admit is a great guy, and you blew him off. Hell, you even pushed me away the first couple weeks. You didn't want to have anything to do with me, and all because I committed the great sin of wanting to help you."

He stopped. There. Now they'd fight about them, and he wouldn't have to talk about Mom. Wouldn't have to think about her. But oh, what it had cost! If Yvonne cried, if she so much as sniffled, he would fall at her feet and beg forgiveness, right now. He'd promise to do anything, anything at all, as long as she forgave him.

She opened her mouth to let him have it, to deny everything and then make a few truthful observations on his character, and he waited for it with cold dread. Then came a look, a slow dawning expression that flitted across her features, and he saw with sick certainty that it hadn't worked, he'd been mean to her for nothing, she wasn't going to be distracted from the issue.

"What does all this have to do with your dead mother?"

Her choice of words had been deliberately cold; he flinched. She seemed to take no pleasure in it, only looked at him sorrowfully.

"I think you're getting me mixed up with yourself," she went on quietly. "You're the one who doesn't like to deal with things. You're the one who keeps pushing people away."

"You don't know what you're talking about," he snapped, rattled.

"No? Have you ever once mentioned your mom before the other night in the car? And your dad's so great, I know he must have tried to talk to you about it. You're pretending she never existed."

"That's not true!"

"It is true!" she shouted back. "I'm standing in your living room and I don't see a single picture of the lady! Just your school pictures and your Dad's Salesman of the Year plaque. No family portraits. No pictures of your mom doing anything."

"Just because your mom has a life-size portrait of herself in your entryway."

"At least I'm not trying to pretend she never existed."

He felt dizzy and knew it was because the blood was draining from his face; he was going white with anger, and welcomed it. Yvonne, amazingly, stood her ground. She even took a step forward. They would have been nose to nose, if she wasn't so darn short.

"How dare you!" he roared. "You don't know anything about my mother, or about how I feel about her! Well, listen up—my mother was the sweetest kindest prettiest nicest most wonderful woman who ever lived. She's worth ten of that idiot who's raising you."

When she spoke, her tone was quiet and very calm. "You have a funny way of showing those feelings."

Austin's fury departed as quickly as it had come. His shoulders slumped and he looked haunted. Haunted and defeated. "Please, Yvonne, I don't want to talk about it. Can't we talk about something else?"

Wordlessly, she shook her head. "If you have any feelings for me. . . if you care about me at all, you'll tell me what happened."

"Why?" he asked bitterly. "You want to hear all the juicy details? About how my dad had to identify her by the scar on her knee, because her face had been ripped up so bad by all the flying glass?"

Yvonne's face crumpled a bit at that, but she held firm. "I don't want to hear any of that. I don't want to hear how your mama suffered and I don't want to hear how you're still suffering." She paused. "It's breaking my heart. I never dreamed I could feel so badly for someone outside my family. But you need to tell it, I think. And I'm here for you, Austin. Always."

He burst into tears. She was shocked—she hadn't seen a boy cry since elementary school. Instinctively she put her arms around him, and he sagged into her, sobbing on her shoulder.

When he finally stopped crying, he saw she had steered them to the couch. He wiped his face with his shirttail and looked at her. Her own eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry," he said dully. "Sorry I was so mean. Sorry I—"

"Tell."

"It was a car accident. In April."

"Barely six months ago!" she cried.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. "It—she was driving home from the store. She'd asked me to come with but I didn't want to go. I didn't want to go on a boring shopping trip with my mom, I wanted to go play hoops with some friends. And sometimes I wonder—I wonder how things might have been different if I'd—"

"You'd be dead too!" she cried, freshly horrified. "That's how

things might have been different. Oh, Austin, you might have died, too, and I might never have known you!"

They thought about that for a long moment, equally horrified. Then he reluctantly picked up the story again.

"Anyway, she—this other car plowed into her. She had her seatbelt on, but it didn't save her. The car—it was a big Chrysler, they're like boats on wheels, real heavy, and it—it—"

His breath started to hitch and she quickly laid her hand on his arm. "It's okay," she murmured, though it certainly wasn't. "Take your time."

"It smashed right into the driver's side. She never saw it coming, I think, until it was too late. I think—the doctors said—I think maybe she was killed instantly. Her body was—was—crushed. Even if she'd been hit in the hospital parking lot, she'd have died."

"Oh, my dear, that's so horrible, I—"

"And the asshole who hit her!"

He made a fist and smashed it down on his thigh. Yvonne winced in sympathy; he'd have an awful bruise there tomorrow.

"He was drunk?"

"He was off his medication," Austin said savagely. "He was an old guy, he had grandkids. And a heart condition. And he didn't like to take his pills. His wife told us at the hospital that she was always bugging him to take the pills, but he didn't like being dependent on medication."

Yvonne felt herself go cold inside. She knew where this was going. She was so ashamed she could hardly bear to look at him. And still he went on.

"He'd blow off doctor's appointments and had lots of fat greasy burgers and didn't take care of his heart and didn't take his pills. And he had a heart attack behind the wheel and his car plowed into my mom's."

There was a long silence, and then Yvonne said tentatively, "That's why—that's why you got so involved with my health. So quickly. I always wondered. Right from the beginning you were after me to improve my attitude and do everything the

doctors said." She paused, then said quietly, "How you must have hated me."

He looked up, startled, even shocked. "No. No! I never—I was kind of pissy at first, but any parallels between your situation and what happened to my mom was—"

"You do see it, don't you? That's why you found me. You didn't even know you were looking. But you found me, and helped me."

