

THE KNACK

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THE KNACK

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To my fellow deviants,
for all the comments and critiques.

THE KNACK

CHAPTER 1

Car rides never failed to turn boredom into utter dread for Aaron Capps. Like a criminal being sent away to prison against his will, he was buckled down tight, trapped behind a pane of glass and made to watch the outside world whip by like the elusive canvas of some somber dream. He squinted through the backseat window, closing his eyes almost completely so that the only thing he could see was the blur of twilight: a shapeless, nameless reality behind his eyelids that temporarily took him away from his own anger and frustration. No more stuffy car; no more lumpy duffel bag sinking in between his sweaty legs, making his balls stick to the insides of his thighs; no more bag of stale Fritos he'd been trying not to eat for the past three days. Just the sound of the voice in his head, bitching about how life sucked.

Think about Tuesday, he told himself. Wait—not Tuesday. That's when you lost Nikki. Think about...Wednesday. The day after. Dad sitting there at the dinner table and deciding to tell you we're moving halfway across the country to Anaheim, to some smoggy ditch in California. Yeah...think about that.

Aaron had already been heartbroken over Nikki's decision to dump him for some stereotypically ego-driven, steroid-pumping football player. He'd moped all the way home from school, kicking at anything that crossed his path and ignoring all the traffic signals—nearly getting himself killed twice, actually. It hadn't seemed to matter, though. He'd pretty much made up his mind that he wanted to curl up in some dark hole and die—except that the day was only half over and his dad still had yet to make The Announcement.

The news had come at dinnertime that evening. The school year was a mere two months from ending and Aaron's father had somehow thought it would be appropriate to announce that the family would be making "big changes." Aaron had simply stopped eating and stared, moon-eyed and open-mouthed.

"Don't be upset," his father had said. "The company has been planning a move for a long time, it's just been a matter of *when*. I know now isn't the best time with school nearly over, but if I don't transfer, it means becoming surplus—and we certainly don't need *that*. Not with our credit card bills the way they are."

The company. Aaron cringed, picturing his father's face in his mind, hearing his voice. Daniel always spoke of his pencil-pusher job as if he were an on-the-button business executive, a valuable asset—when really he was just a payroll entry being swept out of the way.

All the way to Anaheim.

"Aaron, you haven't budged in almost an hour. Is everything all right?"

He stirred slightly, hearing his mother's voice and realizing the side of his face had become numb from leaning so long against the car window. "Yeah," he lied, yawning.

Julia passed him a momentary glance through the rear-view mirror, and he knew she was immensely glad she had insisted he ride with her instead of with Daniel in the U-Haul. She was right, of course: he hated his father right now, and had he been allowed to ride with the man in the same vehicle for more than five minutes, one of them would have finished the trip with a bloody nose.

"You know, you missed a lot of great scenery," Julia said a bit later as they pulled into a Motel 6. "One of the reasons we *drove* on this trip was so you could see some sights away from the city."

"Doesn't matter," Aaron said. "I have a headache. Where are we?"

“Palm Springs. Looks like your father’s calling it a day.”

Aaron snorted, shifting in his seat. “Looks like Las Vegas.”

“You’ve never been to Vegas, sweetheart.”

Julia pulled into a parking space beside the U-Haul truck and killed the engine, which shuddered and wheezed and finally came to a sputtering halt. Aaron got out of the car and stretched. The place didn’t look all that spectacular up close: just a moderate horseshoe of buildings, a Seven Eleven, and lots of desert palms sprinkled atop rolling hillsides. The place was lit up by a dozen or so of the most god-awful yellow street lamps in the world, the kind that seemed to attract swarms of insects like dead buffalo.

Daniel exited the U-Haul (his Spurs cap plastered permanently to his sweaty scalp), bitched about a cramp, and handed Aaron a ten dollar bill. “Get us some drinks,” he said, pointing to the Seven Eleven, “and whatever you want for yourself. We’ll meet you in the check-in office.”

Aaron might have protested, or at least thrown a mild tantrum, but heat and exhaustion had made the entire Capps family miserable enough as it was. He took the money and went into the convenience store. Besides two preteens working an arcade machine and slurping sodas, the place was barren. A balding, middle-aged, terminally annoyed-looking cashier gave Aaron the usual glower, which translated to something like, “Don’t pocket anything or I’ll sic the police on your ass.” It was to be expected, though. He was an adult, after all, and adults always arrived at the same conclusion whenever a sixteen-year-old went straight to the back of the store where the soda and beer was thrown together. Sure enough, after a moment of standing in front of the freezer and trying to decide between iced tea and fruit cocktail, Aaron heard footsteps approaching from behind. However, instead of the cashier, it was the two children he’d spotted playing the video game.

“Hi,” greeted one, the boy. “My name’s David.”

“And mine’s Melissa,” the girl chimed, right on cue, it seemed. They looked to be near-twins, a year or two apart from each other. *Probably brother and sister*, Aaron thought, mustering a smile.

“I’m Aaron,” he responded.

“Nice to meet you, *Erin*,” Melissa said with an amused smile. “Are you new here?”

“Got here five minutes ago. Headed towards Anaheim.” He nodded towards the front of the store, where the U-Haul could be seen through the window.

“*Fav min’tes ’gow*,” David giggled, trying to do a convincing southern accent. “Yaw sownd lack uh Texun.”

“Yeah,” replied Aaron, trying his best to be patient. “I’m from Austin.”

“Well howdy, cowboy,” said Melissa, smiling once more before suddenly looking around as if she were being watched. She then took hold of Aaron’s arm and squeezed it tightly as she whispered urgently into his ear. “They’re gonna eat you up, you know that?”

David joined in, grabbing Aaron’s other arm and whispering in unison with his sister: “We used to live there. They’re bigger than you, and they’re stronger than you. Maybe, if you’re too much of a dud, they’ll leave you alone—but they notice fresh blood real quick. Don’t think they can’t smell you coming.”

“Crazy kids” Aaron laughed, pulling away.

Abruptly, the twins let him go and resumed their cheerful, elf-like stance as the cashier came up to them, a suspicious look in his eye.

“What did I tell you two about hanging around back here? Off with you now.” He faced Aaron. “You too—unless you’re buying something.”

Aaron held up the drinks.

“Fine, then.” The cashier started toward the front of the store again. “Register’s over *here*.”

(As if Aaron's eyes were merely stuck in his head for show.)

"I've had trouble with those two," the cashier said as he rang up the sodas. "They come in here all the time and hang out by the video games." His gaze caught and held Aaron's as he took the ten dollar bill. "When they see people they don't know, they mess around with them, tell them God-knows-what about God-knows-who. Practical jokes, kiddie nonsense. Their parents are Mormons." Gaze unbroken, he handed back the change—two forty-seven for three twenty-ounces that had been priced at ninety-nine cents apiece. "Well, anyway, goodbye. Have a good evening."

"Okay," Aaron mumbled, confused. It was like suddenly awakening from a dream, hearing the last echoing sounds of his own snoring before coming fully awake. He blinked and found himself outside. He was walking across the parking lot, back towards the motel.

What? he thought to himself, and he stopped, a nauseating wave of inertia overwhelming him, making him reel and drop to his knees. For a moment he thought he might pass out, but the feeling quickly passed.

"Aaron!" called his mother, running to him. She must have seen him fall and probably thought he'd suffered heat stroke.

"I'm fine," he yelled back, gathering up the drinks and getting to his feet.

It didn't occur to him that something out of the ordinary might have happened until later in the evening, when he was undressing for bed and going through his jeans pockets. He turned up less than two and a half dollars in change, and a crumpled receipt with ink so faded as to be unreadable. Had he not been so utterly exhausted, he might have wondered why three sodas had cost so much; as it stood, he merely curled up in his sleeping bag and fell instantly asleep.

CHAPTER 2

A gentle whisper in his ear, a soft breeze across his face and suddenly, with an inadvertent shudder, Joshua was awake.

Six twenty-five, he thought, glancing carefully at the clock. Five minutes before the alarm was supposed to go off. *Right on time.*

He blinked his eyes a few more times and, keeping himself perfectly still, started focusing on the various details of his bedroom: down past his feet, a cluttered maple wood dresser and cracked mirror, partially obscured by tacky orange-colored curtains flowing lazily in the early morning breeze; a little to the right, an ancient RCA television set, balanced precariously atop a pile of encyclopedia volumes; T-shirts, socks, and underwear to the left—all draped over various components of his weight machine (he had a walk-in closet, but he'd long ago left it to the spiders and dust-mites).

There's no one here but you, dip-shit, he thought, relaxing somewhat and unclenching his muscles. He moved to get out of bed—and nearly pissed himself when he saw his mottled reflection in the mirror. For a moment he thought he was looking at someone else, some horribly-distorted monster come alive from his nightmares, but it was only his reflection.

My own jacked up reflection.

Straightening somewhat, he squinted hard so that his vision became blurred, so that the craggy skin of his face and chest appeared smooth. No more bumps, no more crevices, no more Freddy Krueger in boxers. Just...Josh.

"Just Josh," he whispered out loud, clenching his fists and concentrating hard on the mirror image. He began to knead the reflection, to warp his perception of his features. Slowly, he felt his skin begin to crawl, and he let out a stifled gasp as pain gripped

his body from head to toe.

“Just...Josh...”

His limbs shuddered slightly, and he gasped again, resisting the urge to start scratching frantically all over himself as imaginary eels slithered between his joints, through his muscle fibers. For a moment it looked as if his head had become misshapen, as if his eyes were slowly dripping off his face like candle wax.

“Damn,” he murmured, opening his eyes and slamming his fists against his thighs. He’d been overextending himself, pumping out excessive amounts of energy without realizing he’d already achieved his goal. He looked at himself and was able to see his slim, smooth visage without having to filter out the melted-cheese contour of his skin.

You’re no movie star, but you’ll do, he told himself, and stripped off his boxers, used them to wipe the sweat from his brow. Then he found a towel, wrapped it around his waist, and headed for the bathroom.

So began Joshua Swaney’s morning.

CHAPTER 3

The Capps arrived in Anaheim late on a Wednesday evening that had become unexpectedly chilly (for a tourist) after an afternoon of blazing, triple-digit temperatures. No one had the inclination to prospect the new house until they'd gotten a good night's rest, so they checked into another motel. Aaron tossed and turned all night, sleeping unevenly throughout, and groaning primitively when he was awakened by his mother at seven-thirty sharp the next morning.

Breakfast was a cheese omelet and hash browns, courtesy of Denny's. Aaron ate his food and gazed out the window at the palm trees outlining the parking lot, at a couple of skaters conversing loudly and trying to grind the curb beside the welcome sign.

Not much different from Texas, he thought, except for the accent.

Except for Ashley Zurich, the girl he met on the way to the men's room.

It would have been hard not to notice her. She was his age, maybe a little older, five-foot-four, pale skin and stunning silvery eyes—all hidden beneath baggy overalls, candy cane shirt, and contrasting black makeup. Her blond hair was done up in dreads, with violet-highlights, and her eyebrows and nostrils were pierced. She stood in the narrow hallway, leaning on the men's side and tapping her foot on the floor.

Aaron tried not to stare, but couldn't help it.

She gave him a quick look-over, then pointed to a sign hanging on the men's room door. "Men's room is out of order."

"Oh," Aaron murmured, and chuckled lightly. "Figures. I don't suppose there's a good bush nearby?"

Ashley smiled amusedly, cocking her head slightly to one side. Obviously she'd discerned an alternate meaning for the word "bush."

"Depends," she replied.

Aaron flushed bright red. "I didn't mean...I mean..."

"I know." She shoved her hand into his. "My name's Ashley—or just Ash, for short."

"I'm Aaron," he responded, noticing that her fingernails were also painted black. He shook her hand; her skin was ice cold.

"I like your accent. Where you from?"

"Austin. My dad got some kind of transfer from his job. We rolled in late last night."

Ashley nodded. "So, you're a cowboy, huh?"

"No," laughed Aaron. "Do I look like one?"

"No. Is that your natural hair color?"

Unconsciously, Aaron ran a hand along the top of his head. "Yeah. I've been growing it out since I was twelve."

"Your parents let you do that?"

"Yeah. I used to have it buzzed, but I got tired of the Marine look. I don't think my mom and dad *like* it, but in the end it's my head, not theirs."

"Well, it's very nice. Very...*cute*."

Aaron found himself developing another blush. "Uh, thanks."

Ashley seemed to be on the verge of posing another question when her cell phone chirped. She smiled prettily and reached into an obscured jacket pocket. "My boyfriend. He's picking me up."

"Oh, cool."

Aaron moved to the side, so she could pass. As she did, though, something struck him as odd. He paused for a moment, following the back of Ashley's head as she moved up the hallway.

"I'll be seeing you around, then," she said over her shoulder. She turned a corner and was gone.

"Bye," Aaron said, and turned in place slightly. *Something odd,*

he thought again, his gaze falling upon a framed picture, sealed in glass, hanging on the wall beside the men's room door. It took him a moment to get rid of the prickly feeling at the base of his neck, and it was all the more infuriating since the picture, depicting nothing more extraordinary than a springtime meadow, seemed perfectly average in all respects. Nevertheless, it bothered him to no end. Something had been *wrong*, as he'd moved to let Ashley pass—

—and then it hit him: she'd had no reflection.

Standing where he was now, Aaron could clearly see the outline of his head and shoulders, some murky facial details as well, reflected in the glass of the picture frame. Ashley...she hadn't shown up at all.

He headed back to his parents' table.

God, I need more sleep, he thought.

* * *

Mark Wozniak, a friend of a friend of Daniel's, was a slightly obese beach-bum of a man who apparently owned multiple chunks of real-estate in and around Orange County. His overly buoyant demeanor complimented his gaudy Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts combination perfectly, for he had the incongruous humor to sing the Beverly Hillbillies theme as the Capps pulled into the driveway of a two-story, beige and white townhouse.

"Welcome to Belinda Circle," he greeted jovially, before Daniel even had a chance to kill the engine. "The place to be if you want free cable."

Aaron vacated the back seat of the station wagon and stood in the driveway. *No front lawn*, he thought, following with his eyes the tacky stone-pebble path that led from the driveway to the front door.

"Holy geez," Mark exclaimed, having just shaken hands with Daniel and now facing Aaron. "You been feeding the kid Miracle

Grow?” He laughed then, held his hand out over the concrete. “Last time I saw you, you were *this* tall—just a small fry.”

Aaron smiled knowingly, though he couldn’t for the life of him recall when he’d ever seen Mark—Hawaiian shirt or otherwise. He surely would have faltered, had Mark pursued a conversation. Thankfully, Julia stepped in to give Mark a hug, thereby drawing the man’s attention elsewhere.

While his parents made small talk, Aaron sized up his new home. The cul-de-sac was clean, the half-dozen homes well-kept, though it was all more desert-like than he’d expected. There was an abundance of sparkling white concrete, one driveway sloping into another, that bypassed the chore of lawn work altogether. In fact, the only plant life was embodied by a row of palms planted curbside.

As for the Capps’ new house itself, Aaron couldn’t help but think that the Wicked Witch of the West had missed Dorothy’s home altogether and instead dropped a two-story beach flat in the middle of Anaheim. It was like a double-decker mobile home, without the wheels.

After ten minutes of Daniel continuously thanking Mark for arranging their room and board, praising Mark for his generosity—kissing Mark’s ass, basically, Aaron finally asked for the key, citing his need to urinate as an excuse to start the unpacking.

“Take care of the place, kid,” Mark said with a wink. He patted himself on the chest. “Your landlord’s a nice guy, but he’s a little impatient when it comes to those wild parties.”

Daniel laughed—perhaps more than he normally would have at such a corny joke—while Aaron thanked Mark and politely took the key. On the inside, he was cringing. *My dad’s in a bind*, he thought, *and Mark knows it. Friends or not, Mark’s gonna lord it over us that he let us stay here for half the rent. Nice way to start things off.*

Aaron let himself inside, did a quick run-through before finding the single upstairs bathroom. Overall, the place was Spartan, the polished floorboards bare, the plastic window blinds as plain

as could be. There were a lot of windows on the ground floor, which was nice—except the view would have been much better if the place had been on the beach.

It took an hour to unload the U-Haul (Mark departed early on, but promised to stop by every so often to see how things were going). Daniel and Aaron carried in the bigger pieces of furniture first, arranging everything in a very basic manner in the living room. Beds, dressers, and boxes followed.

Aaron's new room was above the garage, overlooking the driveway. It was half the size of the master—which his parents commandeered, no questions asked—and had a fraction of the closet space. Somewhat grumpy from lack of sleep, as well as the stifling noonday sun, he piled all his things inside and promptly stripped off his sweat-soaked T-shirt. He kicked off his shoes and socks as well. There was no central air-conditioning.

With a sigh, he went to the window and pushed it open as far as it would go. Then he set himself to unpacking for several minutes before finally yielding to the heat and heading downstairs for a drink. He gulped down water from the kitchen faucet and went outside to examine the backyard. The pavement was warm under his feet as he stepped between various ant trails to reach the shed, which was unlocked. There was a garden hose inside, some rusty tools, but nothing really interesting.

"Hey! What are you doing back there?"

Aaron jumped slightly, the shed door slamming shut with a loud bang. On the other side of the chain-link fence that separated the Capps' yard from the neighbors' was a short, middle-aged man with sun-browned skin and long white hair tucked into a straw hat. He clutched a garden hoe in one hand, which he leaned on, ever so slightly, as he glared at Aaron.

"Well?" he demanded. "Are you just going to stand there like a tongueless, barefooted hippie or are you going to explain yourself?"

Aaron's response was somewhat fragmented, for he was hav-

ing trouble matching up the man's voice with his diminutive body. "I, uh, I live here."

The man raised his snowy eyebrows, then lowered them again, transforming his beady eyes into impossibly thin slits. "I don't recognize you. What's your name?"

Great, Aaron thought to himself. *Been here five minutes and already the next-door neighbor's got it out for me.* "My name's Aaron, sir. My family and I just moved here."

"Really, now?"

"We've been moving stuff in since nine o'clock."

Softening his gaze somewhat, the man looked towards the street. "So you bought the house. I noticed Wozniak took the 'For Sale' sign down a few days back." He looked back towards Aaron and extended his arm over the fence. "Name's Nathan Brown."

After a moment's consideration, Aaron stepped up to the fence and shook Nathan's hand. "Nice to meet you," he said.

"Same here. You look parched. Want a soda?"

Aaron bit his lip, looked back over his shoulder in a combination of mistrust concerning his hoe-wielding neighbor and loyalty to his moving duties. "I really should be getting back to—"

"Nonsense! This heat's unbearable. You want ice?"

"Um...okay."

"Come around front. I'll let you in."

* * *

Cradling a plastic tumbler filled with Coca Cola, Aaron sat with Nathan in the Amazon rain forest that was his backyard. Unlike the Capps' yard, the concrete slabs here had been removed to expose the underlying soil, which gave way to a plethora of ferns and wildflowers. An aqua-blue tarp had been draped across strategically-placed wooden stakes, and served as a canopy for Nathan's makeshift greenhouse. Aaron quite liked it, preferring the ever-present sheen of sweat on his skin to the blistering dry

heat that was outside. The humidity reminded him of home.

"So," said Nathan, sipping a beer. "A country boy, eh? Texas?"

"Austin," replied Aaron, nodding.

"Fabulous. Let me say it's nice to be able to talk to a normal lad these days."

Aaron shrugged. "If you think I'm the standard."

"Well, you've got manners, and you've got the look of someone who doesn't have their head in the clouds—or in the catacombs, as is often the case." Another sip of beer. "People around here got the most wretched attitude problems I've ever seen. Kids wearing leather and chains, eyeliner and tattoos and all that unholy shit. You got twelve-year-olds looking like dogs on leashes being led by girls looking like hookers without breasts." Leaning closer to Aaron's ear, Nathan continued in a low whisper. "You see that house over there, across the way?"

Aaron shifted on his stool and spotted a section of tarp that hung loose along the street side portion of the yard, and which provided a fairly good view of the cul-de-sac. "The one with the wide patio?"

"Mm-hmm," Nathan continued, staring at the house as if it were an unearthly spectacle. "Last week, that eleven-year-old they got brought home a group of these girlies who looked to be demons of the night, and a whole lot older than he is. They were all dressed in black and wearing their chains down to their knees and grabbing parts of that boy that ain't meant to be touched till he's married. Now, you tell me: What do you suppose they do up in his bedroom until his parents get home, hmm? And under the cover of the loudest godforsaken music I ever heard, if you can call what they play *music*."

Aaron developed a slight blush as he briefly recalled his own somewhat recent experiences as a preteen: frantic moments with half-known girls' hands down his pants, trying to get the job done before his parents came home. And this year, with Nikki, he'd progressed to the oral stage, had been dallying with the

prospect of going all the way with her. Until the breakup, of course.

"I don't hear any music now," he said, clearing his throat.

"There's no music because today's Thursday, a weekday. The boy's always out bright and early on weekdays, but not to school, mind you, and he never comes back till evening, when he can climb into his bedroom window without being seen. My guess is that he likes to wash off the smell of marijuana before his parents realize their little boy's been getting high, getting laid by his little girlfriends. It's a pretty sad thing, really, 'cause I used to know the kid when he was respectable, not more than six months ago—but that was before he met *them*." Silence fell over the greenhouse for a moment as Nathan seemed to think about something indescribably distant.

"Who's 'them?'" Aaron finally asked.

Nathan looked as if he'd just tasted something bitter. "You know the type, right? The ones who got the knack of persuasion?"

Aaron shook his head.

"My, you're *not* from around here, are you? You really have no idea?"

Again, Aaron shook his head and shrugged. No, he wasn't from around here, and he was beginning to think such a quality was something best kept to himself. "What are we talking about here? Some kind of street gang?"

"It's those *freaks*. You know, the ones who aren't quite like you and me. The ones who are into that vampire crap with all the blackness and pale skin. Unholy and like ravenous bloodhounds. They'll take an innocent youth and turn him into a creature of the night. That's what they did to that boy across the street. Changed him. Made him one of *them*."

Again, an emphasis on that word: *them*. As if certain residents of Anaheim weren't entirely human.

Caught halfway between amusement and alarm, Aaron started

to ask for a more detailed explanation, but at that moment, Nathan's phone rang, and he excused himself to go answer it. That left Aaron alone to ponder the meaning of his oratory, and to wonder if perhaps the man wasn't operating with a full deck. He sipped his soda, listened to the muffled sounds of Nathan conversing inside the house, and allowed his eyes to wander about the garden. Almost immediately he caught sight of something odd resting at the far end of the yard. Obscured by several layers of glistening leaves and vines, it looked like someone had set a life-sized statue against the rear fence.

Curious, Aaron rose from his seat and made his way through the leafage until he found himself standing before the statue, which very closely resembled Nathan Brown himself. Moistened soil, rich with fleshy roots, comprised much of the limbs and torso. Most fascinating, though, was the face, which was so life-like it might have been simply a layer of dirt and grime painted onto a sleeping person's real face. Aaron stepped in close to examine the craftsmanship—and started as suddenly, and without warning, the eyelids flashed open.

He stifled a yelp, dropped his drink and took several steps backward. As he did so, the eyes focused on him, followed his movements.

“Oh, fuck,” he gasped.

He turned and ran.

CHAPTER 4

Savanna High School: Joshua tried not to look at anyone or anything as he crossed the front lawn, fell into step behind a group of giggling sophomore girls dressed in shorts and tank-tops. One of them glanced back at him and smiled; he blinked at her uncertainly, as if he wasn't sure whether she was being friendly or finding some sort of amusement in his appearance.

You're so damned anti-social, he told himself. Like you want to be a failure.

The girl faced forward again, rejoined her friends in conversation. Suddenly Joshua found himself staring at her butt.

Go on. Look at it, see how it wiggles just right when she walks...makes you want to whip out the goods right here and—

He bit down viciously on his tongue.

Fuck you, he thought—as if he were talking to another person entirely. His left leg twitched involuntarily, and he stumbled slightly, but he didn't fall—he refused to fall and embarrass himself in front of everyone.

Another of the girls, having heard his commotion, glanced back at him; this time he smiled assuredly.

"G'morning, ladies," he said.

In response, the girls giggled collectively. One of them offered a muffled, "What a dork," as they navigated away from him.

He sighed and continued on into the main building, where the lockers were. The hallway was bustling with students fetching their books for first period, making small talk before class, jotting down last-minute quiz notes. Joshua ignored them all. He went straight to his locker and started entering the combination.

56...no, 42...no, 1,263...you can't even remember your own locker combination? Pathetic.

He banged his fist against the locker and closed his eyes for a moment as he tried to filter out all the excess noise in his brain, tried to concentrate on keeping himself calm and collected. He heard a familiar laugh as someone brushed his shoulder.

Her.

She wasn't laughing at him—he knew that. Nevertheless, he waited a moment before opening his eyes and looking down the hallway to where she was standing with her friends, not really doing anything. Just standing around coolly and waiting for the bell to ring.

Bitch, he thought, and she turned, right on cue, to give him a “drop dead” look. He was ready for it, though, and turned away, focused his mind elsewhere—denied her influence. Normally he could hold his own, but for some reason today his resolve was just a bit shaky. He mumbled something incoherent and then slammed his head into his locker, making a noise loud enough for half the school to hear.

“Dude,” said a nearby student, a boy. “You okay?”

Joshua didn't answer. He merely scowled and rubbed his head as he quickly opened his locker, stuffed what he needed into his backpack, and then exited the main building. He stared at the ground the entire time, crossing the quad and entering portable P-5, which was empty, save for the quiet, geeky girl who always sat by herself in the back. His own desk was at the opposite end of the portable, next to one of the windows. He took his seat and let himself sag down, head against the chair back, legs splayed, hands resting on the desktop.

Without much enthusiasm, he waited for the day to begin.

* * *

Aaron wasn't in the best of moods when his alarm clock went off. The previous day having been spent unloading boxes and arranging furniture, he was more than slightly tempted to sleep in.

His parents, however, were adamant that he get signed up for school ASAP—even if it was a Friday.

With a loud yawn, he slipped from his half-assembled bed and went to the window, opening the blinds and peering out into the honeyed morning light. He spotted Nathan, at the head of his front yard, stuffing a handful of envelopes into his mailbox.

Weird old fart, he thought, recalling yesterday's experience in the greenhouse with a nervous shudder. *Guy must get off on playing pranks like that. No wonder he lives alone.* He watched as Nathan closed the mailbox, lifted the flag, took one suspicious look about the cul-de-sac, and then retreated into his home.

Aaron showered, dressed himself in jeans and a T-shirt, and met Daniel downstairs. They had a quick breakfast; then it was off to school and work.

Savanna High School consisted of a squat, single-story main building, and several portable classrooms scattered around the sprawling gymnasium. A mixture of gently swaying palms and cypress provided semblance.

Daniel, having phoned the attendance office during the ride over, merely pulled up in front and handed Aaron all the necessary paperwork. Father and son then parted ways, without waving goodbye to one another. Whether or not he was upset with Daniel, he knew it was their way of getting along. His parents had never really babied or pampered him in any traditional sense. They fed and clothed him, yes, and provided a roof over his head, but beyond that he was his own man. Even as a child, he'd quickly gotten used to fighting his own playground battles. To anyone else, the situation was an inferiority complex waiting to happen; to Aaron Capps, it was just the way things were.

He received a few passing glances from other students, most of whom were still in the process of waking up. A couple of girls waiting near the main entrance smiled at him and waved; one of them blew him a kiss and called him "honey."

He entered the main hallway and was greeted by a cool, air-

conditioned breeze. There were rows of lockers on either side, classrooms dispersed throughout. Aaron tried not to look too outlandish as he searched for the attendance office, his sneakers making slight squeaking noises on the linoleum floor.

“Hello, may I help you?”

Aaron turned and found himself in the presence of a plump, middle-aged woman dressed in a flowery frock that looked very much like a giant shower curtain. There were only a handful of other teenagers currently accessing their lockers, but every one of them now looked in his direction, some smirking, some merely curious as to what the Plum Lady had to say this morning.

God, I hate this, Aaron thought. Clearing his throat, he said, “I’m transferring in from Greendale High School, Austin.” He held up his files.

Plum Lady took them, flipped through briefly. She removed a pair of pink sheafs and handed the rest back. Pointing down the hall, she said, “I’ll clock you in. The counseling office is out in the center of the quad.”

“Thanks,” Aaron replied, and followed her directions. He noted, as he exited the building, that she supervised his path from her perch in the middle of the hallway—as if he might start defacing lockers at any moment. It made him wonder if her vigilance was due to his being a newbie, or if all the students at Savannah were genuine misfits.

Outside, he discovered the quad also acted as the school’s makeshift cafeteria. There were a dozen or so wooden picnic tables set out across an uneven patch of concrete that was surrounded by portables. More palm trees were planted throughout, though the amount of shade they actually provided was questionable.

Aaron found the counseling office and entered, presenting himself to the secretary, a fetchingly-cute senior girl wearing what appeared to be her boyfriend’s jersey.

“What’s your name?” she asked with a brilliant smile.

“Aaron Capps. Double-P.”

“I’m Sheryl.”

She held out her hand. When he shook it, he couldn’t help but notice how soft and warm she was, and how the feeling seemed to spread throughout him. He also couldn’t help noticing that her gaze flicked—ever so subtly—down the length of his torso.

She was checking him out.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, feeling the slightest bit uncomfortable. There was a sort of heat building just beneath his skin.

Sheryl continued smiling, held his hand a moment longer before standing. “Go ahead and have a seat, Aaron. I’ll tell Ms. Ryan you’re here.”

Aaron complied, shamefully sneaking a glance at her bottom as she crossed the portable and entered one of two adjacent cubicles. When she was out of sight, the heat dissipated, and he blinked several times, wondering why he’d been thinking so naughtily. A moment later, Sheryl returned, and all the tingly feelings came flooding back. He had to forcibly focus his mind when she told him he could go and see the counselor (who was, thankfully, well into her forties, and thus did not affect his libido).

He sat slightly slumped through the scheduling process, his thoughts divided haphazardly between a mish-mosh of credit requirements and the remembered shape of Sheryl’s butt. It was embarrassing and infuriating, and he had no idea why, at one point, he started sweating. Thankfully, Ms. Ryan didn’t seem to notice. When she was through filling out his schedule, she handed it to him and wished him good luck.

“Thanks,” he said. He slung his backpack over his shoulder and left the cubicle.

Sheryl was still at her desk near the exit. She was filing her nails, but when she saw Aaron coming near, she stopped in mid-stroke and smiled prettily at him—and the heat intensified ten-

fold.

"Everything go okay?" she asked, tilting her head and letting her hair fall to one side.

Aaron felt the blood rushing to his groin. "Sure...couldn't be better. I guess I'll see you around, then."

"Okay." Sheryl waved with her fingers. "Bye, Aaron Capps."

It was almost painful to leave the office, though once he stood outside in the open air, his head instantly cleared, and his impending erection subsided.

Dork, dork, dork! he thought, realizing he must have come off as a drooling idiot in front of the first California girl he'd ever met. On any given day, he was calm and collected when it came to girls, even the drop-dead gorgeous ones. Sheryl was the first to have affected him so intensely with the mere touch of a hand.

California girls. He grinned and looked at his schedule, which listed his first class as History, portable P-5, Mr. Brandt. He was only fifteen minutes late when he entered the classroom. The teacher, a tall, gangly gray-haired man in a flannel shirt and jeans, had been standing at the head of the class, dictating out of a textbook. When he spotted Aaron, he turned on his heel, facing him, and flashed a toothy grin.

"Speak of the Nords!" he bellowed in classic *Back to the Future* Doc Brown fashion. Low laughter rippled throughout the class. "Well, come on in!" He gestured for Aaron to join him beside a narrow, shabby podium, where the roll book was kept. As he entered Aaron's name, he said, "Now, why don't you tell the class here a little bit about yourself?"

Aaron felt a slight blush developing, and decided right then and there that Mr. Brandt was an evil gnome wrapped in a mad scientist's body (what was the teacher's fascination with making the new kid do a monologue in front of a class full of strangers?).

"Um," he said, after a moment's thought. "My name's Aaron, I'm from Texas, and I *hate* cowboy boots."

The class laughed, which eased the pressure somewhat, de-

spite the odds of his pronounced southern accent being considered a fake.

“Ooh!” Brandt cried, grabbing him by the shoulder. “Listen to that! A new student *and* a tourist! I think Aaron here needs some special treatment! Should we make him rattle off the American Presidents in chronological order?”

God, no, thought Aaron. Thankfully, there was a mixed reaction from the class, thereby prompting Brandt to forgo an academic hazing. He signed Aaron’s schedule and told him to find an empty seat wherever he liked. As there were only two available—one up front directly facing the teacher’s desk, and the other in the back of the row closest to the window—he chose the one in the back.

Brandt jumped right back into his oratory—something about Nordic history—and gradually the class shifted its attention from the New Kid back to the lesson. After the day’s assignment was given, the teacher handed a history book to the student at the front of the row to pass back to Aaron, who was jotting down notes when the person in front of him tapped his shoulder.

“Hey.”

Aaron looked up—and started, for he hadn’t been paying much attention as he’d made his way to his desk, and as such hadn’t noticed the boy in front of him, a boy whose facial features had been blurred by thick, criss-crossing channels of scarred flesh. His scalp was bare, save for a few discolored-looking patches of hair.

A burn victim.

“Thanks,” Aaron said, noticing (as he took the textbook) the same mottled flesh on the back of the boy’s hands.

“I’m Josh,” the boy whispered. “Don’t mind Brandt. He loves giving the new guys a hard time. He treats the new *girls* like prospective brides—but it’s all for shits and giggles.”

Aaron forced Josh’s appearance to the back of his mind and grinned. “I’ll bet he knows every President’s name by heart,

too.”

“It’s his way. You did well, by the way.”

“Just said what I thought a Texas boy was supposed to say, I guess.”

“When’d you get here?”

“Yesterday morning. Didn’t get to see much because I was helping to move all my family’s stuff into the new house. Tired as hell.”

Josh nodded sympathetically, and conversed with him for a short while longer before Brandt reminded them that they were in class to learn, and not to play twenty questions. Aaron snickered and buried himself in his work, and found it immensely more relaxing to have broken the ice with someone so soon—even if that someone was, well, quite extraordinarily afflicted. It was admirable, though, that Josh, despite his condition, could be so open with others, so sure of himself.

At five minutes before nine, class was dismissed, and everyone eagerly began filing out of the portable. Josh lingered as Aaron put his books into his backpack.

“Hey, do you know anybody around here yet?”

Aaron shrugged. “The attendance lady.”

“She doesn’t count.”

Aaron laughed.

“If you want, I can meet you at lunch and show you around a little bit. Do you play basketball?”

“Sure,” said Aaron.

“Cool. I’ll find you in the quad.”

CHAPTER 5

Dawn was a thin sliver of light seeping through the crack at the bottom of the clubhouse door.

Kyna Miller shifted ever so slightly between the bed sheets, listened intently to the burgeoning sounds of the backyard as she surveyed the scene in her mind: birds chirping, crows calling from perches in cedar and palm; possums foraging through the half-dried undergrowth; neighborhood tomcats scurrying between rusted garbage cans and pockmarked Hefty bags. Farther along, past the vine-covered chain-link fence, noises came from the street. Someone was coughing and spitting phlegm—a hungover carouser stumbling home from a long night of drinking, no doubt.

No noises came from the house.

He must have taken off during the middle of the night.

She threw back the sheets, slid from bed, and stretched in the darkness. Despite having been raised by her mother as an at-home nudist, Kyna was already fully-dressed as she moved to her dresser, where she lit several peppermint-scented pillar candles, illuminating the clubhouse, giving it dimension. There weren't many amenities. A weight machine towered in one corner, overshadowing her bed and dresser. A full-length mirror sat at the foot of the bed; the whole adjacent wall had been devoted to a large bookshelf crammed with volumes. The floor was bare concrete, the unpolished, cedar walls equally unadorned. Overall, it wasn't the stereotypical teenage girl's living space, but then again, there was no need for such excess here. After all, a room was just a room—a place where one took shelter during the night. A home, as most people called it, was merely an artistic extension of oneself, a vain attempt at coping with some other

personal shortcoming.

Kyna wasn't trying to cope. She had a room, and that was all she needed.

She began her usual morning ritual with a twenty-minute warm-up, comprised of light aerobics, and then moved on to the weight machine, working shoulders, arms, chest, and back before laying on the floor and doing a set of abdominal crunches. Lastly, a combination of squat-thrusts and leg-lifts, the finale to a total body workout that left her sweaty and slightly out of breath. Her muscles didn't complain much, though, for she'd been beginning her days as such for years. Regular discipline had helped temper her body into the highly-responsive machine that it was today.

Determination had done the rest.

She gathered up her clothes for the day and exited her room via the triple-locked clubhouse door. The backyard of her mother's house was pale, sickly-looking, and unkempt, as usual. Kyna crossed the yard, entered the house through the unlocked kitchen screen door. Inside, the sound of flies buzzing here and there between stacks of food-encrusted dishes and discarded fast food bags permeated a stifling silence. She paused only briefly to get a drink of water, as well as survey the incurable clutter. Evidently the mere fact that the mess was growing into its own realm was not reason enough for Mrs. Miller to consider a cleanup operation.

Onward, into the hallway, towards the bathroom. Kyna stopped halfway down to peer into her mother's bedroom. Mrs. Miller was there, sprawled naked, lying on her front on the bed, the sheets arranged haphazardly around her ankles, her backside thrust slightly outward as if on display for any old drunkard who happened to pass by. She had a bottle of Jack Daniels clutched in one lanky hand—a consummate lover for a woman who'd lost all interest in fleshed men.

Not so much God's artistry anymore, Kyna thought, with a trace of

bitterness. She watched and listened to the rhythm of her mother's soft breathing, reminded herself how much weight the woman had lost these past few years. Once, she had been lithe and beautiful, a delicate flower in full bloom. Once, she had lived a life in pursuit of love and happiness: herself, her daughter, and her husband.

"Appreciate the beauty of God's most wonderful creations," she had always said, back when they'd still had the Coachman, back when they'd lived a blissfully naïve fantasy life at the naturist village. Alas, it had been many years since that early, innocent rough draft had been discarded, replaced with dull, decaying *now*.

Move on. Kyna closed the bedroom door, forced herself to move to the end of the hall and into the bathroom, where she locked herself inside. *Get clean, do it quickly, don't linger.* She had a system, and had trained herself to soap, shampoo, and rinse every part of her body in just under three minutes. That was largely the reason why she excluded most of the "cutie" grooming behaviors of other girls her age, why she kept her hair short as a boy's: low maintenance meant less time spent naked and vulnerable in a bathroom with only one lock, in a house as unprotected against *him* as it was against a nuclear holocaust.

When she was through, she quickly dressed herself while taking a disinterested look at her reflection in the mirror. She saw short blond locks (wet and plastered to her forehead and sides of her face), dark eyelashes, green eyes, pale skin, thin lips. Her neck, very nearly as wide as her jaw, sloped down into her wide, broad shoulders—ample reminder that she could have been born a boy and her appearance wouldn't have strayed much from what it was now.

She returned to the backyard, locked herself inside the clubhouse, where she finished her grooming tasks. Again, there wasn't much to do since she never wore makeup. She'd waxed, shaved, and plucked yesterday. As such, she spent only a mo-

ment in front of the mirror before fetching her backpack and leaving her humble home for the day.

And so, this girl who lifted weights at six in the morning, this teenage anomaly with the short hair and semi-androgynous features, walked purposefully along the streets of the ghetto as she headed for school. No one bothered her, for she knew that from even a close distance she had the appearance of a dauntless, able-bodied young man. Her masculine stride lacked the wiggle of the hips that most girls had, which might have proved somewhat regretful for anyone else—but not for Kyna, who reminded herself that this wasn't a part of town for pretty little girls to be bouncing around. Looking tough—*being* tough—was good. Scare the shit out of all the drunken deadbeats because they thought you were a dyke or a dud.

That was how you did it.

She stopped at a crosswalk at the edge of the block. Here the neighborhood houses and apartment complexes gave way to a strip of meat markets and liquor stores. There were rows of towering palms and patches of wilted shrubs sectioning off the parking lots (and acting as makeshift garbage dumps for empty cigarette cartons and used condoms). A pair of Hispanic men, in their early twenties, shared a smoke under the shelter of a nearby bus terminal. When they saw Kyna, they scowled and gave her dirty looks.

"*Madrina*," one of them called.

The other: "Where you titties, girl?"

Kyna glared at him, wondering if this was some distorted method of courtship. "What do you care?"

The man snickered. "I want you tell me why you have such pretty girl face, but you wear boy's clothes and have boy's haircut?"

If looks could kill, Kyna's would have pulverized her mockers right then and there. It was, however, obvious that these two weren't worth the time or the effort. She turned away as the

light changed, crossed the street and took satisfaction in the knowledge that some men would never know more than the palms of their hands when it came to romance.

Like Joshua.

Silly, fucked-up Joshua. She could see him now in her mind's eye: standing in front of the mirror in his bedroom, trying to mold himself into what he wanted as he got ready for school. As adamant as Kyna was concerning the whole self-image thing—only he had never reached the level of discipline that she had. Standing there in his underwear, clenching his fists, gasping and panting as if having a coronary, he was merely reminding himself of his own shortcomings with every attempt to forget.

Such an absolute dud, she thought, disdainfully—though she took care not to let herself become too overworked. She hated him, sure, but she also felt sorry for him. It was a duality of emotion that oftentimes led her to tears if she wasn't careful—so she kept herself occupied with a mental image of him during the remainder of her walk.

She tried to be amused by what she saw.

In a combination of bad timing and terrible luck, she entered the main Savanna building shortly after he did, and when she saw him in the locker hall, standing in front of his locker like a Neanderthal trying to decipher computer code, she was unable to resist making a more personal impression. It was instinct, really. She slithered deftly between the other students, laughing as she brushed Joshua's shoulder, her mere presence sending a massive psychological ripple through him.

Good, she thought, noting that she could have tapped his scrotum with a cattle prod and not gotten a more sufficient reaction. *Let him squirm—let him stew in his own juices. I don't have to go out of my way to avoid him just because of what...happened.*

Natalie and Anthony waited for her beside their adjoining lockers at the end of the hall. Both were dark-skinned—the former African, the latter Hispanic—and dressed in baggy street

clothes.

Natalie tucked a stick of chewing gum into her mouth. “Hi, Kee,” she said, and clasped hands with Kyna.

Anthony merely nodded accordingly and smiled. “You see ol’ Dumbo’s face just now? He looks like a little kid lost in a shopping mall.”

Kyna nodded and, knowing that Joshua was looking in her direction, turned her back to him. “Pathetic that he even bothers to show up here anymore.”

Bitch.

She felt the heat at the back of her neck, felt him staring at her, working at her—actually *working* at her, as if, by some colossal fluke, she’d chosen today to let down her defenses. She glanced over her shoulder, sent him an ice-cold look that seemed to make him pale several shades despite his perfectly realistic tan.

Piss off, little boy.

Make me.

She faced him full now, took hold of his will, kneaded it like so much dough. Despite what appeared to be a serious attempt at resistance, he ended up turning red in the face and slamming his head into his locker. The sound reverberated throughout the entire hallway.

Pathetic.

She laughed and let him go, watched as nearby students paid him curious glances. There was a certain form of guilty satisfaction involved in seeing him like this, seeing his inadequacy, his mottled skin and bald head—blatant trophies of his own blunders. Of course, to everyone else he was just Josh, with the perfectly even tan and lean beach boy body so many girls found irresistible. He had, at the very least, mastered his own batch of illusions, which allowed him to blend in with everyone else visually (minus all the questions and grimaces from others his grotesque, *true* appearance would have aroused).

Hide all you want, Kyna thought, behind the cute-boy disguise, but I still know who you really are.

Joshua might have been listening to her thoughts, but if he was, he made no show of it. He merely gathered his things from his locker and walked off toward the exit at the opposite end of the hallway.

Kyna sighed inwardly, relegated herself to her own locker, removing what she needed for her first two classes, inadvertently scolding herself for ever having thought of Joshua Swaney as *cute*, cute harmless beach boy, a year behind her, with a year's less experience when it came to girls and relationships and sex. Younger than she, yes, but far less innocent.

* * *

The first half of the day went rather smoothly for Aaron. Most of the students he met were friendly enough and didn't pry too much into the reasons behind his accent and all the other nuances that marked him as a newcomer.

At noon, when lunchtime arrived, he went first to the attendance office to get himself a locker. Plum Lady was ready for him with a grimace and a pre-recorded sigh of restrained exasperation.

"No drugs are allowed on the premises," she said, fishing a legal pad from her desk. "That goes for alcohol, too. Prescription medication must first be cleared with the nurse. No weapons are allowed, no switchblades, guns, screwdrivers, battle axes—the board gives surprise inspections throughout the year, so don't waste your time coming up with new and interesting ways to holster a pocketknife to the elastic of your underwear."

It was difficult to discern whether she was attempting (unsuccessfully) to be funny or whether she'd actually encountered ax-wielding teenage delinquents (who kept knives stashed in their underwear) during her time at Savanna High. Aaron simply nod-

ded and tried to look as amiable as possible.

"You'll need to sign here," she continued, sliding the legal pad toward him. "Keep in mind that you are fully responsible for any damage to the locker. Don't store any kind of food inside, and please don't leave your gym clothes inside either. There are separate lockers in the gymnasium for that."

Aaron signed his name, endured another minute or two of the woman's compelling oratory, and muttered "thank you" when he was finally handed the combination on a piece of paper.

Naturally, it didn't work the first time around, and he soon found himself the last student lingering in the main hallway, trying to figure out the jam in his locker while everyone else was out in the quad, eating.

"Stuck, huh?" came a girl's voice, from over his right shoulder.

He turned and saw Ashley, backpack slung over one shoulder, mesmerizing silver eyes and violet highlights as prolific as ever. He hadn't heard her approach.

"Hey, Ash," he said, smiling. "I didn't know you went to Savanna."

"Duh," chuckled Ashley. "How would you know? You're new here."

"Well, yeah." Aaron frowned and looked at his locker. "Um...I guess I have to go ask for another combination. This thing isn't working."

"Don't bother. The administration around here is as helpful as a pile of rocks." She stepped around Aaron, reaching for the locker handle. "Here, let me try. What's the combination?"

He read it out loud to her, and she twiddled the knob. Without the slightest resistance, the lock clicked and the door opened.

"Nice," said Aaron. "How'd you do it?"

Ashley shrugged. "You gotta have the knack."

"Oh, I see." He piled his books inside.

"So, how has your first day been going? Making any new

friends?”

“Yeah, sort of. I think I’ve collected more textbooks than friends, though.”

“Well, here’s one more to add to your list.” Ashley slid her hand, chilled as ice, into his—an unexpectedly bold move, for sure—and motioned for him to follow her toward the exit. “Come on. Let’s get lunch together.”

She led him outside, where it was hot and crowded. They bought sandwiches from one of the numerous food carts dispersed throughout the quad and, at Ashley’s request, ended up heading out to the football field, where they shared a seat at the top of the bleachers—under the torrid noonday sun.

“I like to come up here when I eat,” said Ashley, planting her feet on the seat in front of her and resting her back against the wind guard. “I can see everything.”

“Yeah, it’s nice,” replied Aaron, wiping his brow on his shirt-sleeve. Underneath his T-shirt he could feel tiny beads of sweat trickling down his chest. However, Ashley, who was wearing long sleeves and pants, seemed not to have broken a sweat at all.

They ate in silence for the first few minutes, appreciating a bird’s eye view of the field and, farther on, the various portable classrooms arranged around the main building. When Ashley failed to initiate any sort of conversation, he turned to face her and found that she was watching him intently, a slight smile curling the corners of her lips.

“So,” he said, clearing his throat.

Ashley leaned forward suddenly, kissed him on the mouth, tried to separate his lips with her tongue. Despite the fact that she was ice cold, her skin seemed to infuse an odd sort of heat with his own.

He pulled back slightly, caught off guard by her unsolicited advance. He reached up with his hand and felt her chilled saliva on his lips. “What’s going on here?” he began.

“Wanna screw?” she whispered, moving closer and reaching

for the zipper of his jeans.

Bewildered, he twitched slightly, grabbed her hands before they invaded sensitive territory. He looked at her, tried to assess the situation. Girls had asked him questions like that before, though they had always been girls he'd known. Friends. Ashley, on the other hand, was hardly even an acquaintance—and already she wanted to screw.

And she was *ice cold*.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, noting that every time he let go of her hands she reached again for his groin.

"You've never done it before?"

"We don't know each other."

"So? You can learn a lot about someone from the way they make love."

Aaron laughed incredulously. "Are you for real?"

In answer, she attacked his groin again, this time actually getting his fly down before he jumped up and took several steps backward.

"Stop," he insisted, readjusting his pants.

Ashley tilted her head slightly to one side, her lips pouting as she got to her feet. "You don't want to be friends with me?"

"It's not that...I mean, I'm not trying to be mean or anything, but I'm not into the casual sex thing, or whatever it is you Goths like to do."

"I'm not a Goth."

"Oh, well, I didn't mean—"

Ashley suddenly became outraged. She let loose a stifled screech and lunged for him, grabbing a hold of his arm with both hands and sinking her teeth into his flesh.

"Ow!" he cried, and stumbled backward, grabbing her by the hair and shoving her away. "Are you crazy or something?"

"Get away from me!" Ashley shouted, licking his blood from her lips. She stomped with her foot, clenched her fists. "Go away! Now!"

Confused as ever (and quite in pain), Aaron clutched his injured arm and clambered down the bleachers. He half expected Ashley to sprout fangs and come leaping down onto his shoulders like some Hollywood vampire, but she remained where she was as he crossed the football field.

Damn, he thought, realizing he'd left his food behind.

He also realized that he'd completely forgotten about meeting up with Joshua until he spotted him jogging across the quad. As open-minded as Aaron considered himself to be, he was unable to ignore the fact that Joshua's skin looked ten times worse in bright sunlight than it did indoors.

"Hey. Where've you been?" Joshua asked, falling into step.

Aaron groaned, looking down at his arm. Blood was dribbling from two nasty-looking holes just above his wrist. "Some girl, um, bit me."

Joshua wrinkled up his face. "Dude...that's messed up. You should have the nurse take a look."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Come on. I'll take you to her." Joshua started towards the main building.

Aaron followed. "Sorry about lunch. This girl, she was helping me with my locker, before things turned bad. I just totally forgot."

"That's okay. Happens all the time."

"Cool. I didn't want you to think I was avoiding you because of your, well, you know. I guess I mean—"

Joshua stopped, halfway up the steps, a strange expression on his face. "What?"

Aaron bit his lip, acutely aware that he'd stuck his foot in his mouth. "Oh, geez—I didn't mean...never mind." He started up the steps, his wounded arm stinging something fierce.

"Okay," Joshua said, and resumed his ascent. When he reached the entrance, he held the door open. "Tell you what. The bell's gonna ring soon, and I just remembered I gotta go and get some

notes from a friend before next class. The nurse's office is down past Attendance, on the right. Maybe we can meet up after school?"

"Sounds good."

"Cool. I'll catch you on the front lawn, by the flag pole."

"Thanks."

Aaron walked alone down the hallway, his face flushed, his heart hammering in his chest. He hadn't meant to bring up Joshua's physical appearance, nor had he intended to miss their lunch date. Such things happened from time to time, but Joshua, with his condition...it was likely many of his peers made excuses when they weren't up to hanging around a burn victim. *And now he probably thinks I'm doing the same thing: avoiding him.*

As if allowing himself to be groped by an ice-cube-Goth-girl (who enjoyed biting people) was something better to do.

CHAPTER 6

Uncertain as to his destination, Joshua wandered through the quad and mulled over what was quickly becoming a serious mental crisis.

This sucks, he thought, grinding his teeth. This totally sucks.

He didn't really look at anyone or anything as he moved past tables occupied by chattering teenagers, people enjoying the lunch hour with their friends, eating food, swapping jokes, sharing light-hearted laughter. Meanwhile, here he was, wandering about in utter solitude, hands stuffed in his pants pockets, head drooped forward so that he was constantly looking away from everyone's faces. Sometimes, on similar occasions, when he had no one to talk to (a daily conundrum, actually), he would pretend to be walking somewhere important, as if he were too busy to hang out during lunch—and every time he would end up in the library, sitting in the corner with a copy of *Sports Illustrated*.

Today he merely seethed, walking hastily towards nowhere, keeping a red-hot afterimage burning behind his eyelids, the memory of a scene he hadn't even witnessed—yet it was driving him insane, for once again he'd been cheated out of making a new friend.

Preempted by Ashley. Pale-faced bitch. Aaron probably got a blowjob out of it, though it's not his fault he's the new guy, not his fault he can't so "no" when he's being tapped by a pro. We've all had our time with Ash, haven't we?

Joshua felt a panic attack coming on. With minutes left before the end of the lunch period, he went into the gymnasium, descended the steps and made his way into the boy's locker room. There were a few other boys here, nonchalantly standing around

in their underwear and having idle conversations about girls and sports. No one paid him any attention as he slipped into the restroom area, where he locked himself in one of the toilet stalls. He held his head in his hands, as if it might pop off and roll away unless he was ultra-careful.

Once again, Just Josh is too little, too late. Never mind that Aaron will never find a better friend in the whole neighborhood...but what was I supposed to expect? He's the new guy. He wants to make friends with the cool kids, girls who have perky little asses and round little breasts. So he drops me like a bad habit, goes after the first chick he can find—nothing wrong with that.

Except that it had been Ash.

Bitter tears, salty and hot, suddenly started trickling from his eyes as he realized that his jealousy was merely a cover for the denial that every time he tried to be normal, every time he tried to make friends, they were snatched away from him by the cool kids.

He should've been mine, I should have made him mine, not given him the benefit of the doubt...not left him to chance and to Ash and Kyna and all their succubus friends. Should've paid more attention, should have played the game, Josh...

He cried softly for another minute or so before finding himself in a sort of contemplative calm, an underlying place where the tumultuous storm clouds of his own angst parted to reveal a clear blue sky above.

It's still only Aaron's first day. He's still new, still innocent; they haven't yet ravaged him like a pack of hungry wolves.

I can still make him mine.

The bell rang. Joshua stood, reached for the door handle to let himself out of the stall. He stifled a yelp when he noticed the skin of his hand and forearm was mottled and craggy.

He'd inadvertently reverted to his natural form, just as he'd done earlier that morning, in his bedroom.

Damn it. Every time I get the least bit upset...

Clenching his fists, he concentrated on himself, seeing his own body from a distance, molding the wretched contour of his wounds back into the smooth, young skin of Just Josh. As usual, the pain was overwhelming, and he had to bite down hard to keep himself from crying out loud, lest he attract the attention of the other boys in the locker room. Beads of sweat formed on his brow, trickled down the back of his neck, soaking his shirt. In a moment it was over. He checked himself, felt his face and the top of his head, and decided that he was “real” again. He was, however, not finished.

Reordering his looks once in a day was taxing; twice left him considerably drained and with a feeling of hunger so pronounced he could almost hear his stomach growling. With significant effort, he wiped his brow, re-seated himself on the edge of the toilet seat. There was a switchblade in his pocket; he took it out, made the slightest incision in his left forearm. He lapped up what he could before the stinging got too bad, then used a wad of toilet paper to clean up the rest as he willed his skin to knit itself.

Pathetic, he thought, leaving the stall, making his way back through the locker room, knowing that his face must be flushed and sweaty, obvious, so damned obvious to the other boys what he *must* have been doing with himself in the restroom.

Screw them all, they're not me. They don't know shit about how it all works.

Fortunately, no one seemed to care.

He exited the gymnasium, relinquished himself to sunlight. The tardy bell rang when he was halfway to his next class, but he didn't care. He was already focusing on what to do about the nagging ache now permeating his every fiber. It was tolerable now, thanks to the toilet stall fake-out, but sure to become unbearable misery by the end of the day if he didn't replenish himself.

Find a girl, any girl. Preferably one you don't know—always easier

that way.

Failing that, there was always Ash.

* * *

She was crying when Kyna found her. Sitting alone at the top of the bleachers, she looked like an absolute mess: her hair was mussed, her lipstick smeared, and there was blood dribbling down her chin.

"Oh, Ash. What's the matter?" Kyna asked, sitting beside her and fishing a handkerchief from her pocket. She cleaned up as much of the blood as she could, though some of it had already dried. It was amazing she had been out here this long without attracting anyone's attention.

"I don't like this," Ashley responded, after a moment. She was shaking her head, scrunching up her face as if in pain.

Kyna scooted closer, put her arm around Ashley's shoulders. "Tell me. Tell me what happened."

Another moment, mumbling unintelligibly to herself, and then: "This guy named Aaron. I met him yesterday. He's new here, really hot. I thought I could work him. I was gonna suck him off, but he wouldn't let me. He got pissed and threw me down. So I had to bite him instead. I didn't want to, but...why'd he turn me down, Kee? What did I do wrong?"

"Throwing the knack's always hard," replied Kyna, smoothing Ashley's hair. "Sometimes it works, and sometimes you just can't seem to get a single person to even *look* at you."

"I *hate* this, Kee. I get so hungry sometimes. I don't know what to do anymore...I'm not a very good scout."

"Don't say that. It's not your fault—you did your best."

Ashley wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, smearing her makeup, making her face look worse than it already was. She looked down towards the foot of the bleachers, where Natalie and Anthony, respectfully keeping their distance, had paired up

to work on the previous night's homework.

"Want us to share?" Kyna asked, knowing that there probably wouldn't be any further opportunities that day for Ashley to satisfy herself. "We can all meet up after school, at my place. We'll use Ken."

Ashley erupted into hysterical laughter. "Oh, yes! He's so easy!"

Kyna patted Ashley on the back and smiled—but not for long, for she caught sight of the school's security guard, accompanied by the principal, crossing the football field.

Headed in their direction.

"Shit," Kyna murmured.

Ashley grabbed her by the arm. "Oh, Kee! He told—Aaron *told* on me! We're going to get in trouble—"

"No," said Kyna, "we're not."

Mario Castillo was slightly atypical, as far as principals went. A forty-something Puerto Rican whose disarming smile was always ready for any occasion, he approached the teenagers in apparent good cheer. There was, however, a veiled intensity to his gaze that made it clear he wasn't here to shoot the breeze.

"How are we doing today?" he asked, nodding at Natalie and Anthony.

They, in turn, shrugged indifferently and looked up over their shoulders at Kyna and Ashley.

Mario cleared his throat, focused his gaze on Ashley. "Ms. Zurich, I need to have a word with you."

At this, Ashley went rigid. Her grip on Kyna's arm tightened. "Kee..."

"Shh. Wait here."

Kyna descended the bleachers, taking the seats two at a time and alighting on the grass before the adults. Her eyes locked with Mario's. "Yes, Mr. Castillo?"

"Hello, Kyna," he replied, matching her stare. "Is there some reason why Ash's decided not to join us?"

There was a gentle pulling, a slight extension of the aura. Kyna had always suspected Mario of having some notion of the knack—or, at the very least, of having such a charismatic personality as to be unable to ignore his own sway over other people.

As such, she reacted appropriately, extending her own influence, playing the game.

“She’s not feeling well, sir.”

“Well, I really need to talk to her.”

“Not right now.”

“It’s quite important.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.”

“Is she in trouble?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether or not she’s done something bad.”

“She hasn’t.”

Mario blinked, as if coming to a sudden realization. He exchanged glances with the security guard, whose expression was equally as dumbfounded. Meanwhile, in the background, Kyna continued working him over, pushing him towards a pre-ordained end result. Not so quickly that he might catch on to what was happening, but gently enough so that he felt confident he was in control of his own decisions.

He decided to let the matter drop. “Okay, then. Just looking out for you guys, that’s all.”

“Thanks, Mr. Castillo.”

Mario nodded and turned to leave. The security guard followed.

When they were both out of sight, Ashley hurried down to join her friends. “They didn’t stand a chance,” she said gleefully. “Good work, Kee.”

Kyna wiped her brow. She was sweating from her exertions. “They’re only duds. Easy as breathing.”

“But,” said Natalie, getting to her feet, “what about this Aaron dude? If he knows about Ashley, he might come back with questions. He might make trouble. He’s not one of us.”

True, thought Kyna. Just because a person has been bitten doesn’t necessarily mean he’s ours yet. Different people reacted in different ways.

She took Ashley by the shoulders, leaned in close so that their foreheads touched. “Let me see.”

Ashley acquiesced, closing her eyes and opening herself. Their auras intermingled briefly as they swapped collected impressions.

Geez, thought Kyna. I didn’t realize just how low your stores were.

There were only a few vibrant impressions left: a lanky, desperate tenth-grade boy, from last week; a grown man, who should have known better, from a few days ago; various sessions of self-mutilation during which Ashley had miserably consumed her own blood so as to trick her brain into thinking she’d actually eaten.

And Aaron. Blond-hair, blue eyes, tall and muscular and superbly proportioned—his essence sent a tingle up Kyna’s spine. She was taken aback by his good looks, certainly, but also by her own reaction to him. She might have developed an instant crush had she not reminded herself that he was a guy, a male, a *man*. Probably a stereotypical asshole as well. After all, the cuter a guy was, the more ruthless his relationships were.

Don’t beat around the bush.

She absorbed what Ashley had gathered from Aaron’s essence, added it to her own personal store so that when she saw him, she would know who he was, know what he’d done to Ash.

Then she would even the score.

* * *

Fifth period geometry. Aaron entered Ms. Featley’s classroom

twenty minutes late and handed her his now-wrinkled schedule and nurse's pink-slip.

"Ooh," she said, noticing the bandages on Aaron's arm. "What's happened to you, Mr."—she glanced briefly at the schedule—"Capps?"

Rather than go into an unnecessarily long story about an ice-cube vampire girl who went around offering strangers free sex, Aaron simply shrugged and said, "Had a little accident. Nurse fixed me up, though."

Ms. Featley shook her head and made a "tsk-tsk" noise as she handed back his paperwork.

The desks were arranged in two long rows on opposite ends of the classroom, leaving the center of the room clear so that the teacher could roam freely during lectures. Aaron found a seat and did his best to go with the flow, as far as the lesson was concerned—though it was a bit difficult because his attention suddenly refused to focus on anything but one of the girls sitting in the opposite row.

She wasn't what he would typically consider as cute. Her blond hair was short, sort of a bowl-cut, and though her face was pretty, her body was somewhat masculine: broad shoulders, thick neck, narrow hips. She wasn't *manly*, but she was certainly harder-looking, much more athletic than most girls. He wondered briefly if she was a lesbian...or perhaps an over-achieving gymnast.

He was simultaneously perplexed and entranced by her looks; he couldn't stop staring. A few times she caught his gaze, and he blushed, looked away, tried to concentrate on his work—only to find himself staring at her again and again. The more he looked, the more he realized it was her face, most of all, that made the biggest impression. Soft, delicate, almost angelic, it was in stark contrast to the rest of her, and perhaps the only potent indication of her femininity.

Amazingly, Aaron found himself broiling, becoming turned on

as he surveyed her lower half. There wasn't too much left to the imagination there, for she wore gray sweats that revealed the impressive contour of her legs and butt. He looked up again—

—and flinched as he caught her looking right at him, smiling at him, ever so slightly.

He looked away, surprised at himself, surprised by his sudden, sloppy boldness. *She wants me*, he heard himself thinking; it was an utmost certainty that this girl, whom he knew absolutely nothing about, was attracted to him. *Ah, but hold on there, big boy. Since when did you go for the tomboy types?* Another glance in her direction, followed by another fluttering of his heart. *Crazy. Nuts. Just look at her. She must be a dyke, a hardcore feminist or something. Hair's too short, arms and legs too muscled. Probably go down on her to find a big fat dick.*

Still, he was mesmerized, the heat building beneath his skin and turning his thoughts to molasses. It was comparable to what he'd experienced earlier in the counseling office—only this was a magnification, a full-blown maelstrom.

The bell rang, and Aaron (having lost all track of time) was freed from his reverie as the Girl with the Boy's Haircut promptly rose from her desk and exited the classroom along with everyone else.

It seemed he'd breezed through half the class without even trying.

Fending off a dissatisfied look from Ms. Featley, he hastily gathered up his things and left.

* * *

The fever kicked in during P.E. class, which was (thankfully) the last period of the day. Without shorts and a T-shirt, Aaron ended up sitting out anyway. By the time the dismissal bell rang, he was ablaze, and aching from head to toe. His first instinct was to blame the bite wound, though oddly enough it felt perfectly

fine when compared to the rest of him.

Needless to say, he disregarded Joshua's earlier invitation to meet after school and walked straight home, relegating himself to the fact that he would probably be spending the weekend in bed.

Oh well.

* * *

Belinda Circle.

Kyna made a mental note to herself as she passed by, heading eastward along Lincoln and keeping a view of Aaron in her mind's eye.

That's how you do it. Stay with him, coax him through the transition, keep him moving nicely along, until tonight. Should be ready by then. All that energy, fighting the fever, just trying to stay awake...

...this weekend is going to be an absolute feast.

CHAPTER 7

By the time Aaron arrived at his parents' house, his fever had quadrupled in intensity. Dragging his feet as he went, he fetched the mail and crossed the blistering concrete driveway—a miniature Sahara at this hour of the afternoon. He let himself in, discarding his backpack beside the front door and peeling off his sweat-soaked T-shirt as he made a beeline for the kitchen. There, he splashed his face with water from the tap and took several large mouthfuls in a vain attempt to cool himself. It didn't work, however, as the heat continued to build in waves.

He felt like he was burning alive.

"Mom?" he called out, leaning against the counter and closing his eyes. He could feel a deep throb throughout his body. *Probably a 24-hour flu, he thought. Or...what did they call it? Montezuma's revenge? Eating and drinking in a new place, with a different set of germs than you're used to. You get really sick for the first couple of days because your body needs to adjust its immune system.*

Julia was nowhere to be found (and Daniel would be at work until five o'clock), but she had left a note on the table indicating her absence.

Running errands.

Aaron sighed and left the kitchen. He went upstairs and planned out a little self-care in his head: Tylenol, shower, bed. In the bathroom he found a box marked "amenities," which was filled with bottles of vitamin pills, hydrogen peroxide, and mouthwash. He also found boxes of cotton swabs and tubes of toothpaste—but no Tylenol.

Wonderful.

He shoved the box aside, leaned against the sink counter to examine his reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror. His face was

flushed bright red, his eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot. He was also sweating profusely. Large droplets trickled down his forehead and along his cheeks

Goddamn, he thought, for the first time becoming just a little frightened. *I'm dying or something.*

The bite wound. Perhaps it was infected. Fully expecting to see the ravages of some exotic form of bacterial infection puckering his skin, he unwrapped the bandages and examined his arm. However, despite a few unsightly blotches of dried blood, the wound appeared to be healing normally. No swelling, no discoloration, no pus—no loose flaps of skin seceding from his body and forming little miniature bodies of their own. In a sense, this was reassuring, but in another, it left unanswered the basic question rattling around in his mind: *What's wrong with me?*

He stripped off his clothes and stepped into the bathtub. He turned on the cold water and let the spray cascade over his smoldering body for a few minutes before he realized it was doing nothing to alleviate the inner furnace threatening to turn him into a human sparkler. His heart hammered in his chest, the blood rushed in his ears—he was starting to get light-headed.

Anxiety attack? he wondered. He'd never had one before, though he'd heard stories of other people stressing themselves out to the point where they became physically ill. *Maybe, with the move, all the adjustments of setting up camp in a new city, a new state...but no, that's not me. I don't flip out like this.*

Carelessly trailing water as he went, he left the shower, grabbed a towel from the linen cabinet and wrapped it around himself as he stumbled into the hallway. He paused for a moment to try and discern any sounds from down below.

No one home yet.

The dizziness was getting to him. He barely made it into his bedroom before he collapsed on the floor, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Without enough strength to even lift his arms, he remained where he was as he slowly lost consciousness.

His last coherent thought was whether or not he'd left the shower nozzle on.

* * *

He drifted in and out of sleep for several hours, watching the fading sunlight, projected through his bedroom window, travel across the ceiling. Eventually it was replaced with the sulfuric glow of the outdoor street lamps as evening fell...and still the fever raged on.

I wonder if anyone will find me before it's too late, he wondered, listening to the drumbeat of his heart, feeling skin crawl beneath skin, a second layer of himself writhing and shifting deep down inside. Eventually he found himself laying on his back on his bed, sweat rolling down his neck, pooling in between the ridges of his chest and abdomen.

He tilted his head somewhat to the right, saw the bath towel strewn across the floor—evidence that he'd dragged himself up onto the bed without considering his shame.

Great. If mom and dad find me now, it'll be with everything hanging out every which way. That's just great.

Ages and ages passed. No one checked in on him. Gradually, the fever dissipated, and his limbs felt more like arms and legs rather than gelatinous slabs of lifeless matter. Experimentally, he raised his arms, looked at his hands as he flexed his fingers. Mobile again, he sat up to find an insistent erection bobbing between his legs, an indiscriminate hunger buzzing in his blood.

Sick as hell and my dick still manages to find time for that.

A glance at the alarm clock, which read 11:32pm, and he swung his legs over the side of the bed. For the most part, his body was obedient to his commands, though it felt as if he'd been lifting weights for the last eight hours. He was thirsty enough to drink his weight in water; feeling the sweat-soaked bedsheets, it became evident where it had all gone.

He was out of his bedroom, halfway down the darkened hallway when he realized that he was still undressed. Embarrassed at first (what if his parents saw him like this?), he paused only briefly to listen for the telltale noises of light snoring emanating from their bedroom. After that, the new thrill of sneaking around the house in the nude took precedence. He descended into the living room, moved through the semi-darkness without making a sound. In the kitchen, he fetched a glass and filled it with water from the tap. He emptied it in six gulps and replaced it in the drain. Then he made his way back into the living room, enjoying the feel of open air against his backside.

The Girl with the Boy's Haircut was waiting for him.

At first, he was caught off guard, and immediately tried to cover his groin with his hands—a difficult task, considering the state of his member.

The Girl merely laughed. She sat on an unopened box, near the window, her legs spread apart, her chest thrust outward as she leaned back somewhat, presenting herself to him. Light from the street lamps outside filtered in through a nearby window, casting narrow strips of light across her unclad body.

Aaron was unable to speak. Whether out of prurience or out of a genuine desire to confirm the Girl's presence, he took a tentative step forward. He wondered how she'd gotten inside, though he couldn't seem to make his mouth work just yet.

The Girl initiated the conversation:

"Wow. Look at you. Nice birthday suit."

Again, he was reminded of his aroused state, and he lowered his eyes in shame. When he looked back up he saw the Girl coming towards him; she promptly initiated intimate contact.

"I saw you staring at me in class today," she said.

She was warm and smooth. Seeing her naked like this, he was convinced immediately that her lean, muscular build had not entirely diluted her feminine allure. He wanted to reach out and touch her thigh, her breast, but instead he cleared his throat,

took a step back. "What's going on? How did you—"

"The front door was unlocked," she replied, frowning as she stepped in close again. "You've got to remember you're in California now."

"But how did you know I live here?"

"You ask too many questions."

Aaron took another step backward and found himself suddenly pressed up against the wall.

"Nowhere to go," the Girl said, embracing him once more. He could feel her toes brushing over the tops of his feet.

Nowhere to go. "I'm dreaming—this is in my head, right?"

"Could be."

"But then...how...why am I dreaming of you?"

"So we can play together."

"I don't understand." Aaron looked away, towards the staircase. "I mean...someone's going to catch us. My parents are upstairs."

"I told you, it's a *dream*...but if it were real, wouldn't you be excited?"

A moment's thought, a moment's agonizing. He was unable to pull away. "I don't know," he said, squirming. "I don't know you."

"Doesn't matter. This is all in your head—you said so yourself."

"Oh...but we can't just...I mean...in my dreams I don't usually —"

She flicked his member. "You usually don't *what*?"

"I don't...I mean...you gotta know a person before you just go and...and..."

"That's what your mommy and daddy tell you when they're trying to stuff you full of their *morals*. But as soon as you're on your own, it's your own rules. What matters to you when you're banging some girl?"

"I don't *bang* girls."

"Right."

“I don’t.”

“So, what, then? Mutual only? Oral? Tell me a guy with a body like yours doesn’t work out to impress the girls.”

Aaron swallowed, tried to resist giving an answer, tried to ignore the Girl’s insistent kneading, but she was pulling at him with more than her hands now, and his memories spilled over, just a bit—memories of Nikki and himself, alone in her bedroom with the lights down low— “Why’s it so important?”

“Because it is. ‘You can learn a lot about someone from the way they make love.’ Or maybe all it takes is a girl, letting her take you out to the bleachers behind the school and offering you head, but you think you’re too good for her, so you push her aside like a piece of trash.”

An image came sharply into focus in Aaron’s mind, some far-off memory of himself and a pale Goth girl sitting together atop the bleachers at Savanna. “How’d you know about that?”

The Girl smiled coldly. She seemed to have found an answer of some sort. “Shh,” she said with a wicked glint in her eyes as she knelt in front of him, lowered her mouth to—

“Hey!” he protested, grabbing her hair and trying to pull her off. However, his arms became feeble, and his legs began to tremble as his will dissolved into nothing. He could only observe in an odd mixture of fear and ecstasy as the Girl worked at him, gave him that which he wanted most, that which he was too embarrassed to accept willingly. She finished him off in less than a minute, and when it was over, she stood again, studied him intently. She was breathing heavily, as if overwhelmed by her own emotions.

She ran her hands lightly across his chest. *You are so fresh. No wonder Ash spotted you.*

Aaron’s mind was reeling, but he couldn’t allow the dream to play out without resistance. “You know Ash?” he asked, trying to keep his concentration.

The Girl, now showering his neck and shoulders with kisses,

responded mentally: *Just finishing what she started.*

He wanted to ask her something else, but his mind became entangled again, filled to the brim with the essence of the Girl. He focused instead on returning her embraces, and his hands—unusually skilled in this instance—became bolder, slipping between her legs.

She suddenly sobered and pulled away.

“Why are you stopping?” he asked, perplexed.

There was an odd expression on her face. She looked confused for a moment, wiped her brow with the back of her hand. Aaron got the feeling they were going too fast (too fast, for a dream?). Perhaps he was subconsciously unaccustomed to such strong mental stimuli, and this was his brain’s way of—

No, not that. The Girl took his hand, lead him towards the hallway. *Let’s do it someplace else.*

Aaron heard her thoughts—a dream within a dream—and he acquiesced, but instead of heading for the staircase (as expected), she went for the front door, opened it and stepped out into the night. He hardly had time to think about what was happening before he was jogging with her, *au naturel*. He asked her where they were going, but she didn’t answer. She merely moved slightly ahead of him, legs and buttocks flexing impressively in the subtle light, bare feet making light slapping noises against the pavement. She lead him out of the cul-de-sac and east along Lincoln. All the while he was splitting his attention between her amazing form and the well-lit street, which was, thankfully, deserted at this hour. However, that didn’t mean that at any moment they wouldn’t be spotted by late night pedestrians—or worse, by the police.

“Hey,” he called out, reaching for her shoulder as they came upon the parking lot of a 24-hour liquor store. Still, no one else was around, but—

“Here,” the Girl said, stopping abruptly and whirling around to face him. She wrapped her arms around him, pulled him down

onto the sidewalk. "Let's do it here."

"What?" Aaron was incredulous. "Right here? This is crazy, this is nuts..." But there she went again, beginning her repeat performance, desperately groping him in various sensitive places, leading him towards the inevitable. Again, his willpower drained away even as an alarm siren went off in the distant recesses of his mind.

Relax. Just a dream, right?

Yes. Strange, twisted, wickedly exhilarating dream in which some strange girl is worshipping your wang like a Popsicle.

It was too good to be true, though, for as the second culmination of the evening began to build, as he slipped past the point of no return, he noticed the store entrance doors opening, two men exiting, no doubt immediately spotting the Girl and himself in the midst of their lascivious interaction, and *oh, shit—*

—she bit down hard, causing him to cry out in alarm as blood, warm and thick, spurted against his chest. His vision flashed white, the resulting pain an uncertain bi-product of an erotic dream gone horribly wrong.

That's for fucking with Ash.

He rolled away, onto his hands and knees, panting, gasping for air—

—he jolted awake to find himself desecrating the sidewalk in front of a 24-hour Easy Mart. He toppled forward onto the asphalt, cupping his hands protectively over his crotch, and immediately realized three things: one, the Girl with the Boy's Haircut *had* been the specter of a dream; two, his penis was still intact, with nothing more serious than a few bits of gravel stuck in places he'd rather have kept clean; three, he was the center of attention for a pair of unamused store-owners who were looking down at him with expressions of disgust on their faces.