He shook his head. "I don't think—I didn't want you to maybe kill someone else. Not if I could help it. I kept—keep—thinking, if only that asshole had listened to someone. If only he hadn't been so selfish. . . ."

Yvonne groaned. "I feel awful."

Austin shrugged helplessly. "I just wanted to help you realize there's worse things than being insulin dependent. Lots worse. That was all I wanted. I didn't count on falling in love with you."

Now she was crying, and he was trying to comfort her, and crying himself. She kept apologizing and he kept telling her not to be silly and it was some time before they managed to stop the tears.

This time, Austin felt clean. Re-born, almost. He realized that the lump of hate and rage he'd been carrying around for seven months had largely disappeared. He didn't know if it went because he had told Yvonne what had happened, because they had cried together, or if his inner self had finally gotten sick of it, and booted the rage right the hell out.

It didn't matter. He was glad to be rid of it.

"I'm so sorry about your mama," Yvonne said, taking a shuddering breath and wiping her face with the backs of her hands. "But I'm glad you told me."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Well, after you dragged it out of me. . . ." He sobered. "I'm glad I am, too. I guess. . . I guess I was a jerk, earlier."

"You were deliberately mean." She paused and he waited, downcast. "Almost as bad as when you made me eat that awful French Silk Pie."

He grinned. "Careful, miss. I've still got the recipe around

here somewhere."

She laughed and kissed him.

Chapter Fourteen

They had been parked outside the cemetery for the better part of ten minutes. Yvonne kept opening her mouth to ask if they were ever going inside, then closing it. It was clear Austin didn't want to be here. It was equally clear that he was determined to go in.

So he sat and waged an internal battle, and she sat and wondered who would win.

Four minutes later, by her watch, he released his seat belt and opened the car door.

"Come on, gorgeous," he sighed. "Let's get this over with."

They crossed the street and entered the gates of the cemetery holding hands. Austin looked around, and nodded. "Pretty nice place. For a boneyard."

"You—haven't you been here before?" she asked timidly.

"No."

She thought about that for a moment, wanted to ask, decided not to, then couldn't resist.

"Didn't you—uh—go to the funeral?"

"No."

That seemed to be all he was willing to say. Again, she argued with herself. Again, her curiosity won out. "You were too sad?"

"I was too pissed. Furious at the world, the asshole driver, my dad for asking my mom to go to the store and get him Double Stuff Oreos. At myself for not going with her."

"No. No, Austin, we talked about that, you might have been killed, too."

"Maybe. And maybe I would have seen the asshole coming and could have yelled, or grabbed the wheel or something."

"Maybe. Or you wouldn't have noticed a thing, and think of your poor father! Robbed of his wife and his son." She shivered.

Austin looked startled, as if he'd never considered it that way. Then he nodded. "Anyway, the funeral—I was too angry, and too—I couldn't bear seeing my mom in a box. My mom loved everything about being outside, even in the rain—if she was outside, she was happy. And the thought of her being shut into a box, that box being stuck in the ground, and six feet of dirt shoveled over it—"

Yvonne shivered again. "Stop, please, or I'll start crying again."

"Sorry. Anyway, I didn't go. But Dad told me where her plot was, if I ever wanted to come here. I never have, until now."

"Austin, I appreciate being asked to come with you—you'll never know what it means to me, that you'd want me here today. But I think this should be a very private thing."

"And I think if you weren't here with me, I wouldn't have the guts to do this. If you leave, I'm out of here, too." He looked at her with vulnerable eyes. "I can't do it by myself."

"I know that feeling," she said, and smiled ruefully.

They walked for a while, and Austin found the plot without much difficulty. Mrs. Opitz's headstone was small, a rosy color with no fancy angels or streamers or carvings. Just a simple headstone, engraved: "Sara Opitz. Wife. Mother. Friend. 'Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.'"

Austin stood with his hands in his pockets and simply looked at the headstone for a long time. When he spoke, his voice was very low, so low Yvonne would have missed it if the wind had been blowing. "Hi, Mom. It's me. I'm sorry it took so long for me to come."

He turned to Yvonne and she saw how bright his eyes were, how he blinked fast to keep the tears from falling. "It's wrong," he said fiercely. "It's wrong that she's stuck in that hole in the ground. If you'd have known her—she hated being shut inside. She liked to feel the sun on her face. And she can't. Not from in there."

It was tough work, talking past the lump in her throat, but she managed. "Austin, you know your mom's not down in the

ground. She's not. It's just a shell. It's like picking up an empty crab shell off the beach and thinking that's all there was to the crab."

"What a disgusting analogy."

But he smiled a little, and Yvonne was glad. When he turned back to the headstone she took a quiet step backward. And another. Before too long she was several feet away from him, enough to give him at least some privacy. She waited for him by the lilac bushes, dreamily touching the dark green leaves and wishing she could have met Sara Opitz.

After a long while, he walked back to her. "Ready to go?" he asked briskly, but his face was wet.

She nodded; he took her hand and they fell into step together.

"I told her about you," he added, as an afterthought.

"Of course," she said airily. "I'm the most interesting thing you have to talk about."

He snorted and lightly pinched her arm. "Said you were a doofus who didn't know which end of the needle the insulin came out of. But that you were learning. And that you'd never do to someone what was done to her."

"Never," she vowed. "Not ever." She paused, thinking how best to articulate the strength of her feelings. "I swear on your mama's grave."

Austin nodded, and they linked hands and walked back to the car.

- THE END -

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: MaryJanice Davidson lives in Minnesota with her husband, Anthony, and daughter, Christina.