Damn, he thought. This is bad.

CHAPTER 8

Two blocks southwest of Savanna High was Pacific Grove, an ultra-clean, ultra-snobby planned community that sat in the middle of the time-worn decadence that was Anaheim. Joshua, head drooped, hands stuffed in his pockets, walked quickly past neatly aligned palms and impeccably trimmed hedges, past scooter-wielding children and lawn-tending fathers. No one paid him any attention, nor did anyone seem to notice the unsightly stains on his lips.

Friday, like any other day of the week, usually found him home alone and feeling sorry for himself. However, today had been just a little different, for although he still felt like a wretch (that went without saying), there was one major difference: he wasn't hungry. Rather, he felt somewhat bloated, and just a little bit sick. Despite the afternoon heat, he shivered, as if chilled by invisible snowfall. He would have donned his sweater, had he not left it lying crumpled on Heather's living room floor.

Heather, he thought, his gut writhing. That afternoon she'd merely been a nondescript face, just another cute girl he might have passed by without a second glance. He'd been waiting in line at Taco Bell; she'd been ahead of him, standing there with her backpack slung over one bare shoulder, her gym shorts clinging to her butt like Saran Wrap.

Fresh out of P.E. class.

He'd tried not to stare too much, tried to think of other things, his food coming soon...*stuff yourself, then go home and jerk-off until you pass out...but no, look. She's turning around, smiling at you, asking you if you know what time it is.*

It had been so long, he hadn't been sure if he still had it in him, but the hunger was so fierce, and the fiasco in the boy's

locker room had left him drained, in need of something more than his own essence.

Can't subsist forever on recycled blood.

So he'd reeled her in, complimenting her eyes, her face, telling her he wasn't normally this bold with girls, but she was just so pretty. Her boyfriend must be a lucky guy. What? No boyfriend? Aw, couldn't believe that...

In twenty minutes' time he was walking with her to her parents' place in Pacific Cove, slipping in through the front door, and, oh! the vibrant memories were coming back in a flood now as he saw himself kissing her, groping her, sprinting towards home plate without even making the effort to find the bedroom. She'd kissed him back, helped him out of his clothes, assuring him that her parents wouldn't be back until after five, that she'd never done this sort of thing with a boy before, but for some reason, now—*God, you're so cute!*

Out of their clothes next, stumbling onto the floor, kissing her on the mouth, tasting her saliva, swallowing as much as possible. Any sort of bodily fluid had a twang to it, especially if it was someone else's.

So much better than your own. All this time...saving your own blood in little vials...not enough...not enough.

He'd told himself that this was what teenagers did with each other, that sex was just part of growing up—he didn't have to feel bad about it, as long as he pretended. After the first few tastes, he'd thrown everything he'd had at his victim so that there wasn't the slightest chance of her pulling back until it was all over. She was oblivious, of course. To her, he was merely inflamed with passion, and so she made no move to stop him. Rather, she encouraged him, begging him, please, please do anything he wanted.

And he had. From kissing and nibbling to biting and tearing, he'd done everything his urges had demanded he do...and the blood, the potent rush of warm vitality as it spurted down his

throat...the sheer ecstasy of it all nearly killed him on the spot.

Funny, Joshua thought, yanking himself back to the present, suddenly feeling his stomach turn. Didn't think it would be that easy. She hadn't even realized what was happening until I was halfway to the door, pulling my shirt back on and...oh, Jesus. She's just sitting there like that, shaking and moaning as she looks down at what I've done to her, pain slowly sinking in, all this blood just seeping into the carpet, and...oh, no.

He stumbled slightly, clutching his midsection as he felt his gut begin to clench up. It was like having eaten a pound of raw meat.

Gonna be sick...

He managed to control himself for another block, until he came to Lincoln, at which point he could no longer hold it in and hastily sought out an appropriate spot to empty the contents of his stomach. There was a liquor store across the street; he made a beeline for the rear of the building, where the dumpsters were. Then he vomited, spewing angry jets of vile fluid against the asphalt. Most of it splattered on his pants and sneakers.

No, dipshit! You're being wasteful! Save some of it!

It was all too much, though. Going for months without tasting anyone but himself, and then suddenly devouring Heather, violating her—*raping* her. Forcing his will on her, making her do what he wanted (whether she realized it or not), and all the while extracting her essence to satisfy himself.

And now? He was physically satisfied, yes, but he was also more disgusted than ever with himself and with the direction his life had suddenly taken. Never had he filched from someone so violently, so carelessly. He'd stolen from others before, mostly guys, before he'd worked up the courage to go after girls. It was easier that way, to get his fix from semen—easier and less violent (in most cases) than figuring out how to get someone's blood, easier learning how to play the homosexual game so he could suck off men behind the gay bars, get their seed that way, mov-

ing from lap to lap. It was good eating at the cost of his own conscience, his own soul...but no, he'd refused to do that anymore, hadn't he? Abstinence was colossally difficult, but better to be self-sufficient (and miserable) than at the mercy of your own affliction. For a while he'd even thought he'd gotten a handle on it, though over time he'd felt himself stretching thinner, the underlying ache festering into something that could no longer be ignored.

And now it had come to *this*.

Now, because of him, there was a girl named Heather who would soon be going through the same thing: the fevers, the shakes, the terrible midnight sweats—and that was if she survived the wound, if someone got her to the hospital before she bled to death.

Another life ruined because you don't give a shit whether or not you pass on your STDs to one person or one hundred people.

In utter misery, Joshua collapsed onto his knees, leaned against the wall for support as his stomach slowly settled itself. Every muscle in his body twitched, both from his release and from the terrible knowledge that he was now a criminal. Heather was a student at Savanna, and had probably spotted him once or twice before (though he didn't know her personally); there would be very little delay in pointing him out to the police. Once she figured out what had happened, there would be questions about the boy who'd sweet-talked his way into her home and then had his way with her.

Then again, maybe she would be one of the quiet ones, a silent sufferer like himself, one who was too horrified, too revolted by the truth to let anyone know about it. After all, parents, police, doctors, holy men...what did they know about the fever? Assuming you brought up the subject, how did you talk about it without sounding like a total nut case? *Excuse me, but I have this problem, you see. I once had sex with a girl and she gave me a kind of sickness. No, not an actual STD. More like, well, I'm not a vampire per se, but I do*

need to feed on human bodily fluids—blood, sweat, saliva, semen—for the aural energy. I have to do it on a regular basis, too, or else I go nuts. I guess you could call it a communicable deficiency of some kind, but I sure as hell can't find anything about it in any medical encyclopedia. So, do I need a prescription for this, or can I get something over-the-counter?

He eventually slumped into a sitting position, his back against the wall, his legs splayed out. He watched the vomit slowly dry on his shoes as afternoon waned into evening, evening into night. Not once did anyone approach him, ask him if he was okay. No concerned friends, no concerned mother, who might have been wondering about her son's whereabouts at such a late hour, but whose "let the kid raise himself" mentality prevented any such physical intervention from occurring. As a child the freedom had been intoxicating; now it was more frightening than anything in the whole world.

It was nearly midnight when he finally decided to leave the alley. Wiping half-dried tears from his cheek and getting to his feet, he started towards the front of the store, where streetlights gave acidic form to barren sidewalks, empty streets—and Aaron Capps, kneeling naked in the middle of the parking lot and...masturbating?

"What the hell is this?" someone exclaimed.

Joshua had come out from the side of the building closest to the street, and there were a few low-cut hedges between him and the storefront, where a pair of clerks had suddenly emerged. He quickly squatted and scooted in close to the bushes so he could observe the scene incognito.

The man who'd first spoken was now shaking his fist angrily. "Hey, you! What do you think you're doing?!"

"That's nasty," replied his partner, with a laugh. "I bet his girlfriend hasn't given him any in months."

"Shut up and call the cops."

* * *

Despite the audacity of waking up to find himself fully exposed in public, Aaron discovered that the worst part of the entire evening came afterward, when he was back at home and sitting slumped at one end of his parents' living room sofa. He was (thankfully!) fully dressed now, and more or less fully recovered from his altered state, though his head still throbbed.

The police had picked him up, listened to his babbled story about how he'd woken and found himself outside the liquor store. He'd also sworn he would never intentionally do such a thing, and that tonight's incident had been his first experience with sleepwalking; he couldn't understand how or why he'd walked all the way out there just to, well, do what he did.

They'd tested his blood alcohol level, which had turned up nothing of consequence, and, considering the parking lot had been vacant anyway, had shipped him home with a stern warning and a blanket wrapped around his waist.

Now, alone with his parents (who weren't all that fresh themselves at half past midnight), and enduring an uncomfortable silence as the Capps family as a whole attempted to make sense of things, he might have just as easily crawled into a hole and died.

"Well," Julia said after a while, clearing her throat and checking Aaron's thermometer. "Your temperature's normal." She smiled half-heartedly.

Aaron didn't dare make eye contact, didn't dare do anything to invite that ominous, unasked question: *What has driven you to flaunt your bare bottom around the streets of Anaheim in the middle of the night?* Using his dream (the contents of which he'd kept entirely to himself, for obvious reasons) as an excuse was out of the question, so he sat and sulked, awaited whatever punishment was to be dealt.

The trouble was, it was so unlike him to do anything of this sort. As a child, he'd gone through his ornery phases (throwing

mud balls at girls, staying up late to watch dirty movies, using Daniel's power tools without permission), but never had he *really* gone over the edge. There was no reference point for tonight's transgression.

"Well," Julia said again. It was the fourth time that evening she'd started a sentence with the word "well." She bit her lip, looked at Daniel, who sat across the room atop an unopened box. He shrugged and gave her a your-guess-is-as-good-as-mine look. She faced Aaron again and took hold of his arm. "Doesn't look infected, but maybe I should run you over to the doctor tomorrow anyhow."

"I don't see what good that'll do," Aaron said, not wanting to have to tell someone all the gritty details of one, his dream, and two, his encounter with Ashley. To tell another guy that you were bitten by a girl because you wouldn't let her fuck you—it was embarrassing. "I feel fine. Really, I do. It was probably something I ate."

Julia looked concerned, but didn't know what else to say at the moment. She sighed and got up. "Okay, then. Off to bed."

Aaron complied. As he climbed the stairs, he noticed that Daniel and Julia remained in the living room. Undoubtedly, they were about to have a Private Talk.

When he was upstairs and out of sight (but still within earshot), he paused to listen:

"What do you think?"

"Christ, Julia. I think he's fine. He's just...sixteen. He's mad at me for shipping us here so suddenly. You saw how he was during the trip. I don't think we said a single word to each other the whole time. He's rebelling—though by now the neighbors must think we're all a bunch of misfits."

"It's not like him, though. You think he'd really do something like this to get attention?"

"When I was sixteen, I did a lot of things that 'weren't like me.' I pulled stunts all the time to get back at my old man."

"But why wouldn't he tell us if something was wrong?"

"Come on. How easy was it for you to just walk up to your parents and have a heart to heart? Besides, Aaron's a self-serve kind of kid. I think he has to work this out on his own before anything else."

"We just have to make sure he doesn't become a deviant in the meantime."

"He's not going to become a deviant."

"I was joking, Daniel."

"I know."

A moment of silence. Daniel clearing his throat, and then:

"Mark's offer still stands for tomorrow's barbecue. I was going to make an excuse, some reason we couldn't go, but he's got some kids of his own, and a couple friends have kids close to Aaron's age. Maybe we should make an appearance."

"Gee, it's not like I had any unpacking to do or anything."

"Christ, I can't stand the guy either. He'll probably bring up the fact that we're his beneficiaries a dozen times before we get to the coleslaw, but, well, in a hundred years, who's going to care? Besides, we can finish settling in on Sunday."

"You make it sound about as interesting as a dentist appointment..."

Aaron left the hall, retreated to his bedroom, where he closed and locked the door. He sat at the edge of his bed and groaned inwardly, feeling the heat coming off his face in waves. It had nothing to do with fever, though. This was shame, embarrassment, frustration—all rolled into one conglomerate emotion he couldn't begin to understand. Even in the privacy of his own room he felt as if the eyes of the entire neighborhood were on him, peeking through the window, seeing him shame-faced and bare-assed despite his clothing.

Mom thinks I'm sick, dad thinks I'm being a wise-ass...and me? I don't know what's going on.

One thing was for sure: he was dreading Monday afternoon,

when he would have to sit in the same classroom with the Girl, the inspiration behind his teenage brain's latest erotic indulgence. Naturally, he wasn't so naïve as to believe that other people could actually read his mind or seed his dreams. It was just... well, it was like the rare occasions when he would be masturbating in the afternoon (instead of doing his homework), and his mother would knock on his door to talk to him about whatever it was she needed to talk about. He would hastily tuck himself back into his pants, wipe as much of the sweat from his forehead and neck as he could before letting her in. She would then proceed to sit on his bed, oblivious to what he'd been doing in that very spot not thirty seconds ago, and talk for what seemed like hours as he stood at the opposite end of the room and fidgeted. She didn't know (at least, he hoped to God she didn't), but *he* did, and it was almost as bad as shamelessly whipping out the goods and doing it right there, in front of her.

Thump.

Aaron looked toward the window.

Thump-thump.

There was a small dark splotch against the glass. Someone was hurling tiny mud cakes, trying to get his attention. He went to the window, slid it open and stuck his head outside. Joshua was there, still dressed in his school clothes and standing in the middle of the driveway. He gazed around himself cautiously and motioned for Aaron to come outside.

As if one aberration for the night wasn't enough.

Aaron considered merely closing the window and going right to bed, but Josh looked adamant about their meeting *now*, so he sighed and gestured towards the backyard.

Daniel and Julia didn't spend much time downstairs. After a few minutes of idle conversation, making the midnight rounds of all the locks and light switches, they turned in for the night—at which point Aaron slipped quietly from his bedroom, down the stairs, through the kitchen, and out into the backyard.

Joshua was waiting there for him, an unearthly specter masked in twisted flesh and smelling faintly of...something sweet and sour (vomit, perhaps?). He had his backpack with him, as if he'd decided not to go home after school.

Maybe he didn't have a home to go to.

Aaron cleared his throat. "Hi, Josh. What's...how've you been?"

"Okay," said Joshua. He seemed preoccupied. "Sorry if I woke you up."

"It's okay. I was awake anyway."

"Yeah...I, um, sort of saw what you did out by the liquor store."

Aaron's face flared crimson. "Oh, God—"

"I didn't come over to make fun. I have a question for you, and I want you to answer it honestly."

No, I'm not an exhibitionist. "Okay."

Joshua took a deep breath, let it out, and stared Aaron straight in the face. "Can you see me?"

"What?"

"Can you *see* me?"

"Of course I can. You're right in front of me."

Joshua rolled his eyes in exasperation. "No, I mean...do I look like any other fifteen-year-old, or is my skin all gross and messed up?"

Aaron grimaced slightly, shrugged. "Um, well, yeah. There's that."

"And I looked like this when you first saw me, right? Before you got bitten?"

"Well, um, yeah. Is there some reason why you would have looked different?"

Josh smiled in apparent amusement. "You're putting me on, aren't you?"

"What?"

"You're one of us. One of the afflicted."

This was getting strange. "What are you talking about?"

“Nothing,” Josh replied, his smile broadening as he folded his arms. “I was just thinking we could help each other out, if you get my drift.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then we should talk.”

“It’s one in the morning.”

“This will only take a minute.”

With a sigh, Aaron acquiesced—

—and that’s when things got interesting.

CHAPTER 9

The evening shadows had long since claimed the interior of Kyna's clubhouse when she finally decided she could move freely again. She opened her eyes, uncrossed her legs and wiped the sweat from her face as she slid from her bed and started pacing. She was still fully dressed, having begun her meditation session right after school.

Initially, everything had gone smoothly. She'd lain on her bed, relaxed every muscle from head to toe, remained so perfectly calm and still that eventually she was not aware of her body at all. She'd sent her feelers out across the city, allowed her aura to expand outward along every street, through every alley, between every crack and crevice of suburbia. Floating bodiless above a murky sea of flickering, glowing souls, she could discern the brighter ones from the insubstantial ones. The former often came in pairs: distinctive energy caused by strenuous exercise or lovemaking. The latter were usually the lonely souls, the deeply contemplative or disenfranchised people who merely floated aimlessly on the spiritual sea instead swimming in any given direction.

Aaron's soul had been a lone point of light, unusually brighter than the others—perhaps because of his fever (a biological stress that drew heavily on one's essence), or perhaps because there was simply more of him packed into that handsome body of his. She could see why Ashley had fixated on him in the first place; it would have been hard *not* to.

Herself and Aaron, next. With him in his mind, the two of them together in his parents' imagined living room, her essence had intertwined with his, and she had worked him over, gotten him all excited, causing the energy to radiate off him in waves.

Her intention had been (as it was with all the other duds she'd tapped) to bring him to his most vulnerable point and then feed off that sweet, abundant potency as it came gushing out of him like water from a geyser. It wasn't so much a sexual thing, though the circumstances had certainly been erotic. She hadn't meant to become entangled in Aaron's typically male libido, but it had happened anyway. She'd allowed herself to become impassioned, too entangled in his essence, so much of it, all at once—

—I'd almost gone over the edge.

A pang of anxiety caused her stomach to turn. She slowed her pacing and concentrated.

Something went wrong, but you got a handle on it. Pulled back before it was too late.

Of course, seeing a cute guy without his clothes on (even if by way of the astral plane) provided a basic thrill, but it was something Kyna normally kept in the background, something she enjoyed on the side as she focused her main energies on getting the job done.

I let him get to me, forgot he's just a guy, a man—a more pleasant means of sustaining yourself, maybe, but that's all. Don't forget that this isn't love, there's never love. Only you against them. Take what you need, keep yourself alive...move on. She almost felt nauseous. *Acting like any typical sixteen-year-old girl, screwing guys on a hormonal whim, no thought of the consequences. Maybe he doesn't care, maybe he's not clean, maybe he's just trying to feed off you.*

Kyna wasn't supposed to want guys. Admire the cute ones, yes, perhaps even play with them during sup—but always at a distance, always for a good laugh.

You don't want Aaron, because wanting a guy means giving yourself to him, and that also means giving him control.

With Joshua she'd made such an error, and it had cost her dearly, convinced her that being paranoid was far better than being victimized. Nevertheless, she was still simultaneously intrigued and repulsed by Aaron. He was the first boy to have in-

voked such a response from her. Well, the first since Joshua.

Funny. So similar in certain ways, different in others. He's cute—really cute—and he seems like such a nice guy...a guy who treats girls and relationships seriously. Even in his dreams he was thinking about the consequences—but then, he was only worrying about being caught in his parents' living room. How would he have reacted if I'd come to him alone, somewhere he would have felt confident? Just a dream, yes, but boys tend to translate their dreams both ways when it comes to fantasy and reality.

She shivered again, feeling the pang deep in her gut—something wickedly delicious and frighteningly overwhelming. She gritted her teeth, clamped her hands into fists, refused to light the candles she knew rested upon the dresser. After all, she'd been living alone in the clubhouse, apart from her mother, for years. Such solitude had often provided a sense of safety and protection from all that was wrong with the world. No sense in giving in to every little phobia known to mankind simply because of a small screw-up.

Don't start acting like a baby. Analyze your mistake, realize you did him all wrong. Too much crazed abandon, not enough reserve...but that's okay. You caught yourself, and now you know better. You're not that little girl anymore, looking for a guy's arms to hold you, kiss you, listening for him to tell you he loves you and wants to take you away from everything bad—only to wake up one day and discover he's been using you all along. You're smarter than that now, right? Right. Now get your clothes, go and take a shower and wash yourself clean.

She left the clubhouse, performed her usual security ritual of testing the locks and standing for a moment in the open air to listen for noises coming from the house. The kitchen light was on, and through the window (covered partially by a half-drawn curtain) she could see her mother, still wearing her work clothes and compiling her dinner from a bag of frozen green beans and a two-thirds empty bottle of tequila.

No sign of *him*.

Kyna entered, letting the screen door slide shut with a muffled bang. For a moment she stood at the entrance to the kitchen and watched her mother move back and forth between the sink and stove. The ever-present mess was still there, driving the flies nuts, only now there was the added bonus of Mrs. Miller's cigarette smoke wafting about, replacing the putrid scent of rotting food with that of smoldering tobacco.

"Hi, mom," said Kyna after a while.

Mrs. Miller jumped slightly. "Oh, it's you."

Kyna moved into the kitchen a bit. She clutched her bundle of clothing tight against her hip. "Just stopping in for a shower."

"Oh, cool. Hot as shit today. I bought some new soaps at the dollar store. There's rosemary and tangerine, and something with oatmeal, I think. I have a whole bag under the sink."

"Cool." Kyna shifted from one foot to the other. After an uncomfortable moment of not knowing what to say, she started backing out of the room. "I guess I'll see you later, then."

Mrs. Miller waved her hand awkwardly and stubbed out her cigarette on the counter top. "Hang on a sec, baby. Let me get a look at you." She approached Kyna and clasped her shoulders. "Geez, you're getting so big...where's my little girl gone to?"

Kyna found it hard to smile, for in such close proximity she could smell the liquor on her mother's breath, could see the little wrinkles and blemishes of her dried-out face.

Christ. A thirty-something shouldn't look this old. You look like a reptile...and you wonder why I try not to come inside the house unless I really need to.

She sighed, reached out and ran her fingers through Mrs. Miller's stringy locks. "You should take better care of yourself, mom."

Her mother smiled wistfully, the wrinkles around her eyes becoming crevices. "Oh, baby, I know. One of these days, when I have the time...I promise to pamper myself, okay? Besides, I already have the most beautiful daughter in the whole wide world.

Hard to compete with that.”

Yeah, right. “Catch you later, mom.”

Kyna turned away, left her mother in the kitchen, left her to her green beans and booze. Down the hall, into the bathroom, and out of her clothes next, biting her lip as she quickly stepped into the tub and turned on the water so that salty tears and frigid tap blended into one.

She sometimes cried like this, and she didn’t know why. After all, it was her mother’s life, her mother’s choice to become what she was. It wasn’t up to Kyna to make her into what she wanted, even though she was oftentimes tempted to do just that, to somehow hone her aural skills so that she could influence the woman’s everyday decisions, keep her on the right path, 24/7.

But in order to do that, you’d have to be...God.

Lately even He didn’t seem all that interested in the well-being of the Miller family.

Listen to yourself. Fixating on things you’ll never be able to change. Let it go and move on. You’ve got better things to do than—

She froze suddenly. Mind, body, and soul came to a shuddering halt as she heard a masculine voice—*his* voice—on the other side of the bathroom door (which she now realized she’d forgotten to lock).

Please, no...

His full name was Steven Dedman, though Kyna preferred to call him “Dead Man,” and he was what Mrs. Miller thought of as a husband, even though he only ever came around on weekends, when he was too drunk to want anything but a quick fuck and a good night’s rest. Oftentimes he would leave money—wads of fives, tens, sometimes twenties—scattered about the bed sheets as “a show of appreciation.” He liked his relationships informal.

He also liked Kyna—liked her a lot, and in ways that a grown man should never like a young girl, especially if that girl happened to be his daughter.

She gripped the soap tightly in her hands, watching through

the shower curtain as Dead Man came waltzing right into the bathroom. It was obvious that she was in here, yet he entered anyway—trapping her naked and vulnerable.

So damned vulnerable.

He paused for a moment, seeing her clothes on the toilet seat, looking up again, gazing at her as he put two and two together. She could see him through the shower curtain (which was transparent between the floral pattern), could make out the details of his curly hair and rugged face, the ultra-blue denim jacket and jeans that he always wore. She knew that he could see her as well, that he was squinting as hard as he could, trying to make out the details of her body.

That's right, isn't it, sweet thing? It's been years since I've seen my little girl. Didn't have any hair down there then...but look at you now. All grown up. Hips a little too boyish, still not much in the way of breasts, but good legs, a good butt—an amazing fuck, I bet.

Kyna remained perfectly still in the shower. At first she tried to convince herself that she was just hearing his thoughts, hearing the random debris that filtered through any asshole male's head when he saw a naked teenage girl in the shower, but she knew better, and it made her blood run cold despite her best efforts to remain in control of the situation.

Dead Man chuckled out loud and calmly removed her clothes from the toilet seat, placed them atop the counter. Then he lifted the seat, undid the fly of his jeans, and relieved himself. Through the shower curtain, Kyna could make out the shape of his penis, large and ominous as it dangled over the bowl.

Holding it, stroking it like a pet snake.

She dared not close her eyes, yet she refused to let herself see anymore of this grotesque display. She retreated mentally, leaning back against her own wall for support, bracing herself for the worst—trying to find the smallest bit of comfort while the water cascaded down her neck and shoulders, thin streams trailing from her nipples, trickling between her legs—seemingly in time

with the sound of Dead Man's urine splashing against the inside of the toilet bowl. Any minute now his hand would reach for the shower curtain, slowly pull it aside to reveal the prize.

She clenched her fists ever tighter, closed her eyes and sent him a silent mental spear: *You so much as think about opening that curtain and I swear I'll beat the living shit out of you.*

Another chuckle from Dead Man, an indiscriminate trickling noise as he tapped off the last few drops.

I know you hear me, she sent, dangerously close to succumbing completely to her own fear.

Dead Man never responded, mentally or otherwise. He didn't need to, for his presence, the knowledge that he was there and obviously in control (she would *not* get out of the shower until he left), was enough. It was all he needed, to be the only man she dared not confront—at least, not since she was twelve and had learned to either fend for herself or be forever enslaved to those with the willpower to control the ignorant. He'd backed off, once, perhaps acknowledging her burgeoning adulthood—but not *accepting* it. There was always that back door.

That's right. And someday, if it suits me, I'll put out that little bit of extra effort, take a look at what gifts puberty has bestowed upon my little girl.

For a moment Kyna feared this night, of all nights, would be the night. The past few years had merely been a hiatus—his appetite had undoubtedly grown as she had grown, from a girl into a young woman. If he wanted to, he could reap the harvest this very moment and she would be powerless to stop him.

She waited. It seemed like forever before she heard Dead Man zip up his jeans and leave the bathroom without even washing his hands. Afterward she took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and discovered she'd dug her fingers deep into the soap. The entire bar was mush.

See? That's why you don't look for love, whether it's Dead Man, Joshua, Aaron, or any other guy. Never. Ever.

CHAPTER 10

“There are two types of people in the world: duds and initiates. Those aren’t dictionary terms. You have to listen hard enough to know what they mean. Duds are the ordinary, everyday people who don’t know anything about auras and willpower and all that. Initiates are the ones who know how to control their own willpower in such a way that they can extend their auras outward and affect other people. Not exactly like mind control, but close. The initiates control the duds, the rich control the poor, and that’s how society works. Got it?”

“Not really,” Aaron replied with a yawn. He sat cross-legged on the chilled concrete plane that served as the Capps’ backyard, while Joshua (evidently too keyed up, even at this unwieldy hour) paced in front of him. Both boys spoke in subtle tones, though the subject matter of their conversation was anything *but* subtle. In fact, it was the strangest post-midnight discussion Aaron had ever had. “Look. This is interesting and all, but—”

Joshua waved his hand, sighed. After a moment’s pause he said, “Okay, how about this: You ever wonder why you do certain things when you’re with a friend or a group of friends? Like peer pressure. They tell you to do something, and you know you don’t want to do it, you think they’re nuts and stupid and idiots—but you end up doing it anyway without really knowing *why*?”

“Okay. Peer pressure.”

“Yeah, but what is peer pressure?”

“You tell me.”

Joshua rolled his eyes. “Okay, let me put it another way. What if somewhere in America there was this crazy little town where the people were really good with the knack of persuasion? I’m talking so good that the initiates—the *elites*—knew how to con-

trol and feed off the duds without them even knowing it?"

Aaron snapped his finger. "Ah. Let me guess: Anaheim."

"You're being sarcastic."

"I'm tired." *And you're nuts.* He moved to get up, but Joshua put a hand on his shoulder.

"All right, then. Let's talk about you and Ashley."

Finally, Aaron's curiosity was piqued. He sat back down. "How did you know—"

"There's only one bitch in all of Savanna High who goes around *biting* people in broad daylight. She's a little far-gone—thinks she's an initiate, but she's more of a junkie."

Aaron raised an eyebrow. "So, then...I'm a dud?"

"Not necessarily," replied Joshua, shaking his head and staring off into the night sky. "Ash bit you. Unless you've been tapped before, your blood's now been affected. It's sort of like an infection, or an STD, but it's not anything that any doctor knows about. You get the fever, and after that you're not really *sick*; you're *hungry*." He looked at Aaron. "It's what drives the power struggle. In order to have control over someone, you have to have more willpower, more energy than they do. You could drink buckets full of Ginseng tea, I guess, but if you want a real kick, it's got to be blood or semen. Sweat works, and saliva, too, but they're not nearly as potent. That's why, in case you're wondering, Ash bit you: she was hungry, and you were full of untainted energy."

Aaron felt an uncomfortable itch at the back of his neck, and it suddenly struck him that he was attempting to understand the workings of a completely delusional mind. And yet...

"Vampires," he said, rubbing his temples and thinking he should have told Joshua to get lost the moment he'd spotted him outside his bedroom window.

"Not necessarily," Joshua replied. "I mean, people like us, we don't sleep in coffins or anything, and we don't melt in sunlight."

Aaron shook his head. "Dude...you realize how crazy you sound?"

"Yeah, but think about it. The same day you're bitten, you're out running around commando style and getting into all kinds of trouble—and I bet you've never even *thought* about jerking off in public before. You can't understand why the hell you'd do such a thing—yet you did it, and Ash was calling the shots. Am I right?"

True, the day's events had been atypical, to say the least, but *this*? An explanation involving initiates, duds, vampires who drank blood and jism in order to beef themselves up? *Does he think I'm that gullible? He probably happened to spot me out there tonight—he probably has some kind of fetish where he gets off on hearing about what other guys do with their dicks.* And besides, Ash hadn't been the one in his dream.

He cleared his throat. "I think you're getting a little too personal."

Joshua wrung his hands. "You're missing the point."

Aaron started getting up again. "Josh, it's late. I think you should go home."

As before, Joshua physically restrained him, only this time there was a hint of desperation in his eyes. "Okay, never mind about Ash for now. Let's talk about you."

"Josh—"

"You can see me—the *real* me, and not the illusion I've cast. I'm an initiate, and you can see me. No one's ever told me they can see my real face unless they were also an initiate—it takes skill. That means you've got something, whether you know it or not. It also means you're broadcasting mad kilowatts out across the city for all the ravenous freaks like Ash to pick up on."

"So?"

"So, you're *fresh meat*. They'll come looking for you—but I can help."

Aaron shook his head, his expression incredulous. "Are you for real?"

"After what happened in front of the liquor store, why is it so hard for you to believe me?"

"I don't know. Maybe you and Ashley are in this together. I don't intend to be the butt of your little practical joke."

"You think I'm just screwing around?"

"Show me some proof."

Joshua bit his lip. "Well, it's not like we're talking levitation and flashing lights. It's all willpower, influential thoughts, and stuff like that."

"Well," Aaron continued, "then make me do something. Influence me."

"Okay, but just remember: you asked."

For a moment Joshua fell silent as he stared Aaron down. He clenched his fists, set his jaw in grim determination, and made a face, as if he were trying to mold the contents of his colon into a collection of clay miniatures. Nothing happened (that Aaron could discern). When his would-be hypnotist started breaking into a sweat, he shook his head and started toward the house.

"Goodnight, Josh."

"Wait! You can't go yet." Josh blocked his path.

"Why not?"

"Because, um, you need me."

Aaron made a face.

Joshua pushed on, though he was beginning to stammer. "You're going to run into some unsavory characters who'll treat you royally—but all they're after is your essence. I can teach you how to defend yourself in exchange for...for your..."

"Are you saying you want to suck me off?"

"What I'm saying is, Ash bit you, and pretty soon you're gonna have the same, uh, *needs* she does. The same hunger we all have. You're gonna want to tap into someone in order to get your fill, and you might make some bad decisions. But if we shared with each other, there'd be no risk, no problems trying to find other friends that we can trust in order to get our fix."

Aaron wasn't sure if he should scowl or laugh his ass off. Once in his whole life, he'd been hit on by another guy, and that had not been nearly as blatantly imaginative as this. "Look. I'm going to bed. And I'm not gay, by the way. I don't know what I did to make you think that, but..." He paused, unsure of what else to say. Then, "I'm going to bed. Goodnight."

Making one last attempt, Joshua grabbed his arm for the third time that night. "Please! I'm not making this up. You blow me off and you'll end up like all the rest, all the other newbies who get sucked into becoming mindless duds, fodder for the initiates. I can help protect you from them."

Aaron shrugged out of his grasp, pushed him back a few steps. "This isn't funny anymore. I'm not a fag, okay? Got it?" *And I'll slam your face into the ground if you touch me again.*

Joshua immediately sobered and let him pass into the house. When he was closing the kitchen door behind him, he heard:

"Bye, Aaron. I tried."

CHAPTER 11

Pacific Grove's community center was located at the southernmost edge of the neighborhood, at the mouth of a rather large stretch of putting greens. Featuring an elaborate lounge room, a pair of tennis courts, and a sprawling swimming pool, it was likely the single most prominent example of the local residents' financial clout (and subsequent flamboyance).

Consequently, Aaron felt out-of-place from the start. Not only were he and his parents newcomers, but they were also in a social class not quite on par with everyone else, and it was obvious. The men, dressed in khakis and polo shirts, were gathered around a humongous Kenmore; the women, sporting skimpy bathing suits and Ray Ban shades, lounged nearby and sipped iced tea while they giggled and tittered over this and that.

God, Aaron thought, grabbing his swim shorts as he got out of the station wagon. *So these are the people dad needs to impress. I almost feel sorry for the guy.*

Mark, draped in typical fruit bowl attire (thereby setting him apart from—or perhaps above—the others), welcomed the Capps into the group and introduced everyone. He distributed cans of ice-cold soda from the cooler as Aaron patiently allowed Daniel and Julia to proudly showcase their offspring like a prize trophy.

"Sixteen, you say?" asked Edward, the tallest and slickest of Mark's male companions. He took a sip from his Mountain Dew and approached Aaron, testing the firmness of the boy's shoulder with his hand. Then he faced Daniel and grinned. "Jesus, the kid's pretty bulked up. On the football team?"

"Free weights, sir," Aaron replied, blushing slightly. "Just like to keep the boys in shape, is all." He flexed his left arm slightly.

The women cooed; the men chuckled appropriately. Edward

took another sip of his drink, gave Aaron one more look-over and nodded. "Well, I can always use a pair of strong arms down at the warehouse, if you're interested. Naturally, it would be under-the-table pay, but it'd be a little something for you to put in the ol' Capps College Fund."

Aaron nodded and shrugged. He noted the controlled look of tolerance on his father's face. *Thinking about how nice it is to have a group of his peers automatically assuming he can't balance a check-book without divine intervention. Nice way to start things off.*

"Help yourselves to anything," Mark offered, gesturing at the various ice chests. To Aaron he said, "I'm sure you'll want to cool off. The kids are all in the pool. The cabana's unlocked."

Aaron nodded and left the adult camp, crossed from the neatly-trimmed grass of the park area to the sparkling-clean concrete of the pool deck. There was a slightly uncomfortable moment as he surveyed the water and saw that there were indeed a handful of teenagers (three boys, three girls) splashing and playing in the swimming pool—none of whom he knew.

Several of them called out friendly greetings and splashed jets of water in his direction.

"Geez, you sure you want me to play with y'all?" he asked, forcing a gawky grin to match his exaggerated accent. *Might as well get the Texas thing out of the way.*

Several of the youths giggled. One, a blond girl wearing a liberal two-piece bikini, called out to him. She swam to the edge, climbed up onto the deck and came to where he was standing.

"It's me, Sheryl," she said.

Sheryl. For a moment Aaron's memory betrayed him.

"From school, silly!" She slapped him gently against the chest and slicked back her wet tresses. "Don't you remember?"

It took a moment before recognition set in. "Oh, yeah. The counseling office...yeah." Fearing another hormonal outbreak, he blushed ever so slightly.

She smiled and stepped in close for a hug. "Small world, huh?"

“Yeah.” Aaron embraced her briefly, though not without an appreciation of her breasts as they pressed against him (thereby soaking the fabric of his T-shirt). He certainly didn’t mind, for the scent of her banana-coconut sun screen seemed to have an intoxicating effect. A quick glance over her shoulder didn’t reveal any jealous boyfriends supervising the proceedings, but to be on the safe side, he stepped away politely and chuckled, pulling off his shirt (vaguely aware that in doing so, he was actually flirting, though Sheryl, whose eyes darted to his bared chest almost immediately, seemed to relish it). He felt the slightest rush of exhilaration, for his motions had less to do with preparing for a swim and more to do with his sudden desire to impress an exceedingly cute girl. “No sense in keeping this on now,” he said.

Sheryl smiled. She reached towards his belly, traced a line down his abdominals with her finger. She left a tingling sensation wherever she touched him. “Nice.”

Aaron swallowed, for he’d instantly been transported into an entirely different state of mind. It was like being back in the counseling office all over again. He was smitten, enamored, intoxicated—boiling inside his skin. The whole purpose of his being here today had suddenly been narrowed to a single focal point: Sheryl.

“You coming?” she asked, referring to the swimming pool.

Aaron caught something else, and felt a twinge in his groin. “Yeah,” he replied, rolling his tongue in his mouth, which had just gone dry. “I’ll see you in a sec.”

He went into the cabana to change, then joined everyone else in the pool. They had an informal game of water polo going, which lasted the better part of an hour. This gave Aaron the opportunity to assess his make-out options, as he realized, through something of a fevered haze, he’d come to an indirect decision not to leave the community center today without at least a kiss from Sheryl. Though it was not his most common method of

courtship, he soon found himself juggling his attention between the game itself and the crack of Sheryl's butt, which had devoured much of her bikini bottom.

At one point, Charlie (the tallest and scrawniest of the boys) tossed him the ball and said, "You serve."

Aaron complied and, over the course of the hour, learned everyone's names. He also learned that Charlie (the only boy cocky enough to have worn a pair of Speedos into the pool) was most likely Sheryl's current crush. Every so often, he would catch them playfully brushing against each other, exchanging suggestive looks, and so forth. Yet whenever the opportunity presented itself, she teased Aaron as well: twitching her bottom at him when she bounced above the waterline, backing into him whenever they passed close...licking her lips and smiling whenever she caught him staring here or there.

The funny thing was, she wasn't necessarily his type. She was a valley girl: mature for her age, outrageously pretty, with a bright, blemish-free complexion and a 24 Hour Fitness figure—which was good, but not tuned exactly to Aaron's tastes. For him, it was always some minute feature, some unique and oft-ignored quality about a girl that got his attention. Nikki, with her auburn locks and freckled face, had been a little on the skinny side, but it had been her brilliant cerulean eyes and full, pouting lips that had attracted him in the first place. And, well, she had been good with her tongue...wickedly good. Sheryl's lips were thin, less pronounced, though the ever-present look of mischief gleaming in her eyes hinted that she was more than capable of making up for any shortcomings.

The game ended around two o'clock as Mark, waving a greasy spatula in the air, announced that it was chow time. The youths collected their meals on paper plates and spread their towels out on the concrete so they could sit in a circle (apart from the adults) as they ate. Aaron timed it so that he and Sheryl were sitting together; Charlie, obviously unaware of any amorous inten-

tions towards his girl, sat on the other side of the circle and cracked crude jokes with one of the other boys.

Not particularly hungry, Aaron sipped a Sprite and lounged on his side as Sheryl and one of the other girls asked him questions.

"So," began Sheryl. "Like, is it all cactus and guys in tight jeans in Texas?"

"Not really. There are a few cowboys, but we've got shopping malls and movie theaters and all that."

"Does everyone have an accent like you?"

"Some people do."

"How come you moved to Anaheim?"

"My dad's job. He works for the phone company. His department got transferred or something."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Nope."

"A girlfriend?"

It was Sheryl's friend who'd asked this question, though Sheryl herself was quite attentive.

Aaron studied his soda can. *No, but I wouldn't mind taking you behind some bushes and introducing you to my—* "Used to."

"Why'd you break up?" asked Sheryl. Her body heat seemed to radiate outward in all directions at once.

"She broke it off. She wanted to date some senior who was on the football team. He had a driver's license."

"Sounds like a bitch to me," interjected Charlie from across the way. Evidently he'd been more attentive than his demeanor had first implied.

Aaron ignored him, continued focusing on Sheryl as he answered. "It was no big deal. There just wasn't enough to keep us together, I guess."

Charlie didn't seem to get the point. "But it's gotta hurt a little bit, right? I mean to know that she's probably down there in Texas talking about you, her ex, with this new guy." He leaned back somewhat, the protrusion of his bony pelvis threatening to

pierce both skin and spandex, and snorted. "If my woman ever left me, it'd be by a court order."

Sheryl reached into her cup and removed an ice cube, which she hurled at him. "Dork!"

If your "woman" leaves you, thought Aaron, it'll be because she's sick and tired of being owned by a stick figure.

Charlie got up, walked over to where Sheryl was and pulled her into a standing position so that he could wrap his arms around her waist. Then he shifted so that he was between her and Aaron (who was presented with an uninvited closeup of the boy's backside).

Aaron turned the other way, nearly gagged at the display. Little conceited twig boy, thinks he's all high and mighty because he has the hottest chick here...

An intensity rose within him, something he hadn't been fully aware of until the moment he caught sight of a golden wasp, skimming across the concrete at the edge of the pool. He latched onto the insect mentally, following it with his gaze, focusing the heat from behind his eyelids into an invisible tractor beam. He imagined the wasp suddenly becoming enraged, filled with disdain for anorexic, Speedo-wearing asshole boys. Turning about now, flying directly at Charlie, fastening itself on the inside of his pale leg, stinger poised above tender flesh and—

"Ouch!" Charlie cried with a start. He let go of Sheryl and swatted at his thigh with his hand.

Aaron jerked as well, for he'd fallen into something of a haze during the whole ordeal. Now that it was over, he felt as if a cord of some sort had been cut. He blinked, watching the now-dead wasp (which had left a reddening welt on Charlie's flesh) as it fell to the ground.

"Damn," groaned Charlie, wincing. "That hurt."

The others laughed at him, called him a baby; he stuck his tongue out and went for the men's restroom.

Aaron blinked several times, tried to clear his head as he

looked from Charlie to Sheryl, who was watching him very closely now. *Like she knows...like she's reading my mind...like she can hear me wondering what just happened, if I did it or not.*

"We're going to toss the Frisbee around," announced one of the girls.

Sheryl declined to participate, and the others dissipated. With Charlie away treating his wound, she and Aaron were left alone together on their towels.

"Good one," she giggled, tapping her foot against Aaron's knee. There was a smirk on her face—it had been there throughout the entire ordeal.

"Good...what?" asked Aaron, still trying to figure out what had just happened. Surely he didn't think he had somehow *willed* the wasp to sting Charlie...and yet, there was still the intensity flowing through him, the excited assuredness that was making it increasingly difficult to organize his thoughts.

Sheryl grabbed his hand, pulled him up. "Let's get lost."

Out of one reverie and into another, he followed her into the cabana, where she immediately wrapped herself around him and initiated a frenzied make-out session. He acceded without question, planting frantic kisses on her neck, chest, and abdomen. It didn't matter that at any moment someone might enter the cabana and find them here; he only knew that he was overwhelmed with his own arousal, his own primal need to achieve acceptance, companionship—like in the dream with the Girl with the Boy's Haircut, only this was no dream. Sheryl was real and living and squirming exquisitely under his touch as he started pulling off the bottom of her bikini. However, he'd only half succeeded when he felt a breeze behind him.

The cabana door swung open.

Sheryl yelped and reeled backwards, covering her breasts and crotch. Aaron stumbled to his feet; as quickly as the fever had engulfed him, it now dissipated as he came face to face with a very pissed-off Charlie.

Uh-oh.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Charlie hollered, lunging forward—though his outrage wasn’t directed at Aaron, whom he merely shoved aside as he grabbed Sheryl and hauled her to her feet. “I told you not to play around with duds like him!”

“I can do whatever I *want* to, Charlie!”

“Not like this! God, you’re like a nympho or something! I don’t believe you!”

“Screw you! You don’t own me! Let go!”

Sheryl kicked Charlie in the groin and twisted out of his grasp so that she could put her clothes back on. This led to a mild scuffle in which each of the two insisted on the other’s “overreacting.”

Aaron, for his part, could only watch in absolute astonishment as he scooted back towards the opposite end of the cabana. He could hear footsteps approaching from outside—most likely the adults coming to see what the ruckus was about—and he felt his heart leap into his throat, for he knew the day’s outcome would undoubtedly be a repeat of last night.

Wonderful, he thought. *In trouble again.*

CHAPTER 12

Doing what you don't want to do; that's what Saturday afternoon had been about. Unfortunately for Aaron, clarification had come only after the ordeal in the cabana, where Charlie and Sheryl's heated argument had attracted the attention of every parent within a three-mile radius.

"You seem to have an affinity for being in the wrong place at the wrong time," Daniel had said during the car ride home—at which point Julia had sighed and donned the role of patient mediator, though she too was undoubtedly concerned about her son's having been caught with an unclothed girl in the neighbors' cabana.

"Just drive, honey," she'd said, gently stroking her husband's shoulder. "You can talk it over with him at home."

Daniel had given her a look as if to say, *Gee, thanks. Let me do the dirty work.*

At home, Aaron had sat on the floor, Sheryl's feminine scent still on his lips—not unpleasant, but uncomfortably conspicuous. Surely Daniel must have been able to smell it as well; irrefutable evidence to match the crimson blush on his son's face.

The lecture:

"Look, I know you're trying to settle in, you're trying to get a handle on life at sixteen, and suddenly your old man decides to flip you on your ass with the move and all. Now you want to get back at me for moving us out here on a moment's notice. Fine. I'd probably do the same thing to my dad—but don't...don't screw up your own life just because of...of *this*." Daniel had gestured at the bed and boxes. "Or because of *me*. Don't let it affect your judgment. The last thing you need is to get someone pregnant on accident, or to pick up a couple of herpes simply because

you want to get even with daddy.”

“I’m not trying to get back at you for anything,” Aaron had responded, though any sort of conviction was lost in his own confusion over the matter. *Let him spout off. It’ll be over quicker. It’ll give me time to think.*

In the shower now, still blushing from the memory, the after-taste of too much toothpaste and mouthwash burning his tongue, Aaron processed the day’s events, fretted over having made out with a girl he now realized he had no interest in whatsoever.

Not how it was back in the cabana, he thought, recalling the fevered haze that had led him on. A crush from out of nowhere. I was horny, she knew it—and I let her screw around with me.

Granted, girls caught his attention all the time, and often for reasons that had to do with little more than the typical butt-and-breasts paradigm. But there was supposed to be a certain amount of reserve when it came time to decide who to mess around with and who to politely decline. Today he’d gone down on a girl he hadn’t even known, and it frightened him. He’d deviated from the norm. In fact, upon returning home, he’d spent a considerable amount of time (after Daniel’s lecture, and a weekend-long grounding) in the bathroom, hoping that Sheryl had been clean as he scrubbed his face and rinsed his mouth.

I’m not myself, he thought, stepping out of the tub. In front of the mirror, he watched his reflection carefully, treated it like someone else entirely. Not today, not last night with the Girl. Pissing off mom and dad, pissing off myself. Am I really mad enough about the move to do these things as...as a protest? Is this who I really am?

“Told you so,” he imagined Joshua saying as he dried himself off. He imagined the mutant boy sitting there in front of him, on the toilet bowl, shaking his head in disdain.

Told me what? he thought. That you were right? I don’t want you to be right, because that means people really are screwing around with me, and my only insight is coming from someone who wants to blow me

—*holy crap, I'm arguing with myself.*

He sighed and left the bathroom, went to his room, where he remained all afternoon. Julia offered him dinner at one point—a turkey sandwich and a glass of iced tea—but he merely nibbled at it. He was too engrossed in his own thoughts, too immersed in an uncertain connection between Joshua and Charlie's use of the word “dud.” A part of him also insisted on lingering on the wasp incident as well, but he knew it was impossible to have controlled an insect like that.

You're not a stupid ten-year-old, he reminded himself on more than one occasion. Don't blame your mistakes on some imaginary super power, like Josh. Fess up and do something to change it.

Without metaphysical excuses, it boiled down to himself, Aaron Capps, a newbie in Anaheim, and a prime target for whatever twisted sense of humor the locals happened to share. He'd not assimilated correctly; his first day at school, his mannerisms—his thick accent—had resulted in his being labeled as a southern-fried Texas yokel, and as much as he abhorred the idea, it made a lot more sense than blood-sucking, jism-slurping vampires molding other peoples' wills like so much clay. It was something he could deal with.

Still, as the evening mellowed, as he finally went to sleep, only to wake up Sunday morning with the same tightness in his stomach, he realized that nothing made sense, nothing was clicking. Anaheim was a freak dream, and Aaron was the disturbed dreamer.

Throughout the day (spent doing Daniel's backyard busywork) his irrational fear of Monday morning increased tenfold. He knew, at the very least, that he was up against a California stereotype, which was evidently shared amongst everyone he'd met so far. Even crotchety old Nathan Brown had given him the cold shoulder after their initial meeting, and it all had something to do with...*something*.

In the evening, he still hadn't come up with an acceptable ex-

planation, nor with a get-popular-quick scheme. He climbed the stairs with a heavy heart as he wished for one small bit of incredible luck: that somehow before 7:00 AM time would come to a complete stop—thereby sparing him from the big bad (and sometimes irresistibly sexy, in the case of Sheryl) world.

* * *

Inevitability prompted gradual acceptance, and Monday morning arrived at the whim of a merciless alarm clock. Aaron rolled out of bed, tried not to become too aware of the fact that he was groggily bathing, brushing, and dressing for the privilege of making zero-period P.E.—which was no fault on his behalf. He enjoyed athletics, though somewhere between Texas and California the credits system became a mishmash of transferred deficits, resulting in his needing to take an extra year of P.E. if he wanted to stay on track throughout the rest of his high school career.

Daniel had offered to drive him this morning, but he decided to forgo the stifling silence of a car ride and walked the half-mile himself.

The zero-period P.E. coach was not the same instructor he'd had for sixth period P.E. Where Ms. Kerr was a laid-back, go-at-your-own-pace overseer of recreational sports, Coach Stieffel was a battle-scarred, time-worn molder of lanky teenage bodies into sleek, highly-efficient sports machines.

"Black cotton shorts, gray T-shirt," he said upon Aaron's entering the small office at the rear of the boys' locker room. He scrutinized an early edition of *The Register* as he spoke; his rigid muscle structure pressed formidably through his T-shirt. "That's it. You can pick 'em up at the school store or down at Wal-Mart. There are no sit-outs. Forget your P.E. clothes and you'll be participating in your undies. Keep in mind that we're in the pool twice a week. You'll need swim trunks for that."

Aaron wasn't sure if he should say "yes" or "yes, sir," so he said nothing at all and left the office when it became apparent Stieffel had completed his oratory.

There wasn't a single familiar face amongst all those who were in attendance. Most were seniors who'd slacked off during their first three years and who were now paying for it with their mornings. Aaron wore the shorts and T-shirt he'd brought with him, took a spot in line as roll was called.

A twenty-minute warm-up, consisting of various stretches, jumping-jacks, sit-ups, and push-ups, was followed by a series of laps around the inside of the gymnasium. Afterward, Aaron found himself standing with a group of boys around the water fountain.

"What do you think of Stieffel?" one of them asked.

"He's all boot camp," Aaron replied. "Without the buzz cut."

The boy laughed, extended his hand. "I'm Cal."

"Aaron."

"What school are you from?"

"Greendale, Austin."

Cal snorted. "Geez. You got double-screwed, huh?"

"What?"

"Switching schools your senior year, having to put up with Mr. *Full Metal Jacket* and all." He nodded at Coach Stieffel, who was busy critiquing some girls at the other end of the gym.

Aaron chuckled. "I'm a sophomore, dude."

Instantly, Cal's mood changed. He'd obviously been misled by Aaron's tall stature and muscular build. He was still smiling, but there was now an affrontive element present in his manner. Narrowing his gaze, he exerted a look of such intensity that Aaron was unable to look away. "Hey, check her out."

Aaron turned slightly, felt Cal's hands come to rest on his shoulders, guiding. He pointed to a short, black-haired girl standing uncertainly at the edge of Stieffel's group. She wore thick-framed glasses, had braces, and kept the top half of her

face hidden behind heavy bangs. She was homely, and yet Aaron suddenly had an unbelievable affinity for her.

"That's her," Cal said, gently kneading Aaron's shoulders. His voice was smooth as cream. "She's had her eye on you ever since you came into the gym. Yep. Poor little girl like that, never been kissed, too shy to even *think* of asking a big stud like you to make all her dreams come true...but maybe she doesn't have to. Maybe you're such a nice guy that you'll help her out. Maybe you'll go right on over there and stick your tongue down her throat and show her that even a wallflower deserves attention."

Aaron blinked, tried to clear his head, which had suddenly become clouded without warning. *Almost like...the weekend...trying to think about something else, but...the girl, beside the swimming pool. Or had she been in the living room with me? Same girl, or someone else?* He started walking, trailing half-coherent thoughts as he went. *Doesn't matter. Probably not important anyway. Why didn't I notice this girl before?*

Naturally, she didn't expect it when he touched her shoulder, pulled her somewhat away from the other girls, and fastened his lips to hers, forcing them apart, forcing his tongue into her mouth with clumsy passion. Her stifled protest melted away in a moment of shared urgency, shared breath and saliva, the taste of her mouth, the smell of shampoo and sweat in her hair and—

An invisible cord snapped.

—oh, *crap*.

Aaron started, stumbled a bit, becoming aware of what he was doing as if he'd only been watching from the sidelines until now. He pulled back from the girl, a grotesquely thick, sticky thread of saliva connecting their lips.

Laughter and "whoop-whoops" sounded from Cal and the other boys.

"Oh, shit," Aaron stammered, wiping his mouth and letting go of the girl. "Oh, s-shit...I'm s-sorry...I'm s-so sorry." He turned around suddenly, rage and embarrassment peeling off him in

waves as he saw Cal bawling hysterically and pointing at him.

That asshole...somehow he made me—

“Capps!” barked Stieffel. “In my office, *now*.”

Braces Girl merely smiled and stared dreamily off into space.

* * *

Though he was certain he was going to have his head handed to him, what transpired in Stieffel’s office was not what Aaron expected.

“I’m assuming you’re not from around here,” the coach began, taking his seat.

Aaron swallowed nervously, aware that the warning bell for first period had just rung. “No, sir. From out of state.”

Stieffel nodded. “I’ll also wager you’re not the class-clown type. You don’t usually go around planting kisses on girls you don’t know.”

“I didn’t mean to. It just sort of...happened.”

“A lot of things *just sort of happen*, but innocence is no excuse. Whether or not you know what you’re doing, my class is still being disrupted in the process, and I won’t stand for it. Now, I’m only telling you this because they don’t hand out street-smarts pamphlets with the school orientation packets, but there’s a certain mind set in Anaheim that tends to make it very hard for those not aware of what’s going on to fit in. Guys like Cal, they like throwing their knack around as often as possible, so I’d suggest you learn, and learn *quickly*, to control your own actions before you wake up one day and find someone *else* doing it for you.”

A *knack*, Aaron thought, recalling what Nathan Brown had said, what Joshua had hinted at in his own enigmatic way.

“Sir,” he said, biting his lip uncertainly. “Is this a joke?”

Stieffel’s expression remained as cold and clear as ever.

Aaron stopped smiling. “Sorry, sir,” he murmured, averting

his gaze, though he could still feel the man's stare as if it were a sizzling tractor beam enveloping his head.

"Raise your right hand," Stieffel commanded.

Before he even became aware of the motion, Aaron found his right arm suspended in the air.

"Make a fist."

His muscles tensed, his fingers closed; Aaron's body performed without his consent.

"That was me," said Stieffel, leaning forward. "Now it's your turn. Unclench your fingers and lower your arm, Mr. Capps."

Aaron attempted to comply, but his arm remained right where it was, muscles straining beneath the skin as he focused all his energy into regaining control. He even tried using his free arm to elicit the desired motion, but there were forces at work he couldn't begin to comprehend, much less control. After several moments of silent struggling, he gave up, looked at Stieffel again. He could feel a bead of sweat trickling down his cheek.

"Sir," he began, trembling slightly—at which point Stieffel nodded and let him go. His arm dropped back into his lap like a slab of meat; it took a moment to get back the feeling in his fingers.

Rising from his seat, Stieffel said, "Welcome to Anaheim." He pointed towards the door. "You're dismissed."

Aaron left without saying a word.

CHAPTER 13

The paranoia Aaron acquired in Coach Stieffel's office stuck with him throughout the day. As such, he steered clear of anyone he knew until after lunch, which he spent alone in a restroom stall. So absorbed was he in his own disarray that he completely forgot about the *real* reason he'd been dreading school in the first place: the Girl with the Boy's Haircut.

She caught his attention in Geometry class, when she walked into the room and took her seat just before the tardy bell sounded. Aaron immediately blushed from head to toe and tried to compact himself behind his desk somewhat—as if on this particular day he might have acquired the coveted ability to shape-shift at will. Visions of his Friday night dream flashed through his head, and he felt his masculine reaction swelling against his will.

I'm going to die, he thought, groaning inwardly.

The Girl paid him no mind for the first few minutes of class (during which time Ms. Featley took roll), but he was still paranoid nonetheless—especially after what had happened in Coach Stieffel's office. Though the calm and collected half of his brain told him that such things were impossible, the more whimsical side of Aaron Capps was considerably worried that an inexplicably attractive lesbian-bodybuilder girl had somehow violated his dreams.

She looked at him—presumably a passing glance—as she nonchalantly surveyed the classroom and waited for the lesson to begin. Her gaze caught his for a moment, and though it was perhaps not as self-confident as it had been on Friday, it was potent nonetheless. He felt something there, even after her eyes had wandered elsewhere. Like maybe she was still watching him via

some metaphysical channel.

He scrutinized her throughout roll call, tried to figure out a way to distinguish girl from midnight specter, wondered, even, if he could remember the position of certain moles.

"All right, people," Ms. Featley began, reclaiming her post at the head of the classroom. "Today we will be doing some group work. I'll be dividing you up into pairs. When I call out your names, please move your desks together."

Aaron faced forward, clasped his hands atop his desk and tried to think about baseball.

"Aiken and Pleeth," Ms. Featley began, walking down the aisle with her clipboard in hand. Even before she got to his section, Aaron already knew who he was going to be paired with. "De-laney and Ramirez...Bentley and Kim...Miller and Capps."

Another twitch in his groin, another wave of excruciating heat passing from head to toe as he looked across the room at his newly assigned partner. She glanced only briefly at him, apparently disinterested as she rose to rearrange her desk—though he imagined she might be just as enamored as he and was merely more skilled at hiding it. After all, she'd been giving him such flirtatious looks on Friday; if she *had* wanted him, if she *had* decided to invade his dream, she might very well have come out of it with her shame intact.

No, he thought. *That's nonsense, paranoia, child's play—how could that possibly be? And yet you saw what Stieffel did, you were there when Cal made you kiss that girl. Oh, and Sheryl, in the counseling office, in the cabana, and—look, she's already moved her desk and you're still sitting here like a dork.*

He joined the Girl at the center of the aisle, tried not to stare too much as he scrutinized her, a mental image of Coach Stieffel wavering in the back of his mind. He recognized her scent immediately: Herbal Essences shampoo, mixed with the faint, sweet mixture of tangerine body spray and (even fainter) sweat. It had been stronger in his dream, for he'd been closer, there hadn't

been clothing to dampen the odors. Nevertheless, this was just as potent. Today she had on black corduroys, and a denim blazer over a snug camisole. A quick, surreptitious look-over (as she turned her head away for a moment) confirmed her lean, hard femininity—semi-evident through her shirt and pants, and undoubtedly more magnificent in reality than in dreams.

He was impressed, enamored—ashamed, for she was so much like a boy, so hard and athletic. She wasn't his type at all. He should have been repulsed.

Like getting hot for another guy.

He focused his gaze on the desktop, fidgeted as he felt the sweat building in his armpits and between his legs. He wished Ms. Featley would hurry up and hand out the lesson worksheets.

The Girl waited in silence, watching him and ignoring him. He noticed her hands were sturdy, the abductor muscles more developed than most girls'. Her fingernails were trimmed short and were unadorned.

Got to be a dyke, he thought, and found himself studying her face. Delicate, creamy white, almost. The face of an angel—

"What's *with* you?" asked the Girl suddenly, eyes on him.

Aaron, having been caught staring, blinked and sucked in a gulp of air, for (he now realized) he'd been holding his breath. He started to apologize, but instead, miscalculating the amount of pressure needed to work his tongue, merely made a muffled choking sound. After a moment's wrestling with his own tonsils, he managed to get out, "Allergies."

She looked amused. "What?"

He swallowed hard. "Allergies," he repeated, though in his whole life he'd never so much as looked up the definition of "histamine." "They, er, sometimes act up."

"Oh." An indifferent shrug. "That sucks."

"Yeah."

A moment of silence passed between them. Aaron found he couldn't look away, even when she did. While all around him

other students were chatting softly about this and that, he found himself floating between two worlds, as if he and the Girl were separated from reality by a thin, invisible membrane. He studied the sleek line of her jaw, the evident veins of her neck...the slight movement as she nibbled her lower lip, reminding him of his dream, her tongue teasing his—

“Kyna,” said Ms. Featley, who’d now come to stand beside Aaron’s desk. He coughed slightly, sat up straight as she handed him a worksheet. “You can get Aaron up to speed on the chapter, can’t you?”

“Sure,” replied the Girl, combining her nonchalant shrug and polite smile into one suave movement.

“Excellent.” Ms. Featley patted Aaron’s shoulder. “If you have any questions, come up to my desk.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He placed his worksheet in front of him and pretended to read the instructions at the top while he continued to sneak clandestine glances at his partner. *Kyna. So that’s her name. Kyna Miller.* “So...” he began.

“So.”

“Where do you want to start?”

“Um...how about...where are you from?”

He laughed. “No, I meant the homework.”

Kyna snickered. “I know.”

“Oh.”

Aaron felt himself blush, a reaction which only seemed to feed Kyna’s confidence. She leaned back slightly in her seat, her smile broadening. So calm and collected she was. Almost cocky, but timid as well. *Trying to be real friendly to someone she doesn’t know, someone new...or maybe she just doesn’t make friends very often with guys. Not her thing. Maybe I’m just boring her when she could be spending the rest of the class thinking of her girlfriend.*

At the very least, though, he decided she wasn’t a mind reader, and certainly not a nighttime succubus. She was too ordinary, too much of a fragile girl wrapped in a street punk’s body. Minus

the athleticism, she was very pretty, and she was watching him now, waiting for his answer.

"Austin," he said, relaxing just a little.

She started writing something on her worksheet. "I figured. Never saw you before Friday. Kind of a funny time to move out of state."

"Yeah," said Aaron, nodding. "My dad's not very good in that respect."

"Heh."

They worked in silence for a while. Then, quite abruptly, Kyna said:

"Must have been hard on your girlfriend."

"I don't know about that," Aaron said, shrugging. "We broke up just before I left. Kinda been dragging things out. I mean, we'd been seeing each other for almost a year and we'd never slept together..." He trailed off, realizing he'd just blurted out a bit of personal information he'd much rather have kept private.

Kyna looked away, pursing her lips and apparently fighting back a giggle. "Okay, Aaron."

He coughed, smiled uncomfortably. "Geez, I don't know why I said that."

"Guess you're just trying to be friendly."

"Yeah." *God, my skin is constricting, I feel like I'm going to explode.*
"So...how about you?"

"What about me?"

"You have a boyfriend?"

"None of your business."

Woops. "Well, um...you into sports?"

A look of slight irritation—as if to say, "never been asked *that* before"—crossed Kyna's face. "Not really, no."

"Oh. Weight-lifting, then?"

"No."

Aaron bit his lip, restrained the words that were teetering on the edge of his tongue: *But I've seen you, in my dream. You've got a*

body like an Olympian. You don't just get all trim and buff doing nothing. It was infuriating: he was trying to get to know someone he already knew...sort of.

She didn't pursue any further conversation (though she continued to sneak quick glances at him every so often, when she thought he wasn't looking), so he took the hint and focused on the assignment for the remainder of the hour.

When it came time for everyone to move their desks back and turn in their worksheets, he found himself and his partner were the only two who remained sitting while everyone else milled about near the classroom entrance as they waited for the bell to ring. This seclusion prompted Kyna to fidget somewhat, for it seemed she didn't have anywhere else to look—so she looked at him, smiled, looked away, looked back at him again until at last he rose from his desk, slung his backpack over his shoulder, and walked over to her. The whole time his heart was racing madly, as if this was their last class together ever, as if (when the bell rang) she might walk out of his life before he got a chance to figure out why in the world he wanted to get to know her in the first place.

Having spontaneously lost sixteen years of accumulated social skills, he said, "Geometry sucks, huh?"

Kyna (whose plain expression made it difficult to discern whether or not she appreciated his presence) sighed, rose from her desk, donned her backpack, and said, "I work out sometimes." She faced away from him, apparently watching the clock on the wall, and perhaps regretting the fact that her response hadn't been any better than his Geometry comment.

However, it was at this moment that a sort of pressure was relieved, and Aaron's head cleared enough for him to realize that for the majority of the class he hadn't entirely been himself. He blinked, shook his head slightly, as if coming awake from a trance. *Just like P.E. all over, like at the pool with Sheryl...like in my dream.* He looked at Kyna, whose attention was still on the clock.

Has she been...influencing me? This whole time, without me knowing? But no, she didn't seem like that at all. She wasn't brash or overbearing, like Cal; nor was she cunning, like Sheryl. And she bore absolutely no resemblance to Coach Stieffel (besides, on a much smaller scale, the brawny frame). Still, if this sort of thing was really going on, if people had some sort of knack, maybe someone experienced at the game *could* get her way by playing innocent until at last her victim played out his usefulness—

He clutched his head, moaning softly as he was hit by a mental wind of ridiculous fantasy land possibilities.

Kyna took notice and faced him. "What's wrong?" she asked.

They were still standing far enough away from the core group of students that he was able to speak in subtle tones without fear of being overheard. "Ugh. It's nothing. Just..."

"What?" Kyna repeated, stepping a little closer.

Aaron grimaced, spread his hands and rolled his eyes. "Ever since I got here—and I know this is going to sound dorky—I've had this feeling that everyone in Anaheim is playing some kind of joke on me."

"Oh?"

"I mean, not *everyone*, but, well, I was in P.E. this morning and this guy, uh, he made me do something I didn't want to do. Like mind-control or something. And he's not the only one. Other people have done the same thing." *For example, this really cute girl almost made me bone her at my parents' friends' pool party. You did it to me, too, in a dream. Before you sucked me off.* "It's like the whole neighborhood is, well, I dunno. It's crazy. Never mind. Forget I said it."

Kyna smiled. She was rubbing one of her backpack straps with her thumb. "Anybody can take a few classes in hypnosis. You probably just met the wrong people at the wrong time. Anaheim's like any city: you have all kinds of shit."

"Everyone keeps mentioning they have this...*knack*."

"And you think because you're the new kid they're all some-

how ganging up on you?"

Aaron squirmed. She'd hit the nail on the head—but hearing his conclusion summarized so succinctly only made him feel more constricted.

Thankfully, before he could answer, the bell rang, and everyone began filing out of the room. Aaron took up the rear, following Kyna out into the hallway, where she waved goodbye and started to her next class.

"Nice talking to you," Aaron said, waving back.

She started to turn away, but then stopped, faced him again and smiled. Her cheeks were slightly flushed. "I'm seeing somebody."

Aaron blinked, not comprehending.

"You asked before if I had a boyfriend."

"Oh, yeah."

He blushed as she turned away, started walking down the hallway.

* * *

Kyna repeated a collection of swear words in her head as she left Aaron in the hallway, made her way hastily through the flow of students and towards the ladies' room. Along the way, she happened to spot Joshua (looking like an animal on the run, as usual) approaching from the opposite direction. She felt him tremble mentally when he saw her, and he navigated towards the edge of the corridor.

She intercepted him immediately, fists clenched, teeth grinding in her mouth. He stopped, stumbled slightly, looked at her with an expression of fear and surprise.

Kee, what's the matter? she heard him think.

With a muffled swear, she raised her fist, swung across Joshua's chest—not actually hitting him, but coming close enough to make him flinch—and slammed her knuckles into the

locker beside him. The noise filled the hallway and, for a moment, caught the attention of those within close range. Some stared, others pointed, but no one stopped to investigate any further. In a moment the incident was long ago and far away.

She left Joshua trembling and gawking like a dullard and continued on down the hall, to the restroom, where she locked herself inside a stall. It was here that she let everything go—just for a moment. An instant, a brief period of time during which she relaxed her hold on everything she'd been moderating in her life. Beneath the fabric of her shirt and jacket, she felt her skin writhe, memories of nearly-forgotten scars resurfacing, manifesting themselves physically as the body of a young girl used and abused. Now, when she looked down at herself, she saw that familiar body—grown up now, sixteen years old now, still lean and hard, but showing more wear and tear than anyone should ever see in their teens.

Bungling everything, she thought, recalling her work on Aaron in Geometry class. A lack of effort is more like it. Just as tongue-twisted as he'd been—acting like any little teenage girl. Supposed to be better than that, stronger. How many times have I had this discussion with myself?

She was supposed to have played it cool, work his essence slowly and gradually, prepare him in a gentle, unnoticeable fashion so that by the time he was completely hers he would not have noticed a thing (nor would he have cared). Instead she'd become instantly infatuated with him, his essence, his body. It was so easy to imagine him naked, recall how he'd writhed so beautifully, exploded so exuberantly as she'd gulped him down in his dream—

—stop it.

She inhaled deeply, clamped down with her control once more and brought her daydream to an end. *Think of Josh, sitting in a bathroom stall and pathetically digesting himself. Wanna turn out like him? Of course not. There's a reason he's stuck in your head—so you*

know what not to do. No, a little at a time is how you do it. One sip at a time. Strictly objective. Be patient until his blood is changed, until he comes around.

The only problem was, in order to do that, she needed to be close to Aaron, to learn more about him, how his mind worked, how his essence flowed, and if she was going to melt like so much butter every time she went near him...

But, then, maybe I don't have to do it that way. Maybe...maybe sorry ol' Joshua hasn't completely outlived his usefulness.

The warning bell sounded, echoing throughout the empty restroom. Suffused by a new sort of serenity, Kyna exited the stall and headed for her next class.

* * *

Oblivious to the emotional battle being waged by Kyna in the girls' restroom, Aaron opened his locker and stuffed his backpack inside (sixth period P.E. not requiring much in the way of textbooks). It was at that very moment that Joshua, seemingly conjured from out of thin air, decided to make an unexpected appearance.

"Hey," he greeted with a feeble wave.

Aaron closed his locker and eyed Joshua suspiciously. "Hey."

"You got a minute?"

"Well, actually—"

"I just wanted to apologize for the other night. I was a little, um, out of it."

"Oh, yeah. That's okay." Aaron paused, suppressing the urge to ask for the truth—it would make him seem too naïve, and his curiosity would be too much of an excuse for Joshua to latch onto him. "Look, I have to get to my next class."

"Can we talk some more after school, then? We can meet out in front, by the flag pole. Just give me a few minutes, that's all."

"I start work after school. I can't. I'm sorry." Aaron forced

himself to turn away, but Joshua grabbed his arm. The boy's expression had become ashen.

"I saw you talking to Kyna," he said. "She's reeling you in, and you don't even know it. She was the one in your dream, I bet. She's probably already tapped you, hasn't she? What did she do? Did she suck you off? Did she *fuck* you?"

Aaron wrenched himself from Joshua's grip and pushed him back. Hard. So hard, in fact, that he stumbled and fell onto the floor in the middle of the hallway.

Never mind the truth—not from him.

He said, "Josh, you're nuts! That's what you said about Ash, but you know what? I think you're just as bad as everyone else. You're not here to help me, you're just making an even bigger mess of things. So just leave me alone, got it?" He left, then, exited the main building and headed for the gymnasium.

He spent P.E. class shooting hoops and participating in various meaningless idle conversations. When the end-of-day bell rang, he showered and changed, headed back into the main building to collect his homework materials. By the time he reached his locker, the hallway was virtually deserted. He started piling books into his backpack, but paused when he noticed a white piece of note paper resting on the uppermost shelf. Curious, he took the paper in his hands, unfolded it. It was a sketch—a really good one—of Kyna and himself, naked and embracing, Kyna's hands groping his exaggerated erection.

It was a third-person view of Friday night's wet dream.

He swallowed, suddenly chilled. He looked up and down the hall, back at the sketch. At the bottom of the page a brief message had been scrawled: "See you tonight. Bring your banana-sized boner."

Josh, he thought immediately, recalling the boy's earlier statement concerning his aroused state during the liquor store incident. *Somehow he knows. Somehow he was inside my head that night, with Kyna—or else it was all him, messing with my dreams because he's*

a fag or just plain crazy.

Aaron closed his locker, crumpled up the sketch and stuffed it into his pocket. Part of him actually considered seeking out Joshua, *demanding* answers, though the fact of the matter was he didn't know if what the boy had in mind would help clarify anything either way.

He started down the hall, stopping and looking vigilantly over his shoulder several times, thinking he heard muffled voices from somewhere nearby, but convincing himself it was only his imagination.

* * *

Joshua laughed inwardly when three o'clock rolled around and the last class of the day ended.

No appearances by Heather or the police, no Principal calling me into his office, not even the slightest day-after story told by acquaintances, wondering where Heather is, wondering if it's true, has she really been raped?

Smiling to himself, he entered the main building with the satisfaction of knowing he'd made it safely through the school day (or rather, through most of the school day, for he'd purposely avoided Mr. Brandt's class for obvious reasons) unscathed and unnoticed. Practice made perfect, and he'd been practicing the art of invisibility for a very long time. It was by no means a physical thing, but rather a non-obvious way of carrying himself, his presence.

He walked slowly down the empty hall, so immersed in his own thoughts that he didn't notice Kyna's trio standing beside his locker until it was too late.

"Hello, Joshua," said Kyna, stepping towards him and smiling in her self-assured, unnerving way. Anthony and Natalie quickly moved behind him, able to intercept him, should he try to run.

He lowered his gaze. "Hello, Kyna."

“Let’s talk.”

Her arm linked around his, and she led him to the end of the hallway, where the maintenance cubby was. There was a private spot, occupied only by an empty water bucket and a mop, underneath the staircase. Once out of sight, Kyna pushed him against the wall and leaned in close, her arms closing him in, her knee pressed delicately into his groin. She snatched up his gaze and pulled at his essence, as if he were a dog on a leash and she the heartless master.

“W-what do you w-want?” he croaked.

“It’s been so long since we last talked to each other.”

“N-no shit.”

“I thought we could help each other out.”

“Yeah?”

She nudged his groin—not painfully just yet, but enough to let him know he was to behave, or else. “I want you to tap Aaron for me.”

Joshua swallowed, tried to look away, but found he was paralyzed. Kyna had such a strong grip on his soul that he feared his very existence might rip in half if he moved or jerked his body in any way.

“Come on,” she continued, bringing her face close to his. Her breath filled his nostrils. “I know you like sucking guys off. Hard not to when you’ve been doing it for so long. That’s why you want to be friends with Aaron, right? Devour every last drop of him until you’re so full you’ll never have to eat again for months...maybe even years.” With one hand she began kneading the back of his neck, with the other she interlaced her fingers with his. Then she leaned in and kissed him. Her tongue slipped into his mouth; his free hand instinctively went to her bottom, where he squeezed lightly.

God...I’ve been wanting to do this for so long...been so long, forever since I had a girl. Oh, Kee...

“I remember, too,” Kyna whispered, ending the kiss. “Being

with each other, sharing everything with each other.”

Joshua found he was nearly panting, licking his lips for any traces of her saliva, any droplet of her essence.

Her grip on his neck intensified as she leaned even closer against him. “We can do it again. We can share with each other. You can tap Aaron for me. You’ll share his essence with me, and I’ll share with you.”

She leaned in once more, tried to kiss him again, but he suddenly squirmed within her grasp. He raised his hand, put his palm against her lips, pushed her face away in a last-ditch effort. “No.”

“No,” Kyna echoed, her smile vanishing instantly.

Joshua rose to his full height, wiping his lips. “No. He’s none of your business. Get lost.” Surprised at the forcefulness of his own voice, he tried to step forward, but Kyna wouldn’t budge. Likewise, her companions remained on either side of him, blocking all avenues of escape.

Kyna’s thoughts rang out in his mind; her expression was no longer affectionate. *Do you know how hard this is?* She started massaging between his legs. *Do you know how hard it is for me to be this close to you? I make you an offer and you act like you’re too good for me?* She unzipped his fly, reached inside. *If we don’t eat, we starve, Joshua. You want it—bad. You want me almost as badly as you want Aaron. You wish so much you could undress me right here and do anything you’ve ever wanted with me. Mount me, bend me over, surrender yourself between my legs. And after, when we’re lying together, just like we used to, a simple prick of my finger and you can taste me. It’s all you’ve ever wanted.*

The erotica was more than Joshua could resist, and he found himself nodding. “Yes...oh, God, Kyna...please. I’m so sorry. Yes.” He was whimpering, an emaciated victim, a starving slave.

“You’ll do anything I say?”

A gasp, a nod in response.

“Good, because if you stray even the slightest bit...” She sent

him a mental image, a scene perfectly superimposed over reality except that in this pseudo-instance Kyna wasn't masturbating him—she was dismembering him, twisting him painfully in her hands, dissecting penis from pubis in horrendous slow motion.

Joshua grunted ferally. "No...no, I'll follow. Please...anything you want...I'll do it."

The smile finally returned to Kyna's face. She banished the pain and resumed her manipulations, monitored the straining of his muscles until he tensed at the crucial moment, at which point she ducked between his legs and finished him off.

He stifled a yelp of simultaneous pleasure and disgust, suddenly becoming himself again, blinking in the indirect light and cursing out loud as Kyna at last let go of him, stood up and shamelessly wiped her mouth on the back of her hand.

"Go home," she instructed, "and stay in your room. Wait for me to come get you. Don't leave for any reason until I come get you."

She turned away and left him there, sweaty and exhausted, leaning hunched against the wall as he felt the buzz in his veins—Kyna's revitalized influence over him. Slowly, carefully, he reached down and pulled his pants up, tucked himself back inside and readjusted the waist. Then he quietly made his way back out into the hallway, taking his steps one at a time as he found the restroom and cleaned himself off.

He cried angry tears all the way.

CHAPTER 14

“Keeping busy means keeping out of trouble.”

Such had been a handy saying of Daniel’s throughout much of Aaron’s childhood. If ever he’d misbehaved in any way, he’d quickly been assigned a small list of unimaginative chores designed to keep him occupied until bedtime. Now, the strategy was more or less the same, albeit without the typical parent-child lecture. It was just merely decided that he was old enough to start earning his keep, and so that was what he did on Monday afternoon, after school.

Just out of the shower, he sat on the curb at the edge of his parents’ driveway and endured the afternoon sun as he waited for his ride. The sweat was beginning to bead on his forehead when a beat-up old Volkswagen turned into the cul-de-sac and came to a shuddering halt in front of him.

Behind the wheel was a red-headed, acne-afflicted twenty-something whose ebony-framed glasses were thick enough to serve as flying goggles. Flicking out the remains of a wilted cigarette, he stuck his head out the window and said, “Hey, are you Daniel’s kid?”

Aaron nodded, getting up. “Yeah. I’m Aaron.”

“Cool. I’m Jack. Call me Jacko. Get in. You’re riding with me.”

Aaron climbed into the passenger seat and shook hands with Jack as he fumbled with the seatbelt. They pulled out onto Lincoln and, between the more relevant parts of a *Sevendust* album, which blasted unscrupulously from a ratty portable CD player hookup, exchanged random bits of commentary throughout the ride:

“It’s a home and garden outlet.”

“Huh?”

“The warehouse job. Grunt work, mostly. Hope you don’t mind sweatin’ bullets.”

Aaron shrugged. “Oh. Naw.”

“So, you’re from Texas, I hear?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s the Triple-P out there?”

“The what?”

“The Triple-P: pinball, pizza, poontang.”

“Um...not bad, I guess.” Aaron laughed, though on the inside he was cringing as he added Jack’s twisted persona to the growing list in the back of his mind. It seemed there weren’t any average people in Anaheim; you were either blunt and outspoken—or you were Joshua. That, and an unprecedented number of people seemed obsessed with sex talk, as if being sixteen years old warranted an automatic invitation to discuss all those things your acquaintances just *knew* were bouncing around inside your stereotypically horny adolescent brain.

(He cleared his throat, extinguishing a brief mental image of Kyna’s bare butt.)

“Not bad,” Jack repeated, grinning deviously as he interpreted the convex visuals being filtered through his goggles. “That’s one of the benefits of living around here: the people aren’t much on socialism or intelligence, and the pizza sucks ass, but God almighty, the pussy is the best in the world. You mind if I smoke?”

“Go ahead.”

“Cool.” Jack lit up. He held out a half-empty carton of GPCs. “You smoke?”

“No.”

“All right, then. So...how’d you get hassled into working for ol’ Eddie?”

Aaron shrugged. “My parents are sort of friends of a friend. We met at a barbecue and he offered me a job. It was an easy way to ‘keep me out of trouble,’ I guess.”

"Shit," Jack scoffed. "Bet you can't wait to move out, huh? What are you, eighteen? Nineteen?"

"Sixteen."

"Yeah...you look older than that, but your parents only see the kid inside. They still treat you like you're ten."

"Sometimes."

"I was the exact opposite. I still looked like a sixth grader when I was sixteen. Double screwed there. My parents treated me like a helpless infant, wouldn't let me go to parties with my friends until I was almost old enough to move out. Girls...well, at first no girls wanted to get with me because they thought I was too small. Too much like making it with a little kid." He faced Aaron and winked. "But I knew how to use my tongue."

Nice, thought Aaron, facing out the window so as to hide what had turned into a nuclear blush. Turning the conversation right back around to sex like that. How original. Another mental image of Kyna solidified in his mind's eye. This time she was playing with herself.

Jack seemed to sense his sudden discomfort and snorted. "Oh, come on. Don't go all Kindergarten on me. I bet a guy like you has no trouble getting pussy, right?"

His blush intensified as an expectant hush filled the car. When Jack didn't say anything, he shot him a look as if to say, "Are you asking for details?"

Chuckling, Jack focused on the road once again. "Jesus, man. Was just shootin' the shit. Sorry for the assumption."

"No, it's okay," Aaron said, forcing a smile. "I'm just...well, you know. The whole 'a gentleman never tells' kind of thing."

"I gotcha."

They talked about sports for the rest of the drive.

* * *

"Jack will show you the ropes," Edward said, splitting his at-

tention (somewhat unevenly) between having a conversation with Aaron and taking a call on his cell phone. He walked with his arm around the boy's shoulders during the entire warehouse tour.

Like I'm his son or something, thought Aaron. Or else he's just letting me know he's doing me—and dad, in turn—a favor by letting me work here.

Edward continued: "We clock out at nine-thirty. I'll arrange it so that someone can give you a ride home. Most likely Jack or myself. What's that, Sharon? Yes, let's set that up for Friday. Oh, and Aaron: Come into my office on Fridays to collect your pay."

With that he left Aaron to catch the rhythm of things on his own.

"He's not much on speeches," Jack chuckled, "but the basic rule around here is, if it can be stacked, stack it."

The rest of the afternoon and early evening had Aaron hauling, stacking, pulling and pushing various items ranging from ceramic planters to forty-pound bags of lawn fertilizer. There weren't many other grunts around either, so for the most part it was Jack and himself, working in silent coordination. The most intellectually stimulating aspect of the job was learning to use the pricing gun.

Quitting time didn't come soon enough. When it did, Aaron was sweaty, tired, and more than ready to call it an evening.

Since Jack apparently had a "hot date" that he didn't want to be late for, Edward was bestowed with the duty of chauffeuring Aaron home—an experience which was tantamount to riding public transit. Along the way they stopped in at a Circle K for a pair of Cokes, which held the two of them over for the remainder of the drive—and which reminded Aaron of that age-old truth: drinks were refreshing, and served as good excuses for not having to talk to one's companion.

For Aaron, it was about halfway through his soda that he realized he was being uncommonly detached. He couldn't put his fin-

ger on it, but there was an invisible wall of sorts between himself and Edward, a reason he knew he would never get to know the man properly. Oh, they spoke to each other, talked about this and that, but only in the form of brief, meaningless remarks made between long sips.

The Capps' driveway was vacant when they pulled up, which meant Daniel wasn't off work yet.

"Thanks for the ride," Aaron said, unbuckling his seatbelt and moving to exit the vehicle.

Edward cleared his throat—a deep, guttural noise that made him pause. He faced the man and saw that he was smiling strangely. "No problem. Let me walk you in."

A warmth came over him, the hairs on the back of his neck went straight; somewhere deep down inside his gut something tightened—but he wasn't directly aware of any of it as he shrugged and nodded. "Okay, thanks."

Julia must have heard them come up, for she opened the front door and stood on the stoop as they crossed the driveway, Edward with his arm once again around Aaron's shoulders.

"There's my worker bee," Julia said, folding her arms and smiling affectionately. "I hope he wasn't too much of a handful?"

"Not at all," replied Edward. He shifted slightly, and Aaron felt him roughly massaging his shoulders. "The kid's a good, diligent worker. Only wish the rest of the guys were as useful."

Julia chuckled. Edward released him then, and he stepped aside a bit, his head suddenly clearing, his mind emerging from an unobserved reverie. He blinked, watched as Julia, gazing and smiling at Edward, seemed to completely disregard his presence—and there was an overwhelming feeling that suddenly both adults wanted to be alone. Or rather, it seemed that *Edward* wanted to be left alone—

—*with my mom.*

"Dinner's on the table," Julia said, offhandedly motioning for Aaron to go into the house. "Drinks in the fridge."

He blinked, bit his lip as the moment seemed to fold in on itself. He looked back and forth between his mother and Edward, found he was being ignored on both fronts.

“Mom?”

“Start without me. I’ll be in soon...just going to see Edward out.”

“Um...okay.” A pause. The blood rushed in Aaron’s ears, accompanied by a sort of buzzing at the back of his head. He left the adults alone together and entered the house, crossed the living room. In the kitchen he found chicken sandwiches and potato salad spread out on the table. He took one of the sandwiches, breaking off small pieces with his fingers and placing them into his mouth—but he was not actually *eating*, for his attention was acutely focused on what was happening out on the front step. From where he stood, he could see across the living room and through the door frame at the other end. Edward and his mother were now holding hands, talking in hushed tones, probably thinking he couldn’t overhear what was being said...but he could.

“Is Daniel working late tonight?”

“Yes. Still some...settling in to do with the new computer systems, I think.”

“Ah. Been there. Could take weeks before the left hand knows what the right is doing. Listen, if you ever need anything...I know it’s hard having to run the homestead when he’s not here. If you ever just want to go out sometime, maybe to dinner, or on a scenic drive along the beach...just let me know. You haven’t seen a real sunset until you’ve witnessed it out over the Pacific at dusk.”

Aaron swallowed a piece of bread, watched incredulously as Edward hit on his mother, bewitched her with an unseen ether more potent than any love potion—and now he was smiling, leaning in close, head tilted slightly so their lips could meet—

“Mom,” Aaron said suddenly, clearing his throat and taking an

uneven step forward. Part of his sandwich fell onto the floor, discarded, forgotten—a minor detail left to an alternate reality thwarted by his intervention.

Mom.

Julia blinked, slowly turned and faced him, her expression confused, as if she were coming awake from a light sleep.

Behind her Edward was scowling. *Fuck off, kid. This isn't a three-some.*

He swallowed hard, his blood turning cold. He'd heard Edward's voice inside his head the same as if he'd heard it through a pair of headphones. Clearer, even. *Deeper*. More...*inside* his head than his own thoughts.

Regardless, he took another handful of steps forward into the living room because he didn't know what else to do. He certainly couldn't stand idly by and let his mother be taken in by a sweet-talking snake.

"Um...mom? Where's the iced tea mix?" he continued, his gaze remaining locked with Edward's in what was rapidly becoming a subconscious battle of wills—while all along Julia remained in limbo somewhere between infinity and sobriety. "Mom?"

For a moment it looked like Edward might leap out of his skin, become a bloodthirsty demon bent on ripping him to shreds with razor-sharp teeth—but then he suddenly smiled, stepped back a bit from the door frame. "Well. I should get going. You two have a wonderful evening, okay?" He turned away, receded into the night.

Julia blinked, apparently herself again. Aaron remained right where he was, muscles tensed, ears straining figuratively, like a faithful dog who wasn't satisfied until the intruding presence was out of sight and out of mind. Only when the sound of Edward's car had faded out of earshot did he allow his own breathing to return to normal.

Holy crap, he thought. Josh—twisted, messed up Josh—wasn't lying. Duds and initiates...mom and Edward.

"You okay, mom?" he asked after a while.

Stepping into the hallway and closing the door, Julia flashed a smile and brushed back a lock of stray hair from her forehead. "Of course, honey."

"But Edward, he—"

"He was just saying goodnight."

"But he...he was..."

"What?" She came up to him, put her hands on his shoulders. "What is it, honey?"

Aaron suppressed a frustrated outburst and bit his lip. "Nothing." *You're just totally spacing out on me.* He wanted to grab her by the shoulders, rustle her and say, "Can't you *see* what just happened? He was hitting on you! How could you *not* see that?"

She shrugged and let him go, walked back into the kitchen. He followed her, scrutinizing the back of her head as she poured herself some water from a pitcher in the fridge. He sat at the table and watched her as if he were a young toddler recording his mother's kitchen routine for the first time.

Was I like this when Cal was working me over? he wondered.

After a moment, Julia sat down across from him and, between semi-casual sips from her glass, began picking at a small bowl of grapes resting beside the salad. "Made any friends at school yet?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah. A couple," he replied.

"That's good."

"My P.E. coach is on crack."

"Oh?"

"Real hardcore. Makes us swim in our underwear."

"Come now. He does *not*."

"I'll let you know in a week if it's true or not. How's the job hunt?"

Julia's hand twitched ever so slightly as she popped a grape into her mouth. "I'll probably do the secretary thing for a while. At least until I can find something at one of the universities. Or

maybe at a junior college.”

Aaron nodded. The smell of his own sweat (accumulated throughout the day) was beginning to overpower his deodorant. He rose from the table and headed for the bathroom. At the foot of the staircase he stopped, turned halfway around, and said, “You should, um, be careful around guys like Edward.”

Julia remained sitting at the table. “Oh? Why’s that?”

He shrugged, started up the stairs. “Dunno. Just a feeling, I guess. Goodnight.”

CHAPTER 15

A cool breeze brushed Aaron's cheek as a loved one might, and he came awake.

"What?" he mumbled, sitting upright and rubbing his eyes. At first he thought it was his mother, but it very quickly became obvious that it was someone else—Kyna, in fact.

She stood near the open bedroom window, arms relaxed at her sides, feet planted firmly on the floor. As in his previous dream, she was naked, and he once again found himself entranced by her chiseled physical features, though for some reason an odd detail caught his attention: the toes of her right foot. They were curled, tapping the wood floor beam. It was almost as if she was nervous—

"Kyna?" he mumbled, sitting up straighter, trying to get a hold of the scene before he missed any critical details.

She didn't answer. Instead, she stepped forward and climbed onto the bed, pulled back the sheets, ran her hands lightly over his legs.

He flinched and tried to move away. "Kyna, this isn't a dream." Somehow she removed his boxers without him knowing; she tossed them onto the floor, then knelt between his legs and took him in her hands. "*I know* it's not a dream. I know you're real—Kyna...tell me."

She remained wordless, a governing force in his fantasy seduction, though he sensed she was perhaps not as self-assured as before. Her hands quivered ever so slightly, her eyes focusing more on the various aspects of his bed rather than the intimate details of his face. This went on for an indeterminate amount of time, until his body had reacted sufficiently. Then, calmly, quietly, she moved above and mounted him—and this caught him quite off

guard, for despite his earlier protest, he was apt to believe he was still having a dream—or perhaps a hallucination—of some sort. That meant his mind was presumably still supplying imagery based on his own memories and experiences (if that was how dreams worked, anyway).

Yet I'm getting laid, he thought.

He'd never gotten past the oral stage with Nikki. He knew what she felt and tasted like, and his mind had often furnished him with nocturnal replays of such activities, but he'd never actually "done the deed." Any attempts by his brain to piece together the details of intercourse were always incomplete, speculation in the form of oddly infuriating wet dreams—dreams which allowed him access to all areas of a girl's body with his mouth and hands. However, when it came time to attempt third base, there was always a resistance, an inability to achieve proper penetration, or a failure, even, to find the right spot.

It wasn't like that now. Kyna straddled him, took all of him inside in one swift movement. Almost immediately he found himself over the edge, and he gasped vainly. Still, no words from his partner. Only silent, guiding movements—barely mimicking passion—to alleviate his embarrassment at coming so quickly.

When it was past, she settled beside him so she could caress his shoulders, kiss his neck. A part of him wanted to sit up, to confront her, but there was a haze of utter contentment surrounding him—like those first few moments of certain mornings when he would wake up feeling so absolutely relaxed and peaceful, unconcerned that his alarm clock was about to go off in a matter of seconds.

More time passed. The dream played on like a reel of film continuing long past the end of the movie. Certain frames seemed to skip and jump. He turned to kiss Kyna, but she moved away from him suddenly, got out of bed. He watched her from behind, watched as she moved about the room. She was looking for something, going through his things. She opened the door to the

closet, shoulders flexing as she stretched to reach the top shelf. He was studying the contour of her calves when she turned around, approached the bed again. She was holding something: his old pocketknife—an item he'd acquired from a friend in the sixth grade. He'd never used it for anything more than self-pride, but here came Kyna, crawling onto the bed again, kneeling beside him, holding her arm out over his head, the edge of the blade poised against the smooth white skin of her wrist.

"Open your mouth," she said softly—her first words of the evening.

He tensed. Surely she didn't mean—

"Open your mouth, Aaron. Now."

He shuddered. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled. He tried to protest verbally, but his jaw wasn't working right, his vocal cords were all knotted. Too much air was escaping his lips before he could form the right words. He could only scream inside his head as he felt her essence take over his muscles. He felt his head tilting back, his mouth opening; he watched in revulsion as, with pouting lips, she slashed her wrist in one quick movement. A stream of blood, warm and coppery, trickled down into his mouth, the droplets rolling over his tongue, down his throat.

"Drink, Aaron," she told him. "I know you've probably already felt the hunger, and you didn't know why. The fever's only the first part. I'm...I'm sorry it has to be this way, but you have to swallow. You need to drink. It's okay. Swallow."

She was crying now, her tears trickling down onto his face, onto his lips. He didn't understand why, if it made her so sad, she was doing what she was doing, but he obliged anyway, stopped trying to constrict the muscles of his throat. When he'd had enough (presumably by Kyna's calculations), she lowered her arm and leaned in close so she could kiss him on the mouth. His heart melted and he was sated, comforted—

—he jolted upright in bed, arms and legs spasming as if his

soul had suddenly been catapulted back into his slumbering body without warning. He was, however, fully aware and able to ascertain the state of his bedroom without having to come fully awake first. Naturally, he was alone; Kyna's visit had been a dream—and yet it had been so much more.

He slid out of bed, went to the window, which was open a crack (as he'd left it). He slid it open all the way and peered out into the darkened driveway, which was still and motionless. Once again he was reminded that, due to the sheer drop beneath his window, there was no way Kyna could have climbed in.

He closed the window and walked over to his bed, where he studied the rumpled sheets. There were no stains, nor could he taste any sort of metallic residue in his mouth. The only evidence of what had happened was the stain on his undergarments.

He'd come in his underwear.

Ugh, he thought. As bad as peeing myself.

He cleaned up. Then, for nearly half an hour, he puttered about and pondered the pros and cons of going back to sleep versus attempting to stay awake the entire night—so as to dissuade any macho-girl succubi from having their way with him while he slept.

Eventually it came down to his actually standing before his bed and shifting from foot to foot as he bit his nails in anguish. *To be afraid of going to sleep. This is messed up. Maybe at school they can screw with me, but not here. This is my home, damn it.*

The alarm clock read three fifteen.

Somehow, just before dawn, he managed to slip beneath the sheets, which he pulled up to his chin as he stared unblinking at the ceiling.

He could hear his parents snoring peacefully in the other room.

CHAPTER 16

Tuesday afternoon: Kyna walked into class ten minutes early and wordlessly settled herself in her seat. Ms. Featley, sitting at her own desk and grading a stack of papers, regarded her only briefly before returning to her work.

That's right, thought Kyna. It's only Quiet Kyna. Just ignore me like you do every other societal blemish.

On any other day she might have found amusement in throwing her knack a bit, maybe making the teacher drop her pen repeatedly, or making her incapable of effectively holding a fork (and thereby rendering the remainder of her lunch inaccessible). However, today was different. It was one of those days where she just wasn't herself despite the fact that she'd fed last night—God, had she fed!—and awakened in the morning feeling more than satisfied. Too satisfied, perhaps.

A part of her had already decided early on that she'd blundered throughout the proceedings, allowed too much of herself free reign in the dream. That had led to a mental argument that had stayed with her all through the day. Now, in an attempt to keep herself from exploding in frustration, she occupied as much of her mind as possible so that her thoughts would not wander back to memories of Aaron's bedroom.

Don't need to go nuts in public, have everyone looking at me and asking dumb questions.

She pulled out her sketchbook, found an empty page and began sketching out an imaginary scene in which Aaron, nude and aroused, was reclining against a spread of velvet cushioning.

Look at yourself, she thought as she shaded in his eyes. Obsessing over a guy. And don't try to justify it by saying you're just getting to know him so you can tap him more effectively. You're hot for him. You

know you are. Just look at how you're hurrying over his picture, trying to sketch in the basics so you can start on his dick...spend an hour sketching in the details just right, just like you did with all the other sketches.

Eventually the warning bell rang, and one by one students began filing into the classroom. Their chattering and giggling was auxiliary to her drawing; so engrossed was she in her creation that she didn't even hear Ms. Featley beginning roll call.

Why shouldn't I gain something out of it? I'm a victim like everyone else, trying to make do with what I've got. Why does a painter paint? Because he wants to set a moment in time. Why shouldn't I be able to do that? Just the slightest bit of pleasure in surviving. Besides, what does it mean to like a boy? Hormonal response. Like all that shit we learned in sex-ed class. Our bodies making sure we want to keep having babies so the human race doesn't fizzle out and die. Or in this case, it's whatever's coursing through my veins that wants to make sure I don't let it die

"Does he know you draw naked pictures of him?"

Kyna twitched, found that she was being observed by the girl sitting behind her. She turned slightly and scowled. "What the hell?"

The girl (whose name she'd never cared to acquire) receded somewhat, exchanged glances between the sketchpad and Aaron, who'd recently taken his seat across the way. "Geez. I was just asking."

"Well, don't," said Kyna, gazing full force at the girl, pushing everything else out of her train of sight. "Just mind your own damn business and forget all about this, okay?"

"Oh," breathed the girl, blinking, disconcerted. "I just thought I saw...saw...hmm." She giggled stupidly. "You know, I can't remember what I was talking about! How silly of me." She leaned away, returned her attention to whatever it was she'd been doing before butting in.

Kyna faced forward again, tried in vain to enjoy the simple sat-

isfaction of throwing her knack. She replaced her sketchpad in her backpack and glanced across the room. Aaron was seated at his desk, and she was surprised to see that he was apparently scrutinizing her, though she couldn't be certain whether or not it had anything to do with last night's tryst.

Probably has everything to do with last night, she thought, taking notice of the slightly darkened spots under his eyes. No doubt he'd awakened after their dream and inspected every inch of his bedroom in an attempt to find evidence of her visit. Turning up empty handed, he'd then been unable to sleep again for fear of falling into another erotic trance. *Fucked up, the way guys are always begging for sex, but when something like this happens, they don't want anything to do with it. And now he's looking at me and trying to think of a way to let me know that he knows.* She smiled, unable to help herself. *Cute—no, pathetic. Forget him and his pretty-boy facade. Just play with him. Try and get some enjoyment out of it.*

* * *

Aaron pressed his knuckles against his chin and wished dearly that time did not have to go so horrendously slow. All day long he'd been debating what method would be most effective in confronting Kyna, but here he was sitting in class with her and feeling about as confrontational as a jar of pickled eggs. Indeed, the more he stared at her, the more her exotic looks served to captivate and confuse him. Not to mention her frequent, playful glances in his direction. It was physically constricting.

Smiling at me with that sly look on her face, he thought. *She knows. She has to know, or else I'm completely nuts and this is just another waking dream where she'll suddenly whip out her cootch in front of the whole class and ask me to bang her up against the chalkboard for the rest of the period. But no, what am I talking about? Walk up to her before roll call, look her square in the face and tell her I know what's going on. Shit—too late. Ms. Featley's already finished, she's already*

begun the lesson and I haven't been paying attention because I'm a paranoid dork and—

"Mr. Capps," said Ms. Featley, her voice suddenly becoming amplified—as if he'd just emerged from a pool full of water. She stood in front of the chalkboard with her hands folded; her expression indicated that she'd made previous attempts at capturing his attention.

He straightened in his seat, clearing his throat. Somewhere behind him a male student snickered.

"I'm sorry to interrupt whatever daydream you were having," continued the teacher, "but we *do* have work today."

"I'm listening," he responded, though his tone wasn't very convincing.

"Good. Then you should have no problem completing this equation for me."

Soft laughter flitted throughout the classroom as Ms. Featley held out a piece of chalk and gestured for him to go up to the board. Sighing, he rose from his seat and went to the front of the room. He took the chalk in his hands as she stepped out of the way and began to busy herself at her desk. He gazed for a moment at the equation, then began filling in the missing parts. He stopped suddenly when he heard giggling behind him and realized, with a stifled gasp, that he'd drawn two zeros with dots in their centers—breasts.

Immediately, before the teacher could see, he erased the bits of anatomy and replaced them with two proper zeros. Surprised at himself, he nevertheless moved on to the next part of the problem, wanting to get through with it. He tried to write an eight, but instead his hand moved of its own accord. When he realized he was drawing a crude hand gesture, he quickly erased it with his fingers and dropped the chalk.

Ms. Featley, now hearing more laughter from those who'd seen his blundering, looked up from her desk and frowned. "Is something the matter, Mr. Capps?"

Rather than risk losing control again, he swallowed and shrugged his shoulders. "I-I don't know how to finish the equation, ma'am." Nervously, he squatted, picked up the chalk he'd dropped, and replaced it in its holder before returning to his desk.

Ms. Featley shook her head and went to the board. "Next time, be sure to keep your attention where it *belongs*, Mr. Capps."

Aaron nodded, blushing as several other students chuckled lightly and shook their heads (they thought it had been some sort of joke!). A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead; he wiped it away. He looked over at Kyna—who was actually *smiling*! Not looking directly at him, but smiling, laughing to herself—*job well done*.

He looked away, felt a crimson blush spread from head to toe as he gripped the sides of his desk with his hands.

Ms. Featley continued with the lesson, but he could still feel—or at the very least, he could easily imagine—everyone's eyes on him. So he wrangled his waning reserve, waited (as patiently as possible) until the second half of class, when everyone was paired up once again to finish yesterday's worksheets—and then he laid it out.

"You were, uh, in my dreams," he whispered almost immediately.

Kyna seemed to take his accusation in stride, leaning to one side, smiling almost coyly. "You tell that to all the girls you like?"

He blanched. "Who says I, er, *like* you?"

"It's just the way guys act when they talk to girls. If there's a lot of effort in it, you know they're trying to hit on you in their own way. Plus, you're all like, 'um...uh...um.' Guys always lose their verbal skills whenever they're trying to talk to a girl they think is cute."

Is she demanding that I like her? "Sure, you're, um, cute—but that's not the point. The point is, um, I think you're messing

around with me.”

“Oh?”

“I dunno. Hypnosis or something. A joke.” He thought for a moment, barely enduring her apparent amusement. “I...I just thought I would, um, make it clear...I’m the new guy, I know that. Doesn’t mean you have to make it any harder for me.” He had to stop himself, for the expression on Kyna’s face was that of someone who couldn’t believe what they were hearing. Yet he knew it was a front. *It had to be. She knows more than she’s letting on. I just have to not back down until she admits it.*

“Okay,” she said, leaning forward so that their heads were close together. “I’m playing a joke on you. Did you like it?”

Aaron faltered. “Well, um, I...”

“Did I make you *hot*?”

“Well, um—”

“Did you have to change your underwear after?”

He didn’t say anything. What *could* he say? Now that he’d gone this far...well, if he could snap his fingers and reverse time, he would do it in an instant.

Kyna leaned back in her seat. She was still smiling. “I’m *kid-ding*, Aaron. Geez. Are all Texas boys as naïve as you?”

An intense heat seeped through Aaron’s skin, warmed his blood. His resolve disintegrated like so much dust, and despite all the evidence, he felt like he’d made up every last paranormal oddity in a half-assed attempt to...what? To impress Kyna? To make friends with her? To get between her legs?

“Oh, God,” he moaned in utter embarrassment as he rested his head on the desktop. With a muffled groan he said, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Kyna. I’m such a dork.” He heard her restrained laughter, her controlled amusement (just enough to let him know she wasn’t going to immediately move her desk away from him and request another partner for the assignment), and he wished very dearly that he was invisible.

For the remainder of the period, he kept to himself, working

on his part of the worksheet. However, when class ended and he moved to replace his desk, Kyna unexpectedly took hold of his hand.

"Hey," she said, staring at him intently, her expression fathoms deeper than it had been moments before. "You said you were sorry, right?"

He swallowed, mesmerized by her touch, ashamed that it caused him to quiver right down to his crotch. "Yeah."

"Then make it up to me."

"Huh?"

She rolled her eyes. "Meet me after school. We'll grab something to eat."

Almost before she finished her sentence, he was nodding in agreement.

* * *

There was a Taco Bell two blocks west of Savanna High. Kyna brought along two of her friends, whom she introduced as Anthony and Natalie. Anthony was talkative and outgoing, while Natalie was the quiet, tall and elegant type. They didn't come out and say it, but Aaron guessed they were a couple.

The restaurant was crowded, mostly with students who'd come to offset the day's cafeteria lunch. Aaron and his new companions found a cramped corner table near the restrooms and piled their backpacks against the wall.

"What do you want?" asked Kyna, who remained standing as everyone else took their seats. "I'm buying."

"I'm cool," Aaron said. "I've got cash."

"I insist."

He smiled, forced back the urge to do the "guy thing" by insisting on purchasing his own food. "A soft taco, then."

"What about me?" Anthony whined. "Don't you want to know what I want?"

Kyna stuck out her tongue. "You're getting quesadillas, like you always do." She left the table.

Aaron stared after her for a moment. "Is she always like that?"

"Like what?" asked Anthony.

"So...forceful."

"Don't worry about it. She knows one of the guys here. Hooks us up most of the time."

Aaron faced his companions. "Lucky for us."

"How long have you been in town?" Natalie asked.

"Since last Wednesday."

"From somewhere down south?"

"Texas."

"Cool."

Presently, Kyna returned and distributed cups. She sat alone with Aaron as Natalie and Anthony went to fill their drinks.

"I know," she said. "It's kind of crummy in this part of the neighborhood."

Aaron shrugged. "Doesn't matter. It's fast food, right?"

"Yeah."

A moment of silence, pondering, listening to other people's orders being rattled off over the loudspeaker,

"So, you've met Josh, huh?" asked Kyna.

Aaron scowled. "Sort of. He's in my first period class. Guess he wanted to make friends. You know him?"

"Not really. He's just someone you *know of*."

"Yeah. You kind of *have* to notice his, um, condition."

Kyna looked at him strangely now. "What do you mean?"

"His face," he replied, cringing somewhat. "What happened to it?"

Kyna bit her lip, stared hard at the tabletop. This prompted Aaron to believe he'd perhaps touched on something that she didn't like to talk about. *Like maybe Josh's dad abused him or something, and everyone knows the story but doesn't like to think about it.*

"It's okay," he said after a moment. "Never mind."

Luckily, at that moment, the others returned with their drinks. Anthony, unaware of any of the previous uneasiness, patted him on the back and asked, “Hey, what’re you doing this weekend?”

“Nothing useful,” he replied.

“Why don’t you and Kyna come over my place? I’m having a little get-together on Saturday. My parents will be out of town.”

Aaron looked at Kyna, whose facial expression metamorphosed instantaneously from introverted to cheerful. “You want to go?”

“Sure,” she replied. To Anthony: “What time?”

“Around eight is when I’m telling everyone to show up.”

“Cool.”

The group made smalltalk for another few minutes, until their food was ready, at which point they ate in relative silence—until Kyna surprised Aaron by clearing her throat and saying:

“Aaron says he has dreams about me.”

He almost choked on a piece of lettuce. Kyna was smiling at him deviously, elated, no doubt, at his discomfort—yet he didn’t feel threatened. He didn’t feel as if he were being made fun of. Rather, it was more like camaraderie amongst friends, a playful jest.

Still, they wanted details.

“You’re not serious,” he said, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

“Why not?” asked Anthony. “It’s only a dream, right?”

“It was *my* dream,” he replied, glaring now at Kyna.

Natalie spoke up, her voice soft and delicate, and as nonthreatening as could be: “Dreams can actually help you get to know your friends better, and they can help you make new ones, if you interpret them right.”

Aaron’s facial temperature was quickly rising. “No way.”

“Tell us,” said Kyna, poking his arm.

“Yeah,” added Anthony. “Tell us.”

Natalie joined in as well. “Tell.”

“Tell us.”

“Spill it.”

Geez, he thought, semi-aware of the subtle warmth now being directed at him from three separate sources. *If they really want it...* “Okay, fine,” he said, and he found himself relaying his nocturnal experiences as if the table had suddenly become a confessional booth. He explained about Kyna and himself, in his bedroom, in his parents’ living room—outside, running around naked in the middle of the night. When he was finished, Anthony (on the verge of cracking up) put his hand on his shoulder and shook his head.

“Dude...too much information.”

“Yeah,” cooed Natalie, equally as amused. “We didn’t ask for porno.”

Aaron scowled and was about to point out that it was *they* who had requested such information when Kyna (having sobered somewhat) touched his hand—and instantly he was tranquil.

“We’re just playing, that’s all,” she said. “I just wanted to let you know that I don’t think you’re a creep for being honest. None of us do. You’re welcome here.”

“But what about your boyfriend?” Aaron groaned—still blanketed by Kyna’s assurance, but unable to shake the need for confirmation. “I mean, what would he think about some dude telling his girl he’s having nasty dreams about her?”

Kyna looked at the others for a moment. There was a spark behind her eyes. “Don’t worry about that.”

Aaron shrugged, finished off the last of his taco.

* * *

Later:

Having dropped off both Aaron and Anthony at their respective homes, Kyna was now able to speak freely with Natalie. They were headed eastward along Lincoln, the late afternoon sun cast-

ing an amber glow across the glass-speckled blacktop of a mini-mart parking lot, when she asked:

“So, what do you think?”

“He’s a catch,” Natalie responded, smiling. “Cute *and* fully-charged.”

“Yeah. Ash’s nose still works—and I can see why Josh tried to get his grubby paws on him. Poor fucker’s got shit for brains, but at least he has an instinct for tapping.”

“I’ll say. How do you want to do this?”

Kyna frowned and thought for a moment, knowing exactly what she wanted to do but holding herself back. Playing it cool. “I don’t know yet. I think...I think I’m going too fast, to tell you the truth.”

“Why’s that?”

“I...it’s just...there’s so *much* of him, all at once. It wasn’t like the others. Usually I don’t give half a shit when I’m tapping someone, but when I was with him, when I *tasted* him...he was so *good*, Natalie. I thought I was going to lose it.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t...but I came close.” *God, so close.*

Natalie sighed as they came up to a crosswalk. She pressed the button for the light. “I don’t think it was you. I think it was just...well, maybe he’s got a different makeup. Maybe folks from down south have more jism in them. You know how those Texans are: everything bigger than life. You *did* call him Banana Boy over the phone.”

“Did I?” Kyna laughed. It was a moment’s retreat during an ongoing inner battle between herself, her hormones, and the nameless force surging through her veins. “You know, he can see Josh’s, um, skin.”

“Wow.”

“He can probably see me, too.”

Natalie got the point. She stopped once they’d crossed the street and faced Kyna. “Oh. Did he mention anything?”

"No."

"What about Ash?"

"He didn't mention her either. She's a couple steps above Joshua anyway. Better at masking."

"Hmm...yeah. Well, she's different. You know that. Sometimes even we can't see her."

Kyna sighed, gazed into the traffic. "Sometimes I wonder if she can even see herself, if she even remembers what she is." She bit her lip—hard. "Natalie, I think I like Aaron."

"Like, or like?"

"Like, as in I want him so bad I'm willing to forgo food and sleep just so I can spend every last millisecond in his mind."

"Now, you know you don't mean that."

"I do."

"No," Natalie reiterated, her voice becoming firmer. She reached out and touched Kyna's shoulder. "You don't fall for that kind of thing. You're not a dud."

No, I'm not, Kyna thought, her passion abating somewhat, but I get hungry just like everybody else. And sometimes I wonder just a little too much about boys and sex and getting pregnant so Mr. Right can whisk me off somewhere away from my mother, away from that house and from all my problems, dreaming he'll take me somewhere I can be his girl and have his kids, and I'll be happier than ever because that's what stereotypical teenage girls want.

Natalie was obviously aware of her contemplative state, for she now mustered a half-hearted smile. "It's how we live, Kyna. It's how we survive. We follow the urges, but only so far as we need to. We don't let it get to us—we don't let the people we tap get to us. We get to *them* first, before someone else does, before they realize the truth. Otherwise it's just a good-looking guy who wants a quick lay, a heartless asshole who'll ask you to suck him off just so he can blab to the rest of his friends the next day. Then they all come for you, take their turns, and forget all about you once they've had enough, once you're all tapped out." She

folded her arms. “We’re better than that.”

Yeah, better. “I’ve never felt this before. Not even with Josh.”

“Don’t confuse yourself. Remember, Aaron’s under *your* control, so of course he’s going to be all into you—but you have to keep to the plan. You have to keep focused. You can’t just live off the dreams. You need blood, jism—something *real*.”

“Easy for you to say,” Kyna snorted. “You have Anthony, and he never...” She trailed off. *Never what? Never took advantage of my sexual curiosities as a girl? Never fucked the shit out of me until I grew old enough, strong enough to defend myself when my mom wasn’t around to protect me from my own father? And now, after all that, I actually want a guy. I want him with me, on me, in me, all over me...I want that?*

“Kyna.”

She looked up into Natalie’s eyes, where there was warmth and familiarity—and determination. “I know how it is. You can meet someone who just seems so different from the others, and you think that maybe he really won’t be like all the rest. But he doesn’t know how, you see. He’s hard-wired—they all are. It’s no one’s fault, it’s just the way people are. Aaron’s a good catch, but only if he’s under your control. Only if he has a purpose. If it were the other way around, what do you think he’d be doing to you right now?”

She was right, of course. Kyna knew that. Good advice from a good friend. She might have relinquished herself to the truth right then and there, but instead she felt her frustration growing. After all, how could anyone else in the world know what it was like to be Kyna Miller except Kyna Miller? *I had to learn all this on my own, and when I was much younger; Natalie only had to make friends with me to learn the ropes, spare herself the pain of living out the rest of her life as a dud. She had someone—I didn’t.*

I still don’t.

While all this was going on in her mind, Kyna walked Natalie the rest of the way home. When they at last hugged and parted

ways, she smiled and waved goodbye as usual—but instead of heading south, towards her own home, she went northeast.

To Josh's.

* * *

Kyna wrinkled up her nose as she climbed through Joshua's open bedroom window. The place smelled like dirty socks, and probably hadn't been cleaned in months.

Joshua himself was sitting huddled on the floor beside the dresser, the tacky orange curtains (which he'd almost certainly picked out himself) flapping gently against his knees. He was still wearing the clothes he'd put on Monday morning and, as was evidenced by the jar of urine he clutched tightly in his hands, he obviously hadn't left the room for any reason.

Just like I instructed, she thought, disgusted.

Immediately, she went over to his closet, rummaged through the mess until she found a clean towel. She threw it at him. "Take a shower—and wash *everything*. And don't tell your mom I'm here."

Joshua nodded, shuffled out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Kyna sighed and unloaded her backpack, which she placed on the floor beside the bed. She kicked off her shoes as well and took the opportunity to explore the room, which was buried beneath a growing layer of discarded socks and abandoned underwear. She disregarded most of it and knelt beside the bed, lifted the top mattress to reveal a hidden cache of *Hustler* magazines, as well as a handful of unopened condom packages—though she knew Joshua hadn't used one with a girl since the last time she'd slept with him, years ago.

What a nasty little bugger, she thought, replacing the mattress. Like a squirrel, just not as resourceful.

In due time, the bedroom door opened and Joshua entered. His

hair glistened, and he had a towel wrapped around his waist. He held his dirty clothes in a bundle.

"Put those down there," she instructed, "and take off the towel."

He did as he was told, tossing the bundle onto the floor and disrobing. He waited obediently as she removed her own clothes as well, stepped close to him, leaned in so she could smell him. When she was satisfied that he'd done an acceptable job bathing himself, she nodded and guided him onto the bed.

"Okay, here's the deal," she said. "I'm going to meet Aaron. You're going to stay here and wait for me."

Joshua nodded. There was a thread of saliva oozing from between his parted lips.

"Good. I want you to sleep while I'm gone. Or just lie here and watch the ceiling—I don't care. No masturbating. If I find out you've so much as *looked* at my cunt, I'll slit your throat. Understand?"

He nodded again, his eyes heavy-lidded and opaque as marbles.

"All right," she said, and embraced him. There was a slightly bitter taste at the back of her throat; she had to resist the urge to choke, to push him away, but she managed to keep her concentration throughout the process as she spurred him quickly towards completion.

Just a process, she reminded herself. A series of nerve impulses and chemical responses. He can hardly feel it anyway. He probably won't even remember when it's all over. No enjoyment, no pleasure... just a process...

When she felt him slip over the edge, she closed her eyes tightly and pushed outward with her mind, forcing herself to expand beyond flesh and bone so that her essence was suddenly floating over the bed, observing the scene below. Joshua's climax had extended his aura far beyond the protective shell of his body; she latched onto it, drew it outward like poison from a

wound. Without guidance it would have merely receded after a few moments, but Kyna had other plans.

Time for a little swap, Josh, she thought intensely as she concentrated on a mental image of her own female body. Just go inside, let yourself slip right in, like water flowing into a storm drain...you're waking up...that's it...you're waking up...

She felt him acquiescing, slipping into her body as she transferred herself into his. In a moment it was all over, and she opened her eyes to find herself gasping and panting in Joshua's male body.

"Shit," she breathed. She was somewhat spent, for such transfers drew considerably upon one's reserves. It was, however, not above her skills, and so, after a few minutes of rest, the euphoria of the swap ebbed. She propped herself up on her elbows. Naturally, in Joshua's body, she was no longer in direct control of her female body; Joshua was in control now, though she could still direct his thoughts well enough so that he wouldn't get into trouble wandering around as a girl.

When she'd cooled somewhat, she removed herself from beneath him. As she did this, he collapsed face-first onto the bed, like a lifeless puppet.

"Jesus," she muttered, and helped him to roll over onto his back. So intoxicated was he by her influence that he simply lay there, limbs splayed every which way.

"You're a vegetable," she muttered as she gathered up some clothing for him to wear. Nevertheless, this was how it had to be if she wanted him pliable enough to control. She helped him get dressed. "I want you to do just like you do at school. I want you to press yourself between everyone's attention, make yourself invisible to everyone but me. If your mom or anyone comes looking for you, I want you to concentrate so that they forget why they need to see you, so that they won't want or need to see you until I say it's okay for them to do so. No one comes in here but me—understand?"

Joshua nodded, his expression pitiful. It was almost painful to watch, considering that it was *her* face he was wearing at the moment.

Kyna scowled. *Have a little self-respect, for Christ's sake. You look like a goddamn...nevermind. Doesn't matter. You're not going anywhere anyway.*

Leaving the bed, she went to the closet and found suitable clothing for herself. She dressed, then grabbed her backpack and hoisted it over her newly-masculine shoulders (in actuality, Joshua's build wasn't much harder than her own) as she headed for the window. She was about to climb through when she happened to glance at her reflection in the dresser mirror.

"Oh, shit," she gasped, swallowing hard. Joshua's mottled appearance, usually masked by his knack, was now manifesting itself with all the allure of a slice of cheese bubbling under a heat lamp.

This won't do.

Focusing her concentration, she worked on smoothing skin, regrowing hair; in a moment she was once again a normal fifteen-year-old—save for the fact that she was really a girl occupying a boy's body. On the outside, though, the difference was seamless—better than she'd expected, considering she was in someone else's body, manipulating someone else's design.

She left the bedroom, climbing through the window and jogging along the street. She formulated her game plan as she went, an electric thrill coursing throughout her. It was something she hadn't felt in a long time, and it both frightened and excited her.

Like streaking, she thought. Losing control, except I never really lose control. Not like everyone else. No, I still know how to make it fun. Doesn't have to be an addiction. I deserve a little break now and then. Can't go through life always holding back—sometimes I'm allowed to go a little wild, release some pressure.

Have some fun.

CHAPTER 17

One of the public school system's few obvious benefits is its usefulness as an alibi for almost any occasion. Miss an appointment, commit a minor indiscretion, and all you have to do is blame it on an extracurricular school project. Chances are you'll be rewarded with instant vindication.

As such, when Aaron turned up at the warehouse an hour late citing an after-school test and a troublesome bus ride, Edward wasn't all that annoyed. After all, it was only a part time job, and Aaron was being paid under the table; a necessary absence or two wouldn't bring about the end of the world—even if said absences involved ingesting fast food with Kyna and her friends. Additionally, Edward seemed in no hurry to cross paths with the son whose mother he'd been inappropriately wooing only days ago.

Jack was his usual oily self, working alongside Aaron and cracking tasteless sex jokes within earshot of the female employees. When quitting time came, he insisted on having a smoke out in the parking lot before the drive home.

"There's a new gal over in Inventory," he explained, leaning against the corrugated warehouse wall and coolly infiltrating his bloodstream with nicotine. "I think I'll get her number, add it to the list—just in case I got nothing to do over the weekend."

Aaron, preoccupied with the vending machine (which was being finicky), snorted contemptuously. "What makes you think she'll have time for you?"

"Because I got a knack for these kinds of things."

"Ah. The tongue thing?" He withdrew a Dr. Pepper from the machine—even though he'd really wanted a Coke—and settled himself against the wall.

Jack started to answer, but at that moment a tall, elegant red-head exited one the office portables at the opposite end of the lot and started walking towards her car. As she moved through alternating spaces of evening darkness and frosted LED lighting, her hair a vibrant spray, a fiery beacon of femininity, she conversed on her cell phone.

She was obviously way out of Jack's league—yet here he was, winking and taking one last drag from his cigarette as he started boldly across the lot. He met her at her car, smiling as warmly as if he'd been a friend of hers for years. Momentarily, she put away her phone and started talking to him. They spoke for several minutes, during which time Jack made her laugh more than once. Towards the end she reached into her purse and withdrew a piece of paper, upon which she scribbled something (presumably her phone number). She handed it to Jack, their hands touching for more than a few seconds before she finally decided it was time to get into her car and drive off the lot.

It made Aaron think of Edward and his mother.

Jack returned triumphant. "You see? *That's* what it's all about."

"Nah-ah," said Aaron, wiping some ambient perspiration from his forehead. "That was you talking to some woman you already knew and *pretending* she was just some random chick so you could impress me."

"Now why would I put so much effort into something like that?" Jack shook his head. "Naw, that's just knowing how to throw your mack."

"Your *knack*," Aaron corrected.

"Whatever."

"And you do this all the time? Pick up random women in parking lots?"

"All I need are my women. New face, new pair of titties to hold every night. You tell me that's not heaven."

"It's lonely," Aaron replied, thoughtfully. "I'd have to have

someone there with me for more than a night or two. I'd want something more...long-term."

Jack addressed the air as if a third person had suddenly materialized between himself and Aaron. "Geez, sixteen and the kid's already got it in his head that he's a one-woman man. Let me ask you, straight out: You ever slept with a girl?"

Aaron sighed without answering. He was still trying to rid his head of Edward's image.

"That's right," Jack continued. "You're Mister Manners and all, but let's say you've messed around with a couple of your girlfriends, blasted a couple wads of your DNA down their throats—so what? You think you're missing something by not having kept every single girl you've ever pickle-tickled? Naw, if you're looking for love, kiddo, it don't exist. At least, not around here. People use people to get what they want, that's all it is. You think when a girl's sucking you off that she's The One? Naw, she's just never seen a ding-dong up close before. She's blowing you so she can practice for her *real* man, some college football player with a nice car and a four-year scholarship."

"You're not much of an optimist, are you?"

"Nope." Jack snuffed out his cigarette and nodded towards the car. "Come on, let's get going."

* * *

Aaron got home at half past nine to find Daniel had left the office early and was now solemnly collaborating in the kitchen with Julia on a dinner of lemoned trout.

"Someone named Josh came by earlier," Julia mentioned as Aaron ducked into the refrigerator for a soda. "He left a phone number."

"Okay," Aaron replied.

He mumbled a quick "hi" to Daniel and then went upstairs to his room, where he found the yellow sticky note Julia had plas-

tered on the door—the family message system, as it were, and seal of confirmation that his mother had not actually entered the sacred space that was Aaron Capps' bedroom.

He removed the note and went inside. He hadn't a clue as to why Joshua would even *try* calling on him—especially after their last unsuccessful meeting.

Disinterested, he crumpled the note, tossed it into the wastebasket, and spread himself out on the bed for the evening's homework session. However, half an hour in, he suddenly felt an uncomfortable heat developing under his skin. Even after removing his socks and shirt, the feeling intensified to the point where he felt claustrophobic.

Leaving his bed, he went for the door, paused beside the wastebasket long enough to remove the crumpled sticky note. Then, obeying an unrealized whim, he went downstairs to use the phone.

Glancing at the sticky note, he removed the receiver from its cradle and dialed the number. A woman (Joshua's mother, presumably) answered.

"Hello?"

"Joshua, please," he heard himself say—and immediately the constricting fever leeches from his skin.

Joshua answered momentarily.

"Yeah?"

"Hey. This is Aaron."

"Oh, hi, Aaron."

"You came by earlier?"

"Yeah. You were out or something."

"I was working."

"Oh, you have a job?"

"Yeah. Moving boxes, lugging stuff around. It's a real no-brainer kind of thing."

"I like your accent. 'Kan-duh thang.'"

Aaron scowled slightly. *"Very funny."*

"Just messing with you, buddy."

"Dude, we're not exactly friends, so if you could just get to the point—"

"Aren't we impatient? Okay, then: I want you to go with me to the mall tomorrow, after school."

"The mall?" *Why the heck would I want to do that?* He started to politely decline, but something caught his tongue, something tightened in his chest. Instead he said, "Um...I don't have work tomorrow, so sure, I'd love to go."

"Awesome. We'll meet by the flagpole, out in front of the school."

"Cool."

Aaron hung up the phone, head buzzing with something thick and heavy. His thoughts had become jumbled. The only pristine thread was the fact that he had an appointment with Joshua tomorrow, and that was all that mattered—despite his distaste for anything that had to do with the boy.

He climbed the stairs in a haze and, locking himself inside his bedroom, went right to bed.

* * *

Sitting cross-legged on the floor of Joshua's bedroom, Kyna clutched the cordless in her hand and pondered her options. She'd been occupying Joshua's body since the afternoon, which meant that for several hours she'd been exerting an enormous amount of control keeping herself and Joshua swapped—and it was starting to wear on her.

Hell, she thought, recalling how she'd jogged all the way to Aaron's house, knocked so eagerly on the door—only to be greeted by his mother, who delivered the news that her son wouldn't be in until evening. *A whole afternoon wasted.*

She looked over at Joshua (still occupying her body), sitting slumped on his bed. "Don't give me that look," she grumbled. "You wanted to be friends with him, after all, so this is your

chance.”

Actually, he wasn't giving her a look so much as he was simply staring mindlessly in her direction.

I could switch us back for the night, she thought, which would get rid of the stress of maintaining myself in this body—but then I'd have to do him again. Shit, might as well just stay put until tomorrow. She sighed and lay back on the bed. No problem. It's just a day. I'll pass the time somehow.

Joshua, having sensed her thoughts, giggled and clumsily grabbed his crotch.

Watch it, she thought, and kicked him in the shin—though not too hard, for he was occupying her body.

He behaved himself for the remainder of the night, which was good, because as each hour passed (with excruciating slowness) the stress became worse and worse. Even when she released her hold on the string-cheese contour of Joshua's skin, thereby allowing his body to settle itself somewhat naturally, there was still the constant stream of concentration that had to be maintained to keep herself situated properly, to keep Joshua's essence from wandering out of her body and back into his own. It would have been immensely easier if he'd been coherent enough to carry half the load, like he'd done back when they'd swapped bodies the first time...back when they'd actually been friends. Such was not the case now, however, and so Kyna had to do it alone. She'd been able to maintain herself in Joshua's body for several days, with his help; now she guessed she'd have less than half that amount of time before her strength gave.

She took to tossing and turning on Joshua's floor, dozing fitfully because she knew if she allowed herself to fall into a deep sleep, her essence would default back into her feminine body.

By the time dawn came, her hands were quivering slightly and the blood was rushing in her ears. Her stomach grumbled, demanded attention, reminded her that she would soon be at the mercy of a hunger that had nothing to do with the necessity of

food...but she held firmly to her plans, her emotional needs, her hidden desires to be something more than a series of instinctive wants and yearnings.

Got to hold out for something more.

CHAPTER 18

Kyna was absent from school on Wednesday, much to Aaron's chagrin. During lunch he found out (through Natalie and Anthony) that she hadn't been feeling well, and had stayed home. Beyond that, her friends were vague about her actual ailment; without their chieftain they seemed preoccupied and distant. So, like an older brother who'd promised to take his sibling out for ice cream, he went to the flagpole at three o'clock and waited for Joshua.

Rotten way to spend my day off, he thought, wanting to go home, but unable to shake the inexplicable sense of curious obligation that had somehow been seeded in him since last night's phone call.

After a while Joshua arrived. He was clad in a Marilyn Manson T-shirt and had a studded dog collar around his neck—but perhaps the most interesting aspect about him was the fact that he didn't look like a half-melted ghoul. His tanned skin was smooth, unblemished.

"Wow," gasped Aaron, surprised. "You're...um...you're all..." He waved his hands around his head.

Joshua's face twitched. The skin around his eyes was puffy. "I'm what?"

"Oh. I...it's just...your face is smooth and all. No, um, *marks*."

"Oh, that. Yeah."

"So...how did you do that?"

Rolling his eyes, Joshua seemed frustrated, but responded anyway: "Well, you ever seen a magic show? Like, you ever been to someone's birthday party and they had a magician there doing parlor tricks?"

"That's what that is? A parlor trick?"

“Sort of. More of an illusion, really. Anyone can do it—you can get books from the library on the subject. Let’s go and catch the bus.”

Aaron wasn’t convinced; however, any further questions regarding the matter were forgotten before they could be asked.

He followed Joshua across the lawn. “What’s with the doggie collar?”

“My after-school look,” replied Joshua. “I can sort of stretch out and be myself, you know?”

“Oh.”

“You should give it a shot and let your hair down. You’d look much better that way.”

Aaron ran his hands over his head. “What makes you say that?”

Joshua swore under his breath. “Never mind.”

* * *

Eastridge Mall was bustling with activity when they arrived. Many students from Savanna were there, though hardly anyone took the effort to say hello. The ones who did (the girls, in particular) waved to Aaron rather than Joshua. A few simply snickered and made rude comments concerning the boy’s collar. It made Aaron wonder just how often (and with what success) his companion came out on occasions such as this.

“I’ve never seen so much fish-netting,” Aaron said once they’d made their way to the second-floor food court and ordered half a dozen egg rolls.

Joshua, sitting across from him at the small table they’d snagged, snorted disdainfully. “All the sluts around here dress like that. Like they want to be whores or something. They prance around showing themselves off like they’re in a nudist beauty pageant, and then when they get knocked up by some horny asshole they go crying back to their mommies because they’re preg-

nant.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“I’ll say. So, is Anaheim anything like your home town?”

Aaron laughed. “I guess. I mean, it’s not just a strip of sand and cactus.” He sighed wistfully, remembering a girl’s face, trying to recall her name. His head was in a funk. “It was home. I had friends there.”

“I figured,” Joshua agreed, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “You don’t appreciate something until you lose it.”

Aaron nodded and glanced at two girls walking past. “Not that you always have a *choice*. I was fine with my girlfriend, but she was too...anxious. She was always talking about missing things, missing experiences that she was supposed to have during her high school years. Parties, football games, concerts—I was too ‘old fashioned’ for her. I always wanted to stay in and make out.”

Joshua made a face. “Must’ve been hell.”

“Well, not really.”

“Did you ever do the deed with her?”

“We messed around a little, but it wasn’t all about getting laid.”

“So you’ve never...?”

“No.”

“Don’t you wanna know how it feels?”

Sex or love? “Why all the questions?”

Joshua shrugged, leaned back in his chair. His expression was suddenly tranquil. “I just want to get to know you.”

“By studying my sex life?”

“Hey, you can learn a lot from a guy by the way he fucks.”

“You’re a perv,” Aaron responded, something in him twitching, a spark of memory faltering. Something in Joshua’s manner was familiar, but he couldn’t put his finger on what it was.

“Yeah, I am. So...have you ever screwed anyone, guy or girl?”

“Why’s it so important?”

“Come on, just tell.”

"Fine. If you *must* know, I've gone down on a couple girls, but I've never slept with anyone."

"How come? You waiting for Miss Right?"

"Well, yeah. It might sound stupid, but it doesn't really matter if I don't get any until I'm thirty, or whatever. It's not a twenty-four-hour-a-day kinda thing."

Frowning, Joshua leaned forward. "So, you're looking for real love?"

"Aren't we all?"

"But how do you know what real love is until you *feel* it? I mean, you can *think* you like someone, you think they're interesting to talk to or they're cute or whatever, but you can't *feel* something real until you're brave enough to give yourself to someone who's willing to show you their love physically."

Aaron shook his head. "You can't measure your love for someone by how good they make you feel in bed."

"You could do it with someone who made you feel so good that you knew it was her love and not just fooling around. You couldn't do that with only words. Words can fail."

"Maybe. It would depend. Have you ever done it with anyone based on those standards?"

The color left Joshua's face, and he looked away, biting his lip, considering something barely palatable, it seemed. When he looked back, there was a quivering behind his eyes. "Maybe—but hey, let's go catch a movie."

"No fair!" Aaron exclaimed, playfully—but Joshua had already left the table and was making his way across the court.

Aaron pursued, barely keeping up with his companion as they walked down to the mall's multiplex. When they were standing together in line he noticed Joshua was breathing somewhat heavily, and was sweating. He asked what was wrong and suddenly he became dizzy, his mind clouding over. It was so bad that Joshua had to grab him to keep him from falling down.

"Probably something I ate," Aaron mumbled, stumbling to-

wards the restroom.

Joshua looped his arm around his shoulders and pulled him towards one of the theater entrances instead. "Don't worry about it. You just need to get off your feet."

Aaron was too inebriated to protest, too confused to wonder why Joshua's body was so excruciatingly hot. He allowed himself to be directed into the theater, where Joshua found adjoining seats towards the back wall. In his current state it was easy to simply sit slumped in his seat and stare dumbly at the screen—so of course he didn't catch Joshua staring intently at him...scrutinizing him as one might a famous painting. Aaron was lost within his own space, the surround sound filling his ears, the darkness of the theater pressing in, the buzz of his senses leading him into an ethereal world.

Suddenly there was warmth against his cheek and he turned to see Joshua's slick, sweaty face, mere inches from his own, getting closer—

"What are you doing?" Aaron whispered, alarmed, unable to move, but somehow sublimely relaxed.

Just like in the dreams, only not Kyna...

"I think I should tell you that you have the nicest lips," Joshua whispered, brushing his nose against Aaron's. Beads of sweat, illuminated by the light of the movie screen, trickled down his forehead.

"Josh—"

"I can see why Josh honed in on you...so much...so *much* waiting to be tapped...and yet you're just you, not like the others, not a show-off or an asshole but someone who's just himself. So pure, untouched..."

Their lips were touching now. Joshua kissed him briefly, then pulled back slightly.

"You don't know how it is," he said. "They'll just hurt you, but I'll take care of you. We can take care of each other, okay?"

Aaron squirmed, tried to ignore an overwhelming ache that

suddenly filled his every fiber—

Kiss me.

—tried to understand why he was tilting his head and allowing Joshua to force his lips apart.

Please...help me...please...

Aaron's thoughts or someone else's, he couldn't be sure, but he *did* know that he was filled with such utter wanting that it didn't matter anymore who, what, or where he was. He was paralyzed with emotion that came from within himself and from all around, blending with his breath mixing with Joshua's, hands feeling all over him, reaching, searching for the zipper to his fly, and—

Oh, God.

* * *

Kyna knew she was teetering on the edge of her own sanity, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Too much, all at once...thought I could handle it, but I can't—how could I? All this time, pretending I'm unbreakable, better than the others...I'm no better...gonna let this happen...let it happen...

She felt herself trembling, wanting, hungering—trying not to notice as her hands fumbled with Aaron's zipper.

This is what you want, right? Ashley tasted him, but you're going to have him. Don't care if anyone sees you...so hungry...take in as much of him as you can, before he makes any noise—then run. Exit's right behind you. No one will ever know...just like the others...just let it happen.

She knelt between his legs; she was poised on the brink, about to take him into her mouth when, inexplicably, something within her snapped and she found herself peering through a small window of clarity. She saw herself (in her female body, despite the fact that she was physically in Joshua's) kneeling on the floor of the theater, her mouth gaping open obscenely—and she was overcome with shame and disgust for what she was about to

do.

No...no! This isn't what I want.

* * *

The revulsion overcame Aaron quickly, and it helped him to clear his thoughts as he watched his companion stumble uncertainly to his feet.

"I'm sorry," Joshua mumbled, backing out of the aisle, tripping over the other seats. There was a moment's lingering as sorrow passed between them like some unseen mist—then he tore himself away, ran for the exit.

Aaron's head rolled back against his seat, and he felt (for his sight was now a mass of chaotic colors and flashes) himself falling back into himself. He groaned, suddenly realizing that he was losing his grasp on the chair beneath him—he was losing his grasp on his own body. A storm raged fiercely, all around him. Wind whipped at his skin and shrieked through his ears. He closed his eyes but the flashes of lightning were behind his eyelids as well, trying to dig into his brain, trying to fuse mind and matter together once again. In a moment he knew the storm would have him, and he would be lost forever in an imaginary ocean.

There was the movie theater, but it was away from him, on the other side of an imperceptible rift. He could see himself, or, more accurately, he could see his *body*, sitting slumped in its seat. Part of him was afraid of the sight, and almost frantic to get back inside; another part was intrigued, elated—mesmerized by the experience of occupying a space outside his own flesh.

Fear won out over amazement, though, as he was suddenly spiraling downward at a sickening speed and being thrust back into himself like too many items of clothing being stuffed into a suitcase—

—breath, blood...pain. Aaron convulsed violently for a moment

as he was dumped cruelly back into his body. His head throbbed as he sat up in his seat, opening his eyes. He was himself again, he realized, and even though Joshua was gone, he could still taste the kisses and feel the hands probing his groin.

Bastard, he thought, tears welling up in his eyes. With a sudden wave of nausea washing over him, he closed his fly and stood uncertainly, making his way out of the theater as best as he could without running into anything or anyone. Thankfully, no one paid him any attention.

The lights of the lobby were excruciatingly bright as he scouted out the men's room, entered and threw himself into one of the stalls. Falling to his knees, he vomited. When he was through he remained leaning over the bowl, crying, not caring if anyone heard. He no longer knew what to think or feel; he only knew that he'd been violated in an unexplainable way, and that he'd allowed it to happen, allowed himself to be suckered right into Joshua's ploy.

Just like with Cal in the gym...Coach Stieffel...with Sheryl at the pool. Should've seen it coming—why didn't I realize what was happening?

In retrospect, he never would have called Joshua back, yet... what had caused him to do just that? Curiosity? Or did it have more to do with that warm buzz that seemed to fill his head every time he was attacked by someone with the uncanny knack? Was it just a hopeless ending once someone started puppeteering him?

He sniffed, wiped his face with a wad of toilet tissue. If he'd still been ten years old, he would have gone right home, told his parents what had happened...perhaps even cried in his mother's arms. She would have comforted and cuddled him in her own way. Daniel, intending the best, would have beaten around the bush until he found a way to remind his son that prevention was the path to victory. If only his son had listened to the signals, seen the signs.

Doesn't matter, he thought. *This is all some kind of twisted reality.*

If I somehow got my parents to understand, to believe me, it still wouldn't do any good. I would still be the one who has to face the bullies everyday. No, I'm on my own. Always been this way, living in the same house with my parents, but I still have to take care of myself.

After a time, he composed himself and left the stall. There was no one else in the restroom. He walked over to one of the sinks and splashed water onto his face. The skin around his eyes was swollen—*so pale, like I'm stoned or hungover or something.*

There was something else, too: a glow, a sort of halo extending several inches from his body—as if his aura had not fully settled itself just yet. Curious, he reached towards the mirror, felt—just for a moment—that he might actually be able to reach through the glass and touch a duplicate Aaron Capps inhabiting a reflected realm in an alternate universe. However, the moment his fingertips came into contact with the mirror, the halo was gone.

He left the restroom, went out into the lobby and found a water fountain, from which he drank until he was satisfied he'd ridden himself of Joshua's aftertaste. Then, hoping he didn't look too distraught, he headed for the bus terminal.

CHAPTER 19

Kyna was subdued during the ride home. She sat quietly in her seat at the back of the bus and gazed through the window, taking in random details of the Anaheim streets as she rolled her tongue around in her mouth. The metallic tinge of human blood was still there, sparking memories of her recent successful attempt at satisfying herself. For now, anyway.

Not hard in this city, she thought bitterly, recalling how she'd exited the rear of the mall (after parting ways with Aaron) and scouted the parking lot for a suitable partner. In this case it had been a thirty-something male—as uninspired as all the rest, but trailing his own secret taboos as if he'd painted them upon a large, colorful banner to be carried around with him wherever he went. Most of these sorts of creatures wanted women, some wanted young girls, a few liked boys. This particular dud had fallen into the latter-most category; as such, Kyna (wearing Joshua's skin) had followed him to his car and offered herself to him.

There had not been too much to it after that. They'd retired to the backseat of his Lexus and she'd taken him without reserve, bringing him quickly to his finale. In a mixture of uncontrollable hunger and fiery hatred, she'd bit down hard at the crucial moment, tearing into his flesh with her teeth, summoning blood and semen together. He'd been none too pure, but still immensely satisfying.

And now here she was, past the point, satiated, overfed—bloated. She knew she'd let it get the best of her, and she hated herself more than ever for demonstrating such weakness. And yet it wasn't all that bad, because it had been Joshua's body in the backseat of the car, Joshua's face buried in the man's crotch,

and it would be Joshua's problem dealing with whatever filthy microbes had jumped the gap.

I get the jism, he gets one more STD to add to the list. Doesn't matter. Shouldn't matter.

Yet it *did* matter. She could feel it in the pit of her stomach, the guilt and anguish at what she'd done to a complete stranger using a body that didn't belong to her. It made her feel like a vagrant, a criminal—an outcast from society sitting huddled on some godforsaken bus that smelled faintly of sweat and urine. There was an idiotic-looking man who'd just gotten on; now he was sitting across from her, girl-lover eyes scanning her male body, somehow sensing her true self hidden beneath the layers of Joshua's flesh—

—I don't want to be here anymore.

* * *

It was night when Joshua awoke to find himself, aching and exhausted, lying sprawled face-down on his bed. For a moment he couldn't recall how he'd gotten this way—and then it all hit him as his brain suddenly turned itself on, filtering the day's memories like slides from a dream, scenes from a nightmare. Although he hadn't been present in his body during Kyna's misadventures, his mind retained an afterimage. Upon remembering the strange man, writhing and gasping in the back of the Lexus, he felt his abdominals clench involuntarily as his stomach tried to empty itself—and that's when he noticed just how much trouble he was in, for not only had Kyna blatantly misused his body, she'd almost completely drained his essence as well.

He rolled onto his side, tried to sit up, but his strength eluded him. Momentarily he was unable, even, to keep his eyes open, and he fell back into a dreamless sleep.

He awoke several times during the night, his body alternating between fever and chills. Throughout, the only bit of lucid, con-

scious thought he could muster came in the form of various pleadings for it to be over. The pain, the fever—his life, if need be.

Anything but this.

* * *

The bus deposited Aaron near his parents' house at a little past six o'clock. He rushed inside immediately to shower and disinfect his mouth, though no amount of grooming would ever cleanse him of the memory of today. He cried twice during the proceedings. After nearly an hour, when his skin was pink and raw, when the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet were wrinkled like prunes, he finally switched off the water and went into his bedroom, where he sat cross-legged on the floor and pondered what to do next. When nothing came to mind, he went to see what his mother was preparing for dinner. The normal social interaction would do him good.

Downstairs, the kitchen table had been half-set, and there was a roast in the oven, but Julia was nowhere to be found. Neither was Daniel (who probably hadn't gotten off work yet anyway). Aaron wondered if, in his rush to get into the shower, he'd missed some vital detail.

He was about to call out when a noise from outside caught his attention. Muffled sighing, scuffling, heavy breathing, wafting in through the screen door, which stood slightly ajar. He moved towards it, though he didn't actually have to go outside in order to assess the situation: the noises were coming from the tool shed, and they were unmistakably those made by a couple in the midst of passion.

Please, no, he thought, backing away from the door, bumping into the table. *Don't let this happen.* But he knew it was. Daniel's car hadn't been in the driveway. He hadn't seen Edward's, but he *knew*. The look the man had given him previously, after being in-

terraptured on the stoop, with Julia...it had been the look of someone with unfinished business.

Sitting himself at the table and gripping the sides with his hands, he waited. Several minutes passed, during which time the groaning and gasping reached a pinnacle before giving way to silence. The shed door squeaked open, then, and Aaron heard the sound of footsteps disappearing down the driveway.

Fleeing the crime scene.

Julia appeared in the doorway, her hair out of place, her clothing rumpled. She looked surprised to see him.

"Oh, Aaron," she breathed. "You're home."

He didn't say anything (what *could* he say?). She moved past him, towards the sink. The unmistakable smell of sex clung to her hair and clothes.

"How was the mall?" she continued. She'd turned on the hot water full blast so that the hiss of the faucet filled the kitchen. "Do they have a Sears?"

No, mom, he thought. *You can't hide this. When I was little you used to cover it up, used to hide under the covers whenever I'd accidentally walk in on you and dad in the bedroom...but you could never hide the smell. You can't hide it now.*

When he didn't answer, she turned around to face him, a pained expression on her face. "Well? Are you just going to sit there," she whispered, a tear trickling down her cheek, "or are you going to say something?"

Oh.

He bit his lip, forced himself to look at her without spite, for he now realized his mother's transgression hadn't merely been a case of knowing better and doing it anyway. Of course it hadn't been like that. *What was I thinking? God, she's in this just as deep as I am. We all are.* She couldn't have resisted Edward's will any better than Aaron himself could have resisted Joshua's.

Because we're newcomers—we're victims.

Duds.

He wanted to go to her side, to hold her, to tell her that it had happened to him as well, that they could go through this together. Instead he froze up, became rooted to the spot. *Can't comfort myself, so how am I supposed to comfort her?*

(He was certain Daniel had felt the same way upon discovering his son's apparent lack of sexual prudence.)

Julia sniffed and wiped her face on the back of her hand. "Oh, I'm sorry. I...I don't know what's come over me." She took a moment to compose herself before heading for the living room.

"Do you, um, need some help with dinner?" Aaron asked, getting up.

Julia paused at the threshold. "That's okay. It's your day off, right? Hey, I have an idea." She went over to the end table beside the sofa, picked up her purse. "I saw this little video rental store down by the pizza place. Why don't you go there and rent us something to watch tonight? Your father's got the DVD player all set up." She held out a twenty dollar bill. "Get whatever you want. You can keep the change."

"Okay," Aaron murmured, offering his silent agreement not to make a big deal of things. At least, not at the onset of the Capps' downward spiral.

He took the cash, headed upstairs for his shoes. He was searching for socks when he heard the shower running—Julia's attempt at ridding herself of any evidence of her transgression.

As he left the house, he caught sight of Nathan, beer can in hand, reclining on his front porch. Typically, whenever he saw the man, there was nothing more than a stern frown and narrowing of the eyes to denote life behind the sun-browned mask of his face. On this particular evening, as Aaron crossed the concrete lawn, he noticed that Nathan was watching him more closely than usual.

He wondered if he'd heard Edward and his mother fucking.

"How's it going?" Aaron called out, slowing his pace.

"One more notch in the withered bark of life," Nathan replied,

sighing.

Aaron stopped, caught on something intangible.

"Something the matter?" asked Nathan.

"Naw," Aaron said. He started towards the end of the cul-de-sac once again, but before he'd taken three steps, he was suddenly going the other way, crossing Nathan's driveway and stepping onto the porch. He stood over the man, his voice hoarse and papery as he spoke: "Yeah...something's the matter. Everything's wrong—everything's falling apart."

Nathan got to his feet, launched into a rant about politics and socialism gone bad; halfway through, Aaron broke down and started sobbing. Without realizing it, he embraced the man, held him close and wished it were Daniel—wished it *could* be Daniel. As it was, he stood holding crazy old Nathan Brown, the leery-eyed next door neighbor who kept a life-sized garden doppelganger in his backyard jungle and whose paranoid outlook on life was hardly the medicine needed to soothe a teenage boy's jaded spirits.

For the moment, though, it was just enough.

After a while, Nathan said, "The bullies have gotten to you, have they?"

"I hate them," Aaron whispered. "The people at school, they all tease me and they don't even give a shit. It's all a game, but I have to deal with it, I have to walk away with the problem, and I see them looking like nothing ever happened, and all this time I know they can do it again and again, and I fucking *hate* them..."

Nathan held him at arm's length. "Assertion is all that's needed. A mind that thinks for itself—*thoughts* instead of reactions. I could teach you a few things."

Aaron wasn't listening. His mind was in tatters. He stepped back from Nathan, suddenly feeling supremely embarrassed. "I—I'm sorry...I shouldn't have—I have to go to the store."

He left the porch, jogged down the street.

CHAPTER 20

The next two days were difficult. School was a therapeutic process, which Aaron endured only because Joshua was nowhere to be found. At night, sleep was difficult. Though Aaron's muscles were sore and his bones weary from work, his brain continued to slave away in the dusty coal mine of his mind as thoughts and emotions ordered themselves into patterns of chaos. More often than not, he lay quite awake, wrapped in constricting sheets and anxious sweat glistening between shadows flecked with the vague shapes of his bedroom. In one corner, a pair of movie-going boys groping each other indecently; in another, the outline of a nude Goth girl, crouched, ready to pounce; between the dresser and the closet door, a spell-wielding P.E. coach awaiting the proper moment to execute a bout of paralysis.

On Thursday, class periods one through four were an amalgam of studious faces and dusty blackboards crammed between blotted lines of dollar store looseleaf and Aaron's own unordered thoughts. Whenever anyone spoke to him, it was his brain that responded, not himself.

Despite the incongruity of his erotic dreams (which had mysteriously gone on hiatus), the only coherent moments were, inexplicably, those shared with Kyna during Geometry class. It was comparable to suddenly stepping inside some warm, dry sanctuary during a torrential rain...though if Aaron *felt* utterly wretched, Kyna *looked* it. She had dark, puffy circles around the eyes, and her hair was not as well-tended as usual, her posture not as straight and proud as it should have been.

"Hey," he greeted, depositing his backpack on the floor beside his desk and walking over to Kyna's. She'd already settled herself and was now sitting somewhat slumped as she awaited the tardy

bell and roll call and all the other monotonous chores of high school life.

"My boyfriend broke up with me," she murmured, staring at her desktop.

He asked her if she wanted to talk about it.

She didn't.

On Friday, it was much the same, and Aaron felt a yearning inside, as if something wasn't as it should have been, as if there was an empty spot inside him that was directly related to Kyna's happiness.

"You're still going to the party, right?" he asked after class, when everyone was lined up near the door for dismissal. In all honesty he wasn't in the mood for parties; he merely wanted to go home and brood in his bedroom for the entire weekend. *But maybe that's not the right thing to do, because then I'll be thinking of her the entire time and wishing I could be doing something to make her feel better. If we're together I can at least try.*

She shrugged. "Are you going?"

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, if you are, I m-mean..." He swallowed, stuttering, not knowing why. "P-please go. It...it won't be the same without you. I don't know the others that well yet, and...I just want you to go. It'll be fun." He put his hand over his mouth, his cheeks suddenly flushed. He didn't understand his insistence, didn't know why it was so important for her to acknowledge his predicament, to establish herself as the single focal point of his own sanity he now realized she'd become. Boyfriend or no boyfriend, perhaps if he interacted with her, made her a real friend and not just a sexual fantasy, it would alleviate his embarrassing nocturnal fixation.

Kyna looked a bit perplexed, cocking her head to one side (as she often did), looking...confused? Hopeful? Devastated? Surrendering willingly to something—but to what?

"I'll be there," she said.

* * *

At work, Aaron was able to focus on the basic task of carrying and stacking, keeping his mounting hatred for Edward at bay until quitting time, when he was required to pay a visit to the man's office for his weekly earnings.

As usual, Edward made little effort to acknowledge his presence (beyond what was necessary to maintain an efficient, working environment). He was talking to someone on his cell phone as he flipped through his file cabinet. Aaron bit his lip and waited near the door as he struggled with himself, tried with all his might not to leap at the jackal who'd spoiled his family's purity. Physically, Aaron was tall for his age, and well-muscled—but Edward was a full-grown man, with a man's growth, a man's experience. He also had the knack, which meant he could probably will Aaron to hurl himself through the window long before any sort of serious fight broke out. Besides, Aaron didn't know for sure, he hadn't actually *seen* the man leave the shed that night. Yet...he *knew*.

"Ah, Aaron," Edward said after several minutes on the phone. He grinned broadly as he closed his laptop computer and slid it into its carry case. "How'd you do your first week on the job? Ready to go home for the weekend?"

Aaron responded immediately, but the words that came out of his mouth had nothing to do with the question. "You were with my mom."

The smile disappeared from Edward's face. He came around from behind the desk, stood in front of Aaron. Looking down at him, seeming impossibly taller now, his eyes became wicked sparks. "Did she tell you that?"

Every hair on Aaron's body stood on end. He felt his blood begin to boil. "I heard you. In the shed."

"Did you, now?"

"My dad could take you." *I could take you.*

“Oh, Daniel?” Edward laughed. “Another pretty-boy, though he’s had the dignity to admit he’s past the point, nowadays—but I suppose that’s what sixteen years behind a desk will do to you. And now here’s his carbon-copy son, just beginning the same downhill skid, absolutely *shocked* to discover that his saint of a mother can’t keep her legs closed. The audacity!”

Aaron might have thrown himself at the man right then and there, but he found himself paralyzed, rooted to the spot. All he could do was wince as a jolt of pent-up adrenaline caused his ears to ring and his limbs to tremble.

Edward continued, reaching for his wallet. “But that’s how the world works, son. Some are born to lead, others to follow. You may want to beat the living shit out of me, you may have the brawn to back it up, even, but you’re still just a dud.” He tucked a twenty-dollar bill into Aaron’s shirt pocket, then leaned in close, poked Aaron’s forehead with his index finger. “Now go home and fuck yourself.”

* * *

Kyna tensed when she heard Natalie’s voice at the other end of the phone line:

“Hello?”

She cleared her throat. “Hey. It’s Kyna.”

“Hi, Kyna. What’s up?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to, um, let you know...”

“Let me know what?”

Shut up. Let me say it. “About the party—”

“You’re going, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...I just don’t think—”

“Aaron’s going to be there, right? Let us take care of everything. You just go and have a good time. We’ll take him out back, tap him until

he's nice and dry."

Kyna sighed. "I'm not feeling the moment, Natalie. Now's not the time—for me or for him."

"Then...what? Are you saying you're not going to tap him tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"Because if not, well, you know...there are plenty of people who'd like to have him—"

"No!" Kyna exclaimed, with a ferocity that surprised even herself. "I mean...it's my choice."

"Should be Ash's. She found him first, after all."

"She wouldn't know what to do with him."

A sigh on the other end of the line. *"I don't get you. You want to keep him all to yourself, yet you won't put him to any good use. Sounds kind of selfish to me."*

You should talk, thought Kyna. Wonder if Anthony ever really wants to give up his jizz at a moment's notice.

Perhaps Natalie sensed her antipathy, for her next response was less aggressive. *"Sorry. I didn't mean it that way, but, well, how will everyone else look at this? They'll see you at school with this blond bombshell of a stud, they'll expect something from you, and when weeks and months pass and they don't get it...what'll they think, Kyna?"*

"They can think whatever they want."

Silence. Natalie's inaudible exasperation. *"So what's it going to be?"*

Kyna thought for a moment. When her indecision refused to resolve itself, she said, "I don't know."

* * *

Anthony's party was at eight o'clock.

At quarter till, Aaron found himself walking briskly along Lincoln. Freshly showered and impeccably groomed, he felt mud-dier than ever, in need of shedding an illusory skin that had been

thickening over the past week.

Must be an ulcer the size of a football growing inside my stomach, he thought, coming to an intersection, pressing the crosswalk button, fingering his wallet in his pants and imagining the twenty-dollar bill tucked away inside.

Twenty dollars for four days' work.

Needless to say, he wasn't going to bother showing up at the warehouse again on Monday. *Not with Edward there, Edward and his holier-than-thou attitude, Edward and his ego.*

The light turned green. Aaron bolted across the street, the sweet, oily exhaust of two dozen waiting vehicles filling his sinuses, clinging to his lungs and fusing with his afflicted soul.

Why am I out here, running around like this? he wondered—but he already knew the answer. *Because after spending an entire Saturday stuck in that house with mom and dad and that...that crumbling wall between all of us I'd rather take my chances out in this crazy town.*

In a way it was sort of exhilarating, to be out and about, directing his own course. He'd hardly even mentioned his absence to his parents on the way out; they thought he was merely bumming around the shopping square down the street when in actuality here he was, ascending into a hilly patchwork of shingled vertexes and towering cypress. The homes here were nice, single-story houses with pristine lawns, geometrically-perfect hedges, and spotless driveways. As prejudiced as it might have sounded, Anthony didn't look like the sort of boy whose parents could afford to live in such a nice neighborhood.

The party was already underway when he arrived; Anthony greeted him at the front door.

"All right, you made it!" he said, patting Aaron on the shoulder and leading him into the living room. There were perhaps a dozen people (of varying age, sex, and dress) lounging on the sofa and on the floor, drinks in hand, faces beaming. Natalie was among them—

—Kyna was not.

A bit disappointed, Aaron made room for himself on the floor and exchanged greetings with everyone. He talked, told a few jokes, listened to CDs, and played video games as more guests arrived. The grand total was somewhere around thirty, mostly students from Savanna, faces that were somewhat familiar, but not enough that Aaron felt at home trying to keep up with stories and jokes that were about people he didn't know. He'd wanted to talk to Kyna, to hang out with her, get to know her; instead, he was adrift on a social sea, lost without a compass. It only got more uncomfortable when, at nine-thirty, all the lights were dimmed and the mood of the party became infinitely more sultry. People began pairing off for quality make-out time.

That explains the ratio of guys to girls, he thought, silently excusing himself from a waning group of party goers who hadn't yet retired to some dark corner or vacated bedroom. Finding his way into the kitchen, he got himself a soda and walked from room to room, sipping and trying not to step on anyone's toes. He considered leaving early, but realized he'd left his shoes somewhere in the dimmed living room, which had turned into a miniature brothel.

He'd just discovered the sprawling backyard (and accompanying swimming pool) when he heard a familiar voice calling his name. He turned and saw Kyna standing just outside the sliding glass door he'd come through only moments before.

"Kyna!" Immediately his demeanor brightened as something inside him loosened.

She smiled and came towards him, her sleek and powerful body packaged casually in denim jacket and charcoal hip-huggers. It wasn't however, like it had been in Geometry class, for though he was thrilled to see her, and though her physical attributes were still intriguingly alluring to him, the fever of infatuation did not take him over. Rather, his appreciation for her now was a modest, steady flame burning amidst something much larger, much brighter.

They hugged politely.

"I was starting to think you weren't going to show," he said.

She shrugged. "I had some business to take care of. Almost *didn't* come, but then I remembered that little puppy dog face you made when you were begging in Ms. Featley's class...and I couldn't resist."

"I wasn't *begging*," he said, grinning.

"Sure you weren't."

They found a pair of lounge chairs at the far end of the yard and sat down, *The Used* drifting across the yard from a boom box that had been placed on an overturned orange crate. Several other people were swimming and lounging about, some wearing swim trunks or bikinis, others wearing nothing at all. In this hazy backyard world, lit from beneath by the pool floods and scored by "Poetic Tragedy," Aaron and Kyna talked. They spoke of school, of home, of hobbies, and of each other's opinions concerning the cafeteria menu at Savanna High. The brightest moments came whenever Aaron happened to say something funny and Kyna laughed inadvertently. It was a light, lilting sound that often seemed to catch her off-guard, causing her to lean backward somewhat, causing the muscles of her neck and jaw to work impressively beneath her smooth, pale skin. Hard as she was, it was wonderful to see her smiles, to hear her laughter—to feel her tenderness. She was letting her guard down, he knew, for fun, for the sake of the moment—

—for him.

"You know," he said, sipping his third Coke of the evening, "you're a lot of fun to hang out with."

She snorted playfully. "Why *wouldn't* I be?"

"You know the usual stereotypes. Most girls I've met that I thought were like you, they were all self-centered, conceited. Or else they only spent their time trying to look good for their boyfriends. No time for anyone else. Kind of a show-off thing. They look good, but they have nothing interesting to say, you

know?"

"Oh, I'm used to that," she said, leaning back in her chair and staring out at the pool. "People always think you're weird or strange if you dress a certain way or listen to certain kinds of music. And if you're sixteen and you don't have a boyfriend, don't drive a car...that means you're lost for all time."

Aaron blushed, recalling his initial bodybuilder-dyke impressions. He quickly filed them away in his mind. "That sucks. Why would anyone say that?"

"Don't know, don't care. It actually makes it easier to find out who your real friends are, because those are the ones who stick around, the ones who come to you because of you and not for all that material crap. Meanwhile, everyone else, they turn their backs on you and spread bullshit stories amongst their shallow friends." She paused for a moment, watching the water, her eyes glistening like pearls. "My, er, boyfriend was like that. He got with me because he thought I was a commodity—something cool to show off...but I think people like that become afraid of your boldness, your will to be yourself and to not just slink around with everybody else's trends. They want to control you before you control them, but they miss everything in between."

"Yeah...control," Aaron murmured. He crumbled his soda can. "Lots of people around here seem crazy over it." He thought of Edward and his mother, Edward the Snake, coiling himself around Julia's body, squeezing out all traces of her essence, emptying her soul and taking her body for his own purposes.

"Aaron?"

He sniffed, surprised to find himself on the verge of crying, his hands clenched into angry fists. Quickly he composed himself, wiping his cheek and looking up. "It's nothing."

"You were crying," Kyna said, gazing earnestly at him...waiting patiently.

Tell me, her expression said.

So he did, relating to her the experience of discovering that

his mother was an adulteress—or rather, that she'd been cajoled into the arms of a complete asshole. "I wanted to beat the shit out of the guy, but, well...he's just like all the others who've fucked with me." He bit his lip; the pain was a moment's forced distraction from the memory of the movie theater incident, from his wet dreams—

"What is it?" asked Kyna, noticing his sudden scrutiny.

"Are you *sure* you weren't in my dreams?" he asked, half serious, half he-didn't-know-what. "I mean, I've seen some crazy things since moving here—stuff I couldn't imagine back in Texas. But here it seems to be the status quo or something."

She seemed to freeze for the slightest instant—pondering, considering, deciding something infinitely important—before smiling wanly and looking down at the concrete. "I think I'd know if I'd been in your dreams," she said softly.

Aaron sighed, missing another twinge of subtlety, tuning out a hint of something he didn't want to imagine—something that had to do with Kyna being the only predatory aspect of Anaheim to have actually invaded his most personal mental space.

"Geez, I'm sorry," he said. "There I go again, talking about crazy stuff." He paused, waiting for time to take the melancholy from Kyna's expression. When it didn't work, he suggested they talk about something else.

"Like what?" Kyna asked.

"Well...tell me about your family."

Kyna took a slow, deep breath, her eyes fixing on his, impenetrable irises flickering crystal-clear for just a moment. "My dad's a womanizing asshole. My mom can't deal with life, so she's a junkie. Nowadays she's hardly even alive. Just enough to go to work and earn money for booze and cigarettes. I have my own room outside the house because I can't stand to be around whenever *he* comes over."

He thought she was joking at first, but when he saw the sobriety in her eyes, he knew immediately she'd revealed a sensitive

portion of herself that perhaps no one else in the entire world had ever seen. Why? He couldn't fathom, but he knew it meant something—a test, perhaps. A wish. He found himself responding, not being turned off or disgusted, not looking away shyly and shrugging with an “Oh, that sucks” expression, but holding her gaze and communicating silently that what she had said was okay. That was her baggage; he wasn't going to run from it, wasn't going to find a cuter, more shallow girl who was as easy on the soul as she was on the eyes.

Not another Nikki.

Kyna's head tilted slightly, almost as if she'd been expecting him to take off running the instant she'd finished her mini-biography. This was either exactly what she wanted, or it was too much for her to handle, for she closed her eyes momentarily, and when she opened them there were salty droplets coalescing her dark lashes.

“Why are you here?” she whispered.

The question didn't make any sense at first, but then everything came into focus, and he was able to pinpoint the confusion he'd sensed earlier. *She's wondering what's in it for me, what am I trying to take from her?* “I just...I want to spend time with you, I want to talk to you and tell jokes, and go to the mall and just hang out with you.”

“Oh, come on,” Kyna exclaimed, angry, distressed—quivering like a leaf. “You're just saying that because...because...” She trailed off, looked towards the pool, where several of the others were now watching the proceedings with growing concern. Biting her lip, obviously embarrassed by her own actions, she stood up to leave. “I'm sorry. I should go.”

“Wait!” Aaron jumped to his feet, grabbed her hand. She turned and looked at him, failure and hope shifting across her face.

He said, “Let me find my shoes first.”

* * *

“We used to live at this nudist camp, me, my mom, and Dead Man. It was like a KOA but for hippies and flower bitches. My mom moved there with him after she finished high school. I was born there, grew up there. We had this trailer and all day, all week, every month of the year it was this real free love, commune-with-nature kind of shit. My mom probably thought it was a dream come true, but I never told her what I thought of *him*... what he did with other women when she wasn't around. I didn't know how, I guess, or I was too afraid to tell anyone, and mom... she just seemed to ignore it. I just didn't *know* until I was twelve. We were out here by then, and we were real outsiders. I saw other kids playing and going to school and Dead Man wouldn't even let me and mom wear clothes around the house. Only to school, or to the store. Sometimes he would take everything with him whenever he left, so we'd be stuck inside, unless we wanted to walk through the ghetto naked or wearing a pillowcase or something. He liked to do twisted things like that.

“I didn't talk to anyone, I didn't make friends because I didn't want them to come over and see how we lived. Then one day I decided I'd had enough. I finally stood up to him. I realized I had it in me to control myself instead of letting him control me. I knew then that he'd been beaten, but I had to watch myself, because now he really knew how much I hated him, and I think he likes that, to know he can manipulate a person's emotions. My mom's a pushover. She died inside a long time ago...but me, I'm harder to deal with, and he gets off on that.

“I started looking out for myself in every way. I refused to live in that house anymore, I started working out and all so that if it came down to it, I could beat him in a fistfight. I made it clear that I wasn't a part of it anymore, that I could take care of myself—and that's what I did.”

Aaron shifted on the cool clubhouse floor, his mind process-

ing, considering Kyna's details. She'd taken him here directly from Anthony's, cutting through darkened alleyways and intricate foliage until they'd emerged into her backyard, a murky arena of spidery branches, shimmering leaves, and gleaming garbage bags set alongside a rusted chain-link fence lost to overzealous vines. She'd hesitated, ever so slightly, at the clubhouse entrance, as if opening the door to her home meant opening the door to her very soul. Now, half an hour later, he was sitting barefoot within her haven, listening to every long-lost secret that made Kyna Miller who she was.

"Not your dream-girl kind of story, huh?" she laughed nervously.

He smiled reassuringly. "You didn't die inside."

"I know. Still, I'm not what most guys go for. But I was never looking for a boyfriend anyway. Guys all want the same thing."

"What would that be?"

She burst out laughing. Aaron might have been offended had he not become entirely addicted to the sound of her laughter.

Once she'd composed herself, she caught his stare. "Naïve, aren't you?" She pointed at her chest and crotch.

He shrugged, a blush developing, the implication settling in. "Oh. You mean the sex thing."

She nodded and took his hand in her own. "But it's not like with everyone else. They just want what they want. For me...it has to be an agreement between two people. Each person is willing to share something with the other. Something special."

Her gaze absorbed him. His spine tingled; he felt a twinge in his groin. "Yeah...too bad there aren't more people out there who are looking for that. I mean, I wish...I wish people cared more. I wish—"

A voice whispered inside his head:

Lonely no more.

"Lonely no more," he repeated.

To wake up the next morning and find your lover's still there.

“To wake up the next morning and find your lover’s still there.”

Knowing that you’ll always be there, so you don’t have to be afraid, don’t have to be lonely anymore.

“Knowing that...that you’ll always be there, so you don’t have to be afraid, don’t have to be lonely anymore.”

Kiss me, Aaron...please.

He was overcome, reeling, cautionary circuits overloaded. The old Aaron Capps courting process was discarded, replaced by a new, simple need: to be with Kyna, to dissolve the anguish, to melt the pain. He leaned forward, and they kissed—politely at first, then, as they both became more confident, more intimately. After a moment, he pulled back, his nose touching hers, their breath intermingling. He could smell her skin and hair, so familiar, so comforting.

“It’s strange,” he said. “I feel like I’ve known you all my life, like we’ve met before somewhere.” He thought of his dreams, how perfectly he’d imagined her. He wondered if her real self was just as invigorating.

He’d been gazing into her eyes the entire time, giving no indication as to the properties of his thoughts, but now she suddenly became opaque. Not outwardly, for she still smiled, her hands were still playfully tracing patterns over his chest—but some hidden door had been closed; her eyes had shifted from emerald to slate.

“You’re shivering,” he said, suddenly aware of his growing erection, knowing that she could probably feel it and that she undoubtedly knew what it meant. It was chilly inside the clubhouse, but he sensed her tremors had nothing to do with temperature. He moved to position himself more politely alongside her—the last thing he wanted to do was come off as a jerk. As he settled he found himself repeating that monumental question over and over inside his head: Is it the right time?

She must have sensed his thoughts, for she stiffened again.

Is it the right time?

He started to pull away. "I should be getting home."

"No, wait." Kyna held him tight. "Stay."

Please.

It hadn't been his intention, hadn't been his plan to get lucky with a girl he'd only known for a week—but here he was, alone with her, holding her, on the verge, something buzzing inside his head, go or stay, safety or the unknown. He wanted something, he just didn't know what. Not necessarily sex, but...*something*.

Kyna seemed to share this yearning, as unsure as he was, but determined to make the attempt anyhow. She broke eye contact with him, pressed herself against him and whispered something unintelligible into the fabric of his shirt. Instantly, the storm cleared and the clouds parted, revealing the answer in crystal clarity.

"You..." he breathed, taking her by the shoulders, moving her to arm's length so that he could get a good look at her. "You're... you're one of *them*, aren't you? Just now, you...you were doing it. I felt you."

She sniffed, wiped a stream of tears from her cheek. "You saw me in your dreams. I saw you, too. I was there, I came to you because I...because I liked you, I thought you were cute. I-I never wanted to hurt you, but I was afraid...I mean, I'm not the kind of girl that most guys go for. I never had a boyfriend—I just said that because I was afraid. I saw how beautiful you were and I thought my only chance was to...to influence you. Little things—I wanted to make you feel good...but you've been so kind to me...I couldn't go any further unless...unless I told you the truth."

Aaron was aghast. "So...this whole time...?"

She nodded, miserable, apprehensive...awaiting his response.

There were no rules, no guidelines. Aaron was shocked, of course. He looked at Kyna, studied her as he did an inventory of his own emotions...and he found that even without her influence, he still wanted her, wanted to be with her. She may have

been amplifying his emotions, working his will (and lying to him in the process), but beneath it all he'd still been the one initiating the attraction, as he was doing now—*unless she's still working me over...but no. Look at her. Feel how she's shaking all over...she's told me the truth because she cares.*

He took her in his arms and cuddled close, unsure of what to do next, scared of what could happen, but knowing there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

CHAPTER 21

It was two in the morning when Anthony and Natalie, having escorted the last of the guests off the premises, met outside the house, beside the garbage bins. Awash in pale starlight, their eyes glimmered with a pleasant sort of tiredness—the satisfaction of having fed well—as they tossed their garbage bags inside and then stood together.

“You suppose this is the last party for a while?” Anthony asked, letting the question out quickly, as if he’d been holding his breath since sundown.

“Depends on how well Kyna’s making out with Aaron right now,” Natalie replied. She gestured at Anthony’s lip. “Um, you’ve got some blood right there.”

Anthony wiped himself off with his sleeve. “You think she’s still with him?”

A sigh from Natalie. “I don’t know. I talked with her, told her that everyone has to face their fears, that there comes a time when everyone has to move on with their lives. It’s been long enough since she dumped Josh. She can move on now.”

Anthony bit his lip, watching Natalie for a reaction. “But...suppose she can’t go through with it?”

“Then we’re on our own.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

“Why’d you ask, then?”

“I don’t know.” Anthony looked off towards the driveway, watched the crickets dance over the concrete. He looked down at his hands. “She just seems...*thin* lately. We’ve been with her for a while now. She’s taken such good care of us. I don’t even remember what the old me looks like.”

Natalie shot him a curious glance. “Really? What about at

night, before bed? Don't you let yourself unwind so you can sleep better?"

"Yeah, but I do it after all the lights are out, so I won't see myself. Sometimes I'll catch a shadow here or there, but not enough to keep me awake thinking about it."

"Oh."

A shared thought passed between them, igniting itself amidst the embers of nervous energy, acquired essence, and cumulative uneasiness.

"We should go inside and finish cleaning up," Natalie said after a moment.

Anthony nodded and followed her back into the house, though he didn't stay on task for long. Upon passing the first mirror (this one in the front hallway), he stopped and stared, taking in his reflection between columns of shadow projected by the blinds of a nearby window.

"Now you've got me thinking," he whispered, a devious gleam in his eye.

"Wait," said Natalie, stepping beside him and taking his hand. "Me, too."

"Are you sure—"

"Yes."

Together they stood, and, like fresh paintings left in the rain by a disgruntled artist, their bodies began to shift and squirm. Flesh rearranged itself, bones condensed—two painted shells dissolved to reveal the pair of diminutive creatures housed within: lanky Natalie, with her stringy hair, petite breasts, narrow hips, and knobby legs; skinny Anthony, without his former muscle mass, without his attractive face or well-balanced frame.

Two humanoid creatures, once proud and beautiful, now sickly, now homely.

Anthony moved towards the mirror. His reflection showed a mask of eyebrows and teeth, barely recognizable—yet it was him. His clothes just weren't fitting right anymore. The T-shirt that

had once been stretched taught across his chest now hung limply from jagged skin-and-bone shoulders.

"I look like a mummy," he croaked, poking his Adam's Apple with one knobby finger. "Even my voice is all messed up."

Natalie didn't respond, for she was now engrossed in her own reflection: a long-lost girl from four years ago, a shadowy imprint of the person she used to be, her once-proud African visage now pale and emaciated.

"I used to be anemic," she said, softly, touching her face with her hand. "My mom didn't have insurance. We couldn't afford a doctor, so I remember she kept getting me all these healthy foods at the store. She told me we were going to beat it through diet and prayer...but I just couldn't do it. I *wanted* to feel better, but I couldn't, and so I got sicker, and when I thought I was lower than I could ever get, I met Kyna."

Anthony laughed nervously. "You know, I bet she doesn't need to do this. That's why she's stronger than us. She can go forever without having to revert. Not that she's ever had it as bad as we did."

"Maybe she *does* revert. No one would know, she's so secretive. I know that for us it was genetics. For her it was her family."

A pause, then, as both youths pondered different thoughts along a similar thread.

"We could go back to finding people at school or in the park or wherever," Anthony said. "It's not too hard anymore, now that we know how to do it. Shit, I hear Josh even eats his own jizz to keep himself recycled for as long as possible. If someone like him can survive..."

Natalie scowled. "He's a walking harlequin. No...you and I both know this is as good as it's going to get. We've just got to keep Kyna on track, for her as much as for us."

"So what about her and Aaron? Is she going to follow through?"

"She took him home, I think. I saw them leave together."

“And you really think she’s, um, working him over?”

“I know Kyna. I have to believe, no matter how much of an act she puts on, that she knows what she’s doing. She’s not being taken in by Aaron or anyone else. If she’s pretending to be a lovesick girl, all frail and scared and out of her wits, well, she’s just *pretending*. You’re not a proper initiate anyway unless you know how to act, unless you know how to *really* work the people you tap. She knows how to play naïve guys like Aaron because she knows guys like that really believe they’re doing a girl a favor by spending the night with them. It’s the oldest trick in the book, with the sweetest payoff.”

A sigh from Anthony. “I hope so.”

CHAPTER 22

Noon, thought Kyna. Noon, on a Sunday, and I'm still in bed. I must be losing my mind.

Beside her, Aaron stirred and mumbled something in his sleep. His face was hidden behind a tangle of blond locks, the sheet tucked haphazardly around his waist. She could feel his bare thigh pressed against hers, and it unleashed a flood of memories from the early morning.

Clumsy, inept at first—not like in the dreams, no, but fun anyway. Willing to work his ass off, willing to learn.

Now, here he was, satisfied and resting; sleeping after his performance.

Josh had looked like that after our first time: so angelic, so peaceful, not a trace of animosity about him. Impeccable liar...but no, don't think about that right now.

Instead she made a mental account of what had happened during those precious hours of the morning when she'd coaxed Aaron into a lengthy, heartfelt discussion that had taken the two of them halfway to dawn. Heartfelt, but not entirely true, as evidenced by her explanation of the “special” abilities she possessed:

“Dead Man never touched me. I was too young, I guess, but it was still a pretty twisted way to live. He had some kind of fetish with nudity, and it had taken over our lives. One day I just got so tired of it—something inside me snapped. I can't explain it, exactly, but I know its something he was using, some kind of power he had over us. When I knew that, I could defend myself. I realized it was just a kind of warmth. Like adrenaline, my heart beating fast, this tension in my chest expanding—if I directed it, if I focused it, I could affect things. I practiced for years, and when I

was twelve, I let him have it—and he never had control over me again.”

“Awesome,” Aaron had said, eyes wide with wonder.

So naïve, she thought, back in the present. *Making me feel bad about telling a lie—as if he already knew the truth and was secretly trying to get me to confess how my knack really came to me one morning: an itch between my legs, some vicious STD injected into me by Dead Man, making me sick, almost killing me.*

She recalled how she'd been stricken with the telltale fever, the gradual wasting away in bed, becoming too weak to move a finger or toe, even. Death was a certainty—almost welcome—until Dead Man had revealed to her the terrible secret elixir in a fit of uncontrollable passion.

That's right, she thought, biting her lip, straining to hold back a sudden barrage of tears. He raped me, plowed me open when I was too weak to resist. He whispered bullshit encouragements into my ear as he spat out his seed. So painful at first, and worse afterward—worse when I actually felt better...when I actually realized his sick, twisted energy was revitalizing me. No more fever, no more headache; the poison was passed on to me, as was the antidote.

Now it's the same for Aaron.

She could, at the very least, take comfort in the fact that he didn't have to learn about it the way she had. Ash had already bitten him and transmitted the disease that way. Aaron was already infected, and had been lucky enough to have been born with good blood. He was a carrier, a reservoir, and, as such, had had to deal with the fever for a mere night.

He would never know the worst of what was now flowing through his veins.

Not as bad, that way, she thought, her memories forwarding themselves to when they'd made love—or rather, when (at her subtle command) they'd made a physical promise utilizing clumsy mistakes and awkward techniques. For all the anticipation involved, all the planning and mental preparation, it was

initially terrifying for Kyna seeing Aaron standing at the foot of the bed, out of his shirt, first, then his jeans and underwear.

Too much like Dead Man had been, she'd thought, hoping her face hadn't paled too noticeably. Standing over me with his body covered in coarse, curly hair, dick bobbing in the air, pointing right at me. "You're my little girl, aren't you? Daddy's little girl."

But it hadn't been Dead Man in the clubhouse—just Aaron, smiling nervously, face already flushed bright red as he'd let down his hair and climbed into bed. It had indeed been his first time, though Kyna had giggled and apologized right along with him whenever something had gone wrong. He was big, but he was gentle. When the climax came, she'd feigned surprise, though it hadn't been too much of a stretch, receiving his essence, sharp and potent and real. Not like in the dreams, not like the auxiliary bits of lonely men and love-starved high school students she'd typically received through Natalie's, Anthony's, or Ash's scavenging, but *real* energy rippling directly off a living, breathing person.

Now, at noon on a Sunday, here she was, lying in bed with pure, sweet, one-in-a-million Aaron Capps' naked thigh pressing against hers; here she was sucking in the smell of his hair and skin and breath filling the suddenly-constricting space within the clubhouse that had once been her most private sanctuary; here she was, satiated, filled to the brim with terrifying pleasure stolen during a self-inflicted invasion led by a boy she'd only known for a week—

Oh my God.

She wanted to scream, to jump from the bed and run out into daylight, into reality, into—*what? Where do you want to run to? Same old life, in here and out there. Same old world. Even if you'd refused to go through with this, you'd still need to get your fix somewhere. You'd still need to hurt someone. Now it's just one person: Aaron. And you don't have to hurt him. You have him—he's yours for as long as you want. You can make it work.*

“What are you thinking about?”

She blinked, realized she’d been staring so intently into space that she hadn’t noticed Aaron’s waking. Immediately, she dismissed the mental chorus that had been encroaching upon her sanity—from overcast to sunny in a handful of milliseconds.

“You snore too loud, Banana Boy,” she said, smiling, stretching, and nudging his cheek, all in one deft movement.

Aaron scowled. “Nah-ah, Bubble Butt Girl.”

He pinched her delicately and they rolled together on the bed, laughing, tickling, playfully swatting each other with pillows.

Good. All the things lovers must do, she thought, dodging a blow, but are we really lovers or is this the best damned performance I’ve ever given? Bringing him here, gushing all over him about love and The One and him thinking I’ve opened myself to him and only him, thinking he’s done it with a virgin...but no, it’s been a long time since my first time.

She almost felt guilty—guilty of stealing something from an innocent, even though it had been Aaron’s wish to come here, Aaron’s wish to complete what she had started. He wanted her, that much she could sense. Maybe, even, he *loved* her—but all she knew how to control was the baseline connection between them; love and sex were otherwise inseparable cravings.

Control one and you controlled the other.

It had been on her mind all night. She hadn’t even wanted to show up at Anthony’s party, and had been on the verge of relinquishing her burgeoning connections to Aaron as they’d sat together beside the swimming pool—yet he’d sought her out anyway, his soul pleading to join with hers, and she couldn’t entirely hate that. After all, beneath her rugged, chiseled exterior was the frenzied desire: to be taken, to be had by someone who wasn’t Dead Man. Aaron had slept with her, and in doing so had sealed off a back door that she’d been unable to close for the last four years of her life.

Can’t touch me now, she thought as the pillow fight ended and

she fell into Aaron's arms. *Can't touch me because I've given myself to someone else.*

She kissed him on the nose. There was no half-assed, pathetic attempt (on his part) at an encore fuck. He seemed content to simply hold her, to take her in with eyes alone.

Because I'm directing him...but no, it's more than that. I don't even feel him pulling at me at all. He's just...himself.

So fucking easy.

"Come here," she said, pulling him from the bed. "I want to show you something."

"But, my clothes," he protested, covering his groin shyly as soon as the blanket fell away.

Funny, she thought, charmed, how we've already seen each other naked—we just slept together, for God's sake!—and still he's modest about it.

"Don't worry about that. We're not going anywhere." She sat on the floor, legs splayed, and patted the space in front of her. "Lay down here, with me."

He seemed to consider her invitation momentarily, then he moved onto the floor.

She instructed him to lay down on his back with his head resting against her lower belly.

"What are we doing?" he asked.

"We're going to begin your lessons."

"Lessons?"

"Mm-hmm."

"What kind of lessons?"

She smoothed his hair with her hands. "Brainwork. How to be more assertive, how to have more control over your environment. You've already seen people with the knack. People like Cal, Ash...Edward—anyone who's ever made you do something you didn't want to do. They have control over you because they pay close attention to their willpower. Once you learn to tame your aura, well, then you're free. You can level the playing field."

Aaron shifted. "Well, I don't want to hurt anyone or anything."

Oh, but you do, she thought, feeling the sudden tension in his shoulder muscles. You're thinking about Edward, thinking about what you'd like to do to him right now, how you'd like to repay him for what he did to your mom. And then there was me, in Josh's body...you hate that even more, don't you? Well, just be glad it wasn't really Josh, because when he feeds...

"Don't think of it in the offensive, then," she said. "Think of it as an adjustment. Sooner or later, everyone around here has to choose their side of the tracks. Find a way to fit in or else stay a dud. The first step is to get used to moving outside your body, and the easiest way to do that is to get used to staying awake when you fall asleep."

"Um, sure," Aaron laughed. "I'll just do that."

"Shh," she said, gently stroking his hair and forehead. "That's why we're practicing."

* * *

It was unlike anything Aaron had ever experienced. Even the thrill of his first time with a girl could not have prepared him for *this*. He lay still, cool concrete beneath his bare body, his head resting in Kyna's lap as she whispered soothing words—a modern day magic spell designed to lull him to sleep.

"So relaxed," he heard her say. "Every muscle in your body resting, unmoving...relaxed. Feel your breath becoming slow and easy...slow and easy. Feel your heart relaxing...feel yourself becoming lighter, slipping peacefully into sleep, so sweet and tranquil, no aches or pains...everything so soft and soothing...you could stay like this for centuries just resting, relaxing...snoozing."

As she spoke, his flesh obeyed, his mind acquiesced. He felt himself slipping comfortably into unconsciousness, a pleasant warmth filling him.

“Now, feel your mind starting to turn over. Random thoughts are kicking in as you start to dream. You’re almost there—I want you to think of something now. I want you to visualize this room: you and I, sitting here on the floor. You’re falling asleep, but you’re also concentrating, holding that image of this room in your head...you’re falling asleep, but you’re still here. Let your mind wander, but keep your thoughts *here*.”

A funny thing happened, then, as suddenly he heard a loud roar—like blood rushing in his ears, but amplified a hundred times. His eyesight seemed to bend, to wrap around itself so that his peripheral vision expanded, allowing for a much fuller view of the clubhouse interior.

He was also completely paralyzed.

Panicking, he tried to sit up, but he was stuck—sort of. He could feel his arms moving, his abdominals clenching as he tried to sit up, but all he saw was the roof of the clubhouse beyond Kyna’s now-vague form. It was as if he were occupying two bodies simultaneously: one comprised of flesh and bone, the other fabricated out of thin air.

Kyna, he gasped, voiceless. *I can’t—what’s happening to me?*

Her gentle presence found him—only now she spoke without words:

It’s okay. I’m here. Relax and keep thinking of the inside of the clubhouse. I’m going to teach you how to twist out. You’re sort of still stuck in your body, from the waist down, right? Well, to break free you have to twist out of your body, counterclockwise.

He relaxed somewhat, considering. *Twist?*

It sounds funny, I know, but you have to kind of sit up slightly and rock to one side. Just picture yourself as a giant screw and imagine spinning counterclockwise as fast and as hard as you can.

If you say so, he said, clenching up illusory muscles, leaning to one side, then the other, as he prepared to exit into the unknown. With perhaps a little too much enthusiasm, he started to twist out—and very suddenly found himself spinning out of con-

trol as he left his body behind and, well, *filled* the room. For a moment he felt as if he might explode through the very walls and shoot off into a million different directions, but Kyna was there beside him, a vivid (if immaterial) guiding light.

Whoa there, she giggled, surrounding him, reeling him back in. One step at a time. Plenty of time to work on your acrobatics later.

Of course, without their bodies as a reference point, their conversation was an implied one, made up of instantaneous thoughts unhindered by the speed of the human brain. Still, he could imagine her holding him, smiling comfortingly as she calmed him down, helped him to maintain his focus.

The most important step to master is getting in and out of your body. Influencing someone or something has nothing to do with magic; it's all about stepping back out of the material world for a moment, receding where time can't be measured. Here you can do things in a fraction of the "time" it would take you if you were still in your material body.

And where is here? Aaron asked.

This is everything—the world, the universe, the basis for the knack that everyone has. Usually you only come out here when you're asleep, which is sort of a waste when you think of what you could actually do, if you knew how. Control yourself, and you can control everything else. People, objects—you name it.

Aaron turned giddy, focusing his attention on the clubhouse and realizing that all he had to do was think about an item or a point of interest and suddenly he was there, able to see it without seeing, able to touch without touching. Cool. *Where do we start?*

We've already started. Now, the next step is to get back into your body and "wake up." Think of your body, picture yourself hovering near your feet. That's how you get in: through your feet, spinning clockwise. It's easier than getting out. You can just let your body absorb you. It's kind of an automatic thing. Just relax and stop thinking, let your mind wander now and you'll get pulled back inside.

He couldn't help but feel a sort of a voyeuristic thrill, seeing

his physical self from the outside like this. He positioned himself according to Kyna's instructions—though it was a little harder than he'd thought to complete the transition; he was now back inside his body, but he was still paralyzed.

Not quite asleep, not quite awake.

He felt Kyna giggle, saw her hand reaching toward his belly button, tickling him—

—and he woke up, jolting slightly, feeling the suddenly-hard floor beneath him, the softer warmth of Kyna's legs splayed on either side.

"See?" she cooed. "Not so hard after all."

He could only gasp and work his arms like an infant discovering his limbs for the first time. Indeed, he felt infantile, now that he'd been given a glimpse of how things really worked in the mind-body departments.

"That was amazing," he said, starting to sit up.

Kyna held him down. "It gets better, but you have to practice."

"Fair enough."

For what felt like hours—days and months, even—on end, he lay with Kyna in the clubhouse. She trained him to step in and out of his flesh until transcending was as easy as changing clothes. Then, when he was ready, she took him out for a ride.

It wasn't really sightseeing, because he couldn't see anything. Nevertheless, he and Kyna traveled throughout Anaheim, and he felt the city beneath him in the aching textures of sunbaked roofs, the myriad colors of palm and sycamore, the gridlocked lines of sweaty cars threaded along relentless highways separating stifling ghettos from sprawling manors.

I didn't know you could feel sound, he said, shuddering at the call of a jaybird as they passed through a park. *I mean...damn. Where did you learn to do all this?*

Dead Man knew some things, Kyna replied. *My mom had books, too—stuff that's just an overpriced gimmick to most people, I guess, but I could actually use the astrology. If a book says to meditate, your aver-*

age Joe just sits in a lotus position and gets quiet for awhile. If people like us meditate, we can actually leave our bodies. All these spiritual gurus probably have the right idea, but it's only the initiates who have the right energy to use any of it.

Aaron was elated. *Damn...I didn't know you could do anything like this!*

Not many people do. Now you see how it's possible to have such an advantage. Soon you'll be able to do this all by yourself, and you'll know true freedom.

Shortly thereafter, she led him back to the clubhouse, where he awoke in his body.

Rubbing his eyes and blinking, he fully expected it to be midnight, weeks after he'd gone to sleep. However, quite to his amazement, it was only twelve thirty in the afternoon.

"Still Sunday?" he asked, stretching and getting to his feet.

"Out of body, out of time," replied Kyna, getting up and walking over to the bed. "Haven't you ever had a dream that seemed to last for days? Same thing."

Aaron shook his head. "Radical."

In response, Kyna wadded up his boxer shorts and tossed them at his face.

CHAPTER 23

The afternoon sun was hot, but not unbearable, as Aaron turned—no, *glided*—into Belinda Circle. It was still the afternoon of his first lay, and he navigated the concrete oasis with all the confidence of a sassy runway model, lighter than air, impervious to everything but a well-executed lightning strike.

That was why he was quite unprepared (as he let himself into his parents' house) to find Daniel and Julia, faces downcast, waiting for him. They were sitting together in the living room, caught frozen in the midst of some heavy discussion when, as he closed the door behind him, they quickly fell silent and fixed him with a pair of sobering looks. Immediately he was brought back down to Earth by the remembrance of such things as rules, curfews, and impending punishments—especially since, supposedly, he'd stepped out on a Saturday evening to visit the local arcade; now, on a Sunday afternoon, now, eighteen hours later, here was was, descending from a splendid cloud of post-orgasmic elation and stumbling headfirst into a treacherous pit of parental retribution.

That's right, he thought, biting his lip and moving further into the living room, edging his way towards the staircase. *Still only sixteen years old, still gonna get my ass kicked for disappearing overnight.*

To make matters worse, there were already tears—some dried, some fresh—on Julia's face, and he knew automatically that they'd been summoned forth not by the anguish of worrying over her son's whereabouts, but by the crushing grief in admitting to one's life partner that he hadn't been enough to stave off the advances of another man.

She's told dad—she's told him everything, and worse yet, he thinks

it's her fault, she thinks it's her own fault. Neither of them knows the truth and...goddamnit, I hate Edward.

Daniel cleared his throat, got out of his seat. "Where've you been?"

Aaron dropped his gaze to the floor, where he scrutinized his shoes, the cuffs of his pants—anything to resist The Look his father so desperately needed to give him. *Because he's in shock, maybe on the verge of crying, but he has to hold it in because he's my dad, because he's a guy and that's what we do: hold all our feelings in until they burrow oozing holes through the walls of our stomachs. Better than the other pain he's probably feeling whenever he imagines mom and Edward together...*

"I was...out," he said at last, clearing his throat.

Daniel's voice was terrifyingly calm. "I don't recall getting a head's up from you beforehand. Needless to say, your mother was worried sick—though we didn't bother calling the police this time because, well, there have been certain transgressions committed on your behalf as of late. It seemed pointless to once again draw attention to the apparent dysfunctional nature of our family."

Aaron kept his gaze subdued. He could hear his mother crying. She'd undoubtedly caught Daniel's double-entendre.

"Upstairs, now," Daniel said, quietly.

"Yes, sir," Aaron replied. He headed for the staircase, started up. Each step increased his dread exponentially. When he reached his room, Daniel ushered him inside and closed the door.

"Sit."

Aaron took a seat at the edge of his bed.

Daniel remained standing, and he started pacing as he ran his hands through his hair, rubbed his temples. "We've been over this before, so I'm not going to do a repeat. You need attention, your mother needs attention—I know that. I'm just one man. I'm doing my goddamn best to keep us in a nice house, with nice

things, nice clothes, food in the fridge. I moved us here, took it up the ass from the company because that's the only way I know how to take care of you guys. If that means I'm not around as much as I'd like to be, well, that doesn't mean we're not a family anymore. It doesn't mean we don't stick together, one part picking up the slack for the other when things get stretched a little thin. It certainly doesn't mean my son should be prowling around town at all hours of the night getting himself into trouble."

"I wasn't getting into trouble," Aaron said, softly.

Daniel stopped pacing. "Where were you?"

"At...a friend's."

"Which friend?"

"Someone I met at school."

"Please, indulge my journalistic sense."

Aaron paused ever so slightly, processing his options, deciding that forthrightness might actually speed things up. He sighed and said, "I was with a girl."

Stunned silence from Daniel.

Ah, that's right, dad, Aaron thought. Sex. The monkey wrench in the engine, the one item of father-son business we never really got out of the way, when it mattered. Wasn't a "good time" to talk about it back then, and now it's just as awkward. Maybe even worse, because I'm almost an adult and still we're overdue for a heart-to-heart. But that's not our style, is it? I was always the kid who had to figure out things on his own, from the half-assed textbook diagrams in school, from my friends' dirty magazines—from the clumsy hands and inexperienced tongues of curious girls more interested in telling stories to their friends than in actually helping me understand my mind, my body... my soul.

Daniel sighed, frustration crinkling his brow. There was a look in his eye, a loss for words, a recognition of the fact that Aaron was no longer his. Oh, certainly he was still the man's son, but he now belonged to someone else as well.

Because Kyna's shown me more respect than anyone in this twisted city. She opened herself to me, made up for years of you and mom dancing around all the mushy stuff, never really getting into it at all...it's no wonder I spent the night someplace else.

There was nothing left to say. Daniel looked flustered for a moment, then headed for the door without even a token, "You make any babies, you take care of them" speech.

"I've got errands to run," he said. "We can talk about this later. Until then, you're grounded."

"Yes, sir."

It was an unuttered agreement. Aaron remained in his room for the remainder of the day, didn't dare go downstairs—not even for dinner (though he *did* sneak a quick shower). As expected, Daniel never made an encore appearance. Julia's supposed infidelity, coupled with the knowledge that his son was now sexually active...well, those were a pair of nasties sprung unwittingly from a Pandora's box that Daniel would undoubtedly be quarantining behind another of his mental walls during the coming months.

At some point during the evening, when Aaron was dozing, Kyna called to him mentally:

Hey, Banana Boy.

The communique made him twitch slightly. He was familiar with her voice, familiar with the "sound" of her essence resonating inside his head, but he was still unused to the feel of such voiceless conversation. "Kyna—"

Use your mind, not your mouth.

He became quiet. *Oh, right. I guess it would sound pretty strange if my parents heard me talking to myself.*

Kyna giggled. The vibration tickled him. *Are they close by?*

No. I'm in my bedroom. Aaron rolled onto his side, resting his hand on the empty sheet, imagining Kyna there, smiling back at him. *I was grounded for staying out overnight.*

Aw, it's not so bad. We'll see each other tomorrow morning.

Yeah, but it's going to be forever until then, and being here means I have to think about my family and the proverbial walls we've built between ourselves. We've got...problems.

What problems?

Well, you know.

Edward.

Well, yeah. He's the big one on my mind, but there's a lot of other stuff that I never really noticed until recently.

Like what?

Aaron shrugged subconsciously. I dunno. Stuff that's been on my mind for a couple years now. I just never thought too much about it until we moved here. I mean, all my life, I guess, I've been sort of an in-house resident. I'm not adopted or anything, but I get the feeling we're all tolerating each other until I'm eighteen, and then...I dunno. I used to wonder when I was younger why my mom and dad never hugged or kissed me. If I ever had nightmares, I had to tough it out on my own. They never got all crazy with me after Little League games or at swim meets. I gave all that up after junior high because I figured if I couldn't impress my parents, then there was no reason to do it at all. When I start shaving, I doubt my dad will have the time to teach me how to do it right.

And now, after what had happened between Edward and Julia, the likelihood that his parents were staying together solely for the purpose of getting their son through high school increased tenfold.

Kyna's mood deepened. At least you have a father. That's more of a chance than some of us have.

Oh...yeah. Aaron checked himself. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to unload all my problems like that.

Another pause from Kyna, who rippled (ever so slightly) in his mind. She seemed on the verge of saying something immensely important, but instead said, Hey, don't sweat it. You know my problems, and you also know I don't let them fester. I work them out—so how about this: Tonight, maybe around midnight, you and I go and

teach Edward a lesson.

Aaron sat up, his hand instinctively going up toward his ear, as if he were talking on the phone. *A lesson? What're you talking about?*

He fucked with your family, so why can't we fuck with him?

Tempting. He's an asshole, sure, but I don't know if I'd want to do anything like that.

I haven't even told you what we'll be doing.

Well, I mean I just don't think a jerk like him is worth the trouble. What if we get caught over there? What if he calls the police?

Dork, we wouldn't be there at all.

Suddenly he caught her drift. You mean...?

Yup, Banana Boy. What better way to continue your training than out in the field?

It was an offer he couldn't refuse: to infiltrate the infiltrator, to catch the jackal off-guard, as it were. *Just like he did to me...just like he did to mom.*

You know it. You said you're in your room, right? Lock the door before you go to bed. I'll come for you.

* * *

He woke in a dream to find Kyna (fully dressed this time) standing beside his bed, her hand caressing his chest. He started to sit up, but she restrained him gently.

"Easy," she said. "This isn't going to be as simple as the other dreams. Instead of just us, it will be you, me, and Edward. Just relax for a little bit. Let yourself come into this state more fully."

He complied, resting his head against the pillow. Looking up at Kyna, he could see she was mumbling something under her breath. He was inclined to ask her what it was, but then another thought popped into his mind:

"Kyna?" he asked.

"Yeah?"

“What did you mean when you said I’d feel ‘the hunger?’”

Crimson lips froze in mid-sentence, crystalline eyes went opaque, and the firm hand on his chest suddenly became brittle. “When did I say that?”

“In a dream. You left the bed after we, uh, slept together. You came back with a knife and you slit your wrist.” He looked at the window for a moment, remembered how Kyna had been standing there, the toes of one bare foot curled and tense, tapping against the floor beams.

Nervous.

He wondered now what her toes were doing within the confines of her socks and shoes. Maybe her entire body had gone rigid beneath her clothes. For a moment he was afraid that he’d touched on something untouchable.

“I was hopeful, I guess,” she said, resuming her gentle massage. “I mean...I wanted you to feel the same thing I did, and I wanted to...share with you what you shared with me. There isn’t anything I can think of that’s more potent than a person’s lifeblood. It’s all mental, anyway. No big deal.”

His question still relatively unanswered, he nevertheless found himself satisfied (at least for now) as his senses began to sharpen and his attention was caught on other things. He noted that the details of his room, as viewed via this dream-realm, seemed cleaner and more ultra-silent than usual. This had probably been the case during previous occasions, though now he wasn’t preoccupied with the sex.

“So, what exactly are we doing?” he asked after a moment.

Kyna took a deep breath and removed her hand from his chest. “Well, you’re going to get up now and put some clothes on.”

“But if this is only a dream,” he said, getting out of bed and picking his jeans up off the floor. “Why do I need to get dressed?”

“Because it’s good practice. In dreams, you’re still linked to

your body. You're still using it for reference, so naturally your brain is still handling most of the details. You tend to default to the bare necessities. You look at yourself now and you have blond hair, blue eyes, and all that, but really you're nothing more than pure thought. Trying to keep dressed, to keep yourself *organized*, as silly as it seems, is a really good way of practicing control. Control your dreams and it's easier to control your real life. It's a gradual process."

He nodded, dressing himself and then standing proudly, hands on hips. "Okay. Done. What's next?"

Kyna giggled and nodded towards his lower half. "Try again, Banana Boy."

He looked down and found, with a fair amount of trepidation, that his pants and underwear had disappeared, reoriented themselves upon the floor. Oddly enough, his shoes had remained intact.

There was time for practice, and so that was what he did. Sometimes he found himself wearing pants and no shirt, other times he was clad in everything but shoes; sometimes, even, he was entirely naked despite having dressed meticulously only moments before. Eventually, after a dozen or so attempts (and after a rather embarrassing barrage of Kyna's laughter), he managed to keep things where they belonged.

"Good," said Kyna, nodding and heading towards the door. "Let's go."

He followed her out of the bedroom, through the hallway, down the stairs and to the front door. Together they slipped out into the night (Kyna in the lead), and once again Aaron was mesmerized by the stark beauty of the surrounding dreamscape: myriad stars, speckling the sky above; buzzing insects fluttering between lamplight and darkness; sounds of the neighbors' breathing or snoring (normally too faint to hear), now magnified to crystal clarity. It was not as powerful as what he'd experienced in Kyna's clubhouse, but it was potent nonetheless. (In ac-

tuality, it had been like this during his previous nighttime outing—he'd just been too preoccupied with Kyna's backside to notice.)

"How are we supposed to find Edward's place?" he asked as they jogged lightly down Lincoln.

"Focus on him," Kyna replied. "Feel him, find his scent. You'll just sort of *know* which direction to go."

"Okay. I'll just do that."

"Shut up and concentrate."

Aaron laughed, feeling charged with an unnameable energy. He pictured Edward, focused intently on all the imagery of the man he'd collected over the last week, and soon he found himself thinking of Pacific Grove.

"He feels like he's that way," he said, nodding in a southwesterly direction.

"Cool."

Kyna kept the lead, taking his directions. Soon they were passing through a familiar part of town where the houses were nice and the streets were freshly-paved. They came to the recreational center, and Edward's "scent" became stronger.

"Dork," she whispered as they passed from subdued foliage to Spartan pavement. "Keep focused."

"But I am," he said, snorting playfully—and almost choking when he noticed his clothes had disappeared again. His hands went instinctively to his groin and he glared nervously up and down the empty street, which was a residential, but still—

Kyna sighed. "As much as I like seeing you this way, we're not here to fool around." She snapped her fingers and instantly he regained his modesty. "Don't get used to the favor. Now...which house?"

Aaron thought for a moment, imagined a compass needle suddenly prickling at attention, pointing to a two-story townhouse. He pointed. "That one. I'm pretty sure he's alone."

They bolted across the street. When they reached the front yard they crouched behind an enclosure of hedges and slipped

silently up against the front of the house until they arrived at a spot beneath one of the darkened windows. Aaron squatted beside Kyna, his dream-body warm, almost tingling with anticipation.

“Aaron,” she hissed, nudging him with her elbow. “Your feet.”

He looked down to find he was barefoot, his toes sinking into the moist soil. With a helpless shrug he summoned his shoes and then looked at Kyna, who put her finger to her lips and slid the window open. She beckoned for him to follow as she crawled inside, and, as he followed suit, he found himself wondering why stealth was required when neither of them was actually physically present. His best guess was that somehow it had to do with his training, keeping disciplined mentally, and so forth (after all, whoever heard of a clumsy apparition?).

The ground floor of the house was silent and swathed in shadows. After some meticulous shuffling about, they found the staircase, which lead to the second floor. A balconied hallway split off into two directions: one leading to the bathroom, the other to Edward’s bedroom.

Single, Aaron thought as they crept along the hallway, their formless feet hardly touching the floor. *Makes sense. Assholes like this don’t look for a family in the women they screw.*

Sure enough, when they entered the bedroom, he saw Edward sleeping alone on an extravagant water bed. There was just enough light being cast from the digital alarm clock on the bedside table so that his tranquil face was illuminated by a soft neon glow.

Aaron wanted to wring the man’s neck.

Kyna walked over to the bed and spent a moment encompassing Edward’s essence within her own, resizing the cloak of her consciousness so that she now hosted his soul as well as Aaron’s. The change was evident almost immediately, and Aaron (despite being rather limited in this instance) sensed his own awareness increasing as he and Kyna became more *inside* the room.

He hates horror movies, Aaron thought, suddenly. When he was a kid he used to have nightmares about monsters, so his dad made him watch horror movies to toughen him up.

He gasped as, quite amazingly, Kyna's bodily image morphed from teenage girl into ancient-looking swamp creature clad in tangles of slimy roots.

Would something like this do? she asked silently, spreading her scaly arms.

Aaron nodded in wonderment as Kyna leaned over Edward's sleeping form.

"Edward," she whispered.

Instantly Edward jolted awake, unprepared for the sound of someone's voice, unprepared for the presence of a hideous imaginary monster invading his bedroom.

"What the hell?" he gasped, recoiling against the pillows. He looked disgruntled as his eyes desperately blinked away sleep, but Aaron knew that deep down inside he was utterly terrified—and that although Edward had the body of an adult, his mind had reverted to that ten-year-old boy state that allowed all the ghosts from his past to come rushing at him from the shadows. He screamed, trying to move out of the way as Kyna pounced, pinning him down with the weight of her newly-grotesque frame.

"How much have you taken?" she growled, wrestling with him, overpowering him.

Edward didn't understand the question. He hardly understood any part of what was going on. Aaron didn't get it either, but he felt the urgency, the hatred mirroring his own, and he realized there was a bond between himself and Kyna. He was feeling what she was feeling, and although his viewpoint remained separate from hers, he could still sense a part of himself occupying the same space as she. He also realized they'd never really discussed a plan during tonight's excursion; they were playing it beat by beat, and right now Kyna was following her own rhythm, some-

thing dark and sinister wrenching itself from within.

“Let’s see,” she said bitterly, taking hold of Edward’s head and using her thumbs to pull his eyelids back. “Let’s see what’s in there. Let’s see how many lives you’ve ruined.”

Aaron reeled backward, unprepared for the barrage of stolen imagery that was now coursing through his mind. There were memories flowing, random faces caught in various freeze-frames of passion: a waitress out behind an Italian restaurant, her apron lifted over her face, her torso contorting as she endured the divine explosion between her legs; a college volleyball player, brows furrowed in blissful agony as she clung to Edward’s shoulder and called out for help over and over; Julia, hair mussed, cheeks flared bright red, eyes wide open and glazed over as she tried to ignore the telltale spasms filling her with a wicked man’s seed.

Mom.

There were at least a hundred more images to contemplate, but none as potent as this one. In agony, Aaron crumpled himself against the wall, slid down into a squatting position with his knees clasped tightly against his chest. He’d forgotten his clothes again, but he didn’t care; he was too busy screaming through Kyna’s lips, too busy punching and scratching and tearing with her powerful arms and deft hands—acting out and observing the same terrible scene from two separate viewpoints.

“I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” she screamed, digging her fingers into the flesh of Edward’s neck, cutting off his breath as she exposed his jugular. She became herself again as she straddled him, sliced open the engorged vein and let the copper-spray fill her mouth. Aaron tasted it, too, and he was filled with a terrible ache, a fever pitch of energy now coursing through him, becoming more pronounced with each of Kyna’s delirious gulps. He felt Edward’s life force—the energy that had led him here in the first place—begin to recede rapidly into a darkness more encompassing than the deepest midnight, and he was elated, tri-

umphant—terrified.

“Kyna,” he called out, staggering to his feet, attention flitting back and forth between multiple channels. *A terrible man, yes, he thought, but not a killer.* “He’s dying...you’re...you’re *killing* him.”

She didn’t seem to hear him. She was too immersed in the act to pull back now, and it became evident she was out for something else altogether, something that was entirely of her own design.

Can’t wake up.

Edward gasped feebly as his soul emptied itself into the pit of Kyna’s stomach. He sounded like a broken accordion. The energy was peeling off him now, leaving him hollowed-out—yet his body was still (miraculously) functioning. He pounded against Kyna. She pounded back.

Too much...too much!

“Kyna!” Aaron shrieked suddenly, stumbling, an unexpected urgency taking hold of him. He gasped, soul spilling into open air, clutching the edge of the bed with trembling hands. “Kyna, stop!”

She ignored him, clenched her mind tight and shut him out completely as she finished her work, essence fusing in a confused cacophony of dying breaths and sweat-soaked blankets constricting his limbs flailing uncontrollably in time with the most deafening ring—

—his alarm clock went off.

It was Monday morning.

CHAPTER 24

Stepping between ruptured Hefty bags and patches of mutant crabgrass, Natalie nervously weaved her way through the muck that comprised Kyna's backyard. When she stood in front of the clubhouse, she hesitated momentarily, undecided between knocking or turning away at once. This was, after all, Kyna's territory, an almost-secret domain tucked away into the back-alley lawns and dumpsters of the ghetto.

Even friends, though not completely unappreciated, were not welcome.

Natalie listened. She heard the sound of heavy breathing emanating from within the clubhouse, the sound of metal weights clanging—Kyna's morning workout, she realized with relief. Then again, what did she expect to find by coming here? What did she *want* to find? Kyna and Aaron, still in bed together, proof of their consummate labors? A note posted on the clubhouse door reading, "Success! You may pick up your jism at noon!"? Or maybe just a hint, a clue as to why Natalie had heard absolutely nothing from her supposed best friend since Saturday evening, when Kyna had left the party arm and arm with the cutest dud to cross her path since, well, Joshua.

Kyna should have shared and she knew it.

Natalie took a deep breath and rapped lightly on the door. The noises from within quickly stopped, as if Kyna had been caught off-guard.

After a moment of utter silence, Natalie cleared her throat and said:

"Kyna, it's me."

Silence—followed by a sudden (and unexpected) click as the clubhouse door slid open. Kyna, hair matted, skin slick with

sweat, stepped out into the burgeoning morning light. There was steam coming off her clothes.

“Yeah?” she breathed.

Natalie felt a charge (almost like a wave of heat) coming off Kyna’s body, and only a small part of it had to do with her physical exertions, for this was pure energy, undiluted jism, collected, harnessed—siphoned from Aaron’s soul. It rippled off her almost electrically; she could set off a forest fire with a single touch if she relaxed her control for even a moment. She’d slept with Aaron in the flesh, no doubt about that—but she’d also acquired something else...perhaps *someone* else.

It had turned her into a human spark plug.

“Good morning,” Natalie said, trying to smile but succeeding only in baring her teeth. “I was just...I didn’t hear from you yesterday, so I thought...I thought I would, um, check in on things.”

Kyna wiped her brow with the back of her arm. She looked a bit offset, but not annoyed—yet. “Well, I’m fine.”

Of course she was; she’d tapped Aaron to her heart’s content, and without sharing. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh? Then what *did* you mean?”

Shifting back and forth on her feet, Natalie bit her lip, clamped down on her self-control. “Ash’s not feeling well. Anthony’s sort of been on edge, too. Been a while since we had some really good...I mean, I was just wondering...I thought we’d share Aaron.”

Kyna rolled her eyes. “Is that why you came down here? For Aaron’s *jizz*?”

“I wouldn’t have come otherwise, but you left the party without telling me, and then...and then you didn’t call the next day. We usually do this together—I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“Geez,” Kyna spat, rolling her eyes again. “Like I can’t do shit on my own? Like I have to report to you every time I tap someone?”

Natalie felt her pulse quicken. “You didn’t have to sleep with Aaron. You could have just worked him over, gotten him all nice and woozy and then called me over and I would have finished. Christ, you haven’t *done* anyone since Joshua. You stopped for a reason, and we agreed to help each other out. We do the dirty work, we put ourselves on the line so you can lead us to the good stuff. You leave us with a nice percentage when you’re through with our bodies—that’s always been the deal.”

Kyna’s eyes reflected winter. “Well, it’s not going to work that way anymore.”

“But Ash found him!” Natalie exclaimed. Immediately she cupped her hand over her mouth and clenched her stomach in an attempt to control the welling pressure.

Too late; Kyna rippled with the effect, seemed to grow larger and more massive than a professional bodybuilder, even though (in actuality) her body retained its normal shape. “Aaron and I are together,” she said.

“You’re not serious.”

“Yes, I am.”

Natalie couldn’t believe her ears. It was as if she was watching a video replay of when Joshua had first come into her life. Back then, Kyna hadn’t known the danger in trusting oneself to a boy who looked good on the outside, but who was all rotten apples inside. She should have known better now.

“Kyna, look,” she said after a moment. “I...I didn’t mean to go off on you. It’s just, you’ve only known Aaron for a week. You could get hurt.”

Kyna shook her head. “I don’t think you care about me at all. I think you just want him all to yourself.”

“That’s not you talking, Kyna. It’s whatever’s flowing through your veins.” It was the same thing flowing through Natalie’s veins, the reason she’d come here, allowing her hunger to overpower her judgment. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be a bitch about this.”

“Sure you did,” Kyna snorted, already past the point of no return. “You’ve been working up the attitude ever since I first taught you how to throw your knack. You think you’re hot stuff, ready to leave me behind, and now you want Aaron, and you don’t care if he’s actually in love with someone—you’re so conceited that you think I can’t be *loved* by someone.” She stepped forward, poking Natalie in the chest. “Problem is, you think you have the gall to strike out on your own, you think it would be just *great* to lead your own tribe. No more putting up with Kyna and her bullshit—but you don’t have the discipline to make it work.” Face to face now. “Let me tell you something about the way the world works: People don’t do other people favors. They compromise, maybe, they give a little to get a whole lot more, but it’s only to serve themselves in the end. See how much they can get before moving on to someone else. I’m not being left behind this time.”

Tears began to cloud Natalie’s eyesight. She sniffed and wiped her cheek. “I don’t get you. You spend all your time on your body, on your mind and soul—the whole package. You’re so good you can tap anyone without the slightest trouble, and that makes you better than anyone I know. Yet you insist on opening yourself to Aaron because...because you think you need *love*? What’s going to happen when he dumps you because he’s fallen in *love* with some other girl?”

“He’s not going to dump me for some other girl,” Kyna said, her voice still on the offensive, though her expression had become flecked with uncertainty. “He’s mine. I have control.”

“Kyna—”

“It’s time you moved on.”

Their conversation ended. Kyna stepped back into the clubhouse, though she didn’t close the door just yet. Rather, from what Natalie could make out, she was fishing around in her dresser for something. When she found it, she returned to the threshold and handed it to Natalie.

It was a small vial of blood.

“Here,” she said, emotionless. “This is what you want, right? Well, fucking take it. Go off to your little hole with Anthony and suck it all up until you’re too delirious to even breathe, but don’t ask me for any favors anymore—ever. I’m sick of this crap.”

She retreated into the clubhouse, slamming the door shut. The sound of the lock echoed in the air, reverberated in Natalie’s eardrums long after she’d left the yard and started the walk to school alone—*really* alone for the first time in a long while.

Gripping the vial of Kyna’s blood (now supercharged with Aaron’s essence), she started to cry.

Oh, Kyna...

* * *

Inside the clubhouse, Kyna waited with her head pressed against the door and her hand gripping the knob. Natalie’s thoughts, confused and angry, echoed inside her head, and she choked back the urge to cry. Their parting ways was, however, necessary. Kyna needed her head to be clear, needed her essence to be pure. Aaron would be all she ever needed, she knew that—but only if she did it *right*. Which wasn’t to say she’d misstepped with Joshua back when she’d decided to take her first tragic plunge. No, he’d been fucked up all by himself, and he’d tried to poison her with his collected miseries.

Now it was different.

Now I know what I’m doing, she reminded herself, moving away from the door, gathering her schoolbooks and putting them into her backpack.

Now I know what I’m doing.

Still, telling off a friend was never easy. Though she tried convincing herself that it was the right thing to do, her mood was in tatters, and it didn’t improve with the passage of time. Her doubts nagged at her even as she was in her mother’s house, in

the bathroom, standing in front of the mirror after a too-hot shower and trying to fix her hair, trying to clip her eyebrows—trying to look good when she felt almost nauseous. Halfway through the grooming process, her control slipped and she found herself staring at the ugly facade of a girl wounded beyond all reprieve.

Damn it, she thought, trembling slightly, trying to focus herself. The scars wouldn't go away easily, though. They permeated her flesh like the pox, from head to toe, reminders of past battles, some won, others lost. She tried harder, but her body wouldn't respond—and suddenly all the old doubts came rushing back: What if I've made a mistake? What if I need Natalie or Anthony or—shit—even Ash again when I'm down, when I have no one else to turn to? She ground her teeth, summoned her calm, demanded it through the reserve power of her own stored anger. Look at yourself, you wuss. You're missing the point. This isn't you. This is Edward you're feeling, all his corrupt energy still pumping through you, all the stolen nightmares of all the women he raped. You've got to filter it out, ignore the bad and absorb the good. You know none of this is worth a damn if you're not willing to work for it.

She strained even harder, watching her reflection, seeing an intricate combination of trapezius, deltoid, and pectoral muscles becoming knotted as her skin began to obey, smoothing itself out, melting back into the contours she ordained. In a moment she was herself again, her porcelain complexion regained, though she felt bloated, packed too full of other peoples' sins and desires. Perhaps they were her own; she couldn't tell.

Reaching for her clothes, she tore her gaze away from the mirror, tried to ignore the reflection of her belly, where her well-defined abs looked more like deposits of cancerous tumors than disciplined muscles.

She dressed and left the bathroom. As she passed the bedroom, she saw her mother fast asleep in her bed. On some mornings, Kyna would go in and cover her with a blanket; this

morning she merely closed the door softly and made her way outside, where the air wasn't so stale, the ambient pressure not so foreboding.

The journey to Savanna High was wrought with bitter nostalgia. Without Natalie to talk to, her mind wandered, processing every irrelevant bit of information associated with her recent vow towards solitude. She supposed it had been a long time coming: years where Kyna had lead and the others had followed, eager to learn, eager to expand upon their knowledge—but she'd always kept them just enough in the dark, never really giving away all her metaphysical secrets so that they would always need her. Most of the time they'd simply accepted the arrangement, sticking with her because they'd die without their fix, because they weren't skilled enough at skimming off the cream flecking any good soul. Sure, they could go out and flaunt themselves, they could indulge themselves until they'd released enough endorphins to flood their bloodstreams for an entire year, but they could never *truly* inherit the underlying energy behind it all.

Nevertheless, they'd tried. Anthony's parties had been thinly-disguised attempts at remedying the problem. He'd often teamed up with Natalie to try and practice herding the duds on their own, but Kyna was always the one who'd usually ended up fixing things.

One particular memory stood out in her mind: An early-year party at Anthony's—the usual fare that had come to dominate their harvesting activities as of late—that she'd attended so as to play along with what she'd considered a childish game. “Look how many duds we found tonight,” she'd almost expected Anthony to boast. Of course, he'd never done anything that pompous. In fact, he'd pretty much steered clear of her for the majority of the evening, only making an appearance towards the end, when suddenly both Natalie and himself were coming at her from the bedroom, their clothing misaligned, their skin and hair

moist with sweat. They'd been tag-teaming in the bedroom and failing miserably. They'd begged her to come help at once; she'd gone, feasted, taken more than her share, just to show them up. The day after, they'd complained about it—Anthony had spouted off about how he was going to strike out on his own one day soon...though he never did.

Well, fuck them all, then. They don't need me, I don't need them.

Without realizing it, she'd arrived at school and was now walking through the teacher's parking lot, heading towards the rear of the gymnasium. The swimming pool was located there.

She sat in the empty bleachers and waited for Aaron.

CHAPTER 25

The dream hadn't been all that bad. In fact, now that he'd had some time to reflect on things in a waking state, Aaron realized the ordeal had energized him. Without knowing exactly how it worked, he'd gained something from Kyna—a sort of stamina, like when they'd first slept together—without her even being in his presence. Edward, the bitter details involved in his nightmare, were like nonsense from a fast-fading dream. As such, it didn't matter that he was waking up at six in the morning for zero period; he felt as if he could run several marathons without the slightest need for rest or Gatorade-sponsored hydration.

He showered and had breakfast, forgoing his parents altogether as he left the house. The walk to school was virtually instantaneous; he seemed to float just above the sidewalk, letting it slide beneath him—letting the entire world revolve around himself rather than moving himself around the world.

Sadly enough, he was bridled when he reached the boy's locker room and discovered that Coach Stieffel had decided to stick the zero period class in the swimming pool this morning. Normally it wouldn't have mattered, but he'd forgotten to bring his swim shorts. It quickly became obvious he was unprepared for class when everyone marched out onto the pool deck for roll call and he was the only one in jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers.

As Stieffel started calling off names, Aaron bit his lip, faced the bleachers—and smiled when he saw Kyna sitting at the top, pretending to be doing some last-minute homework (when really she was watching him). It was enough to lighten the mood.

“Capps,” Stieffel barked when he'd reached Aaron's place in line. “Why aren't you dressed down?”

“I forgot my shorts at home,” Aaron replied. Stupid, really, to

tell the truth like that when he could have easily made up a half-assed story to cover himself, but he was still feeling giddy, and with Kyna present, his sense of mischief was turned up full blast. He wanted to act dumb, to piss Stieffel off because Stieffel was at his his best when he was pissed off.

“That’s no excuse,” Stieffel said, jotting something down in his ledger. “If you’re not in that pool with everyone else, I’m marking you off for the entire week.” He moved down the line.

Aaron rolled his eyes, stared after Stieffel for a moment, then up at Kyna, who stuck out her tongue and made a funny-face. He smiled and started undressing, kicking off his shoes and socks, his shirt and pants until he was standing in his boxers. It wasn’t the most eloquent way to go (and it would show when he got wet), but it would spare him the inconvenience of losing a week’s worth of points—and, in a way, it allowed him to put on a show for Kyna.

Look who’s the little exhibitionist, she sent. Woo! Take it off!

Aaron laughed to himself, but remained decent as he lined up with everyone else for laps (Stieffel was barking and growling something about timed exercises).

Aw, I’m disappointed, Kyna sent.

He flashed a devilish grin. I should’ve done the nakie thing, huh?

She giggled. Yup. I bet even Stieffel would have given you extra points for that. God, the sky’s not even blue yet; this guy’s alarm clock must be set for four o’clock sharp.

If he ever sleeps at all, Aaron snorted. The boy in front of him turned, misinterpreting.

Hey, let’s continue your training.

Right now?

Sure.

Aaron paused, counting the number of students in front of him. *I guess there’s time to kill. What do you want to do?*

Aaron Capps vs. Coach Stieffel, one on one.

Okay...

Let's mess with him. You can do whatever you like to him. I'll provide guidance.

But how—?

It's just like in the dreams, or when you leave your body: You're using your mind to shape things, to control things. Granted, you can't morph Stieffel into a jackrabbit, but you can probably affect his mind enough to make him think he's one.

Why a jackrabbit?

Dumbass. That was just an example. You can make him think whatever you like.

Indeed. But how do I...?

Think of him, concentrate on him. Close your eyes and pretend you're seeing through his eyes instead of your own...feel your soul filling his body, like water pouring into a pot. Your essence fitting his shape.

He concentrated as she spoke, following her instructions until he suddenly felt the ground slipping beneath his feet. He felt as if he were stumbling forward out of himself. He closed his eyes as everything began to spin around him—

Concentrate. Hold him in your mind.

Unsure of exactly what he was doing, he tried his best to “concentrate.” At first it was like trying to make all his muscles into steel ropes, and he quickly realized that if he didn't succeed in doing whatever it was he was supposed to be doing, he would very likely explode into a cyclone of charred fingernails and scorched hairs. He defaulted to his natural instinct and allowed himself to be drawn (at Kyna's whim) out of his body and into Stieffel's—or rather, most of himself was drawn outward; there was still a shadow, an afterthought of himself left behind.

Keeping my lungs working and my heart beating, he supposed.

Exactly, Kyna responded. Now, open your eyes.

He conceded, and suffered a brief moment of disorientation, for he was now standing on the other side of the swimming pool and gazing out across the deck through Stieffel's eyes. He saw his

body standing in line, standing there in his underwear and looking absolutely ridiculous. Of course, he'd seen himself before in mirrors or in video footage, but this...this was an entirely new perspective.

Don't worry, came Kyna's voice, soothing and steady. I got your back. Better make this quick, though. I can only keep your body standing for so long...and it feels like Stieffel's getting pissed.

Aaron thought quick, went with the first idea that came into his head:

"Everyone out of the pool!" he bellowed, working Stieffel's lungs. "Quickly! Move, move, *move!*"

The half-dozen students in the water quickly made for the opposite end of the pool as Aaron directed Stieffel's body towards the edge of the deck. It was like walking around inside an oversized Halloween costume. As he approached his destination, he imagined what everyone else was seeing: Stieffel, stepping calmly towards the water, dropping his shorts and, penis in hand, staining the water with his urine. The general reaction was stunned, comical horror (if such a thing ever existed). Some people laughed, others scrunched up their faces in disgust.

Kyna burst out laughing, and must have released her control, for Aaron felt himself being sucked out of Stieffel's body, seemingly treading water at the speed of light as he whizzed across the pool and slammed back into himself. He would have fallen over had a pair of boys not caught him first.

"Dude, you okay?" asked one, helping him to stand.

Aaron heard himself laughing. "Yeah...thanks."

"You see what Stieffel just did?" asked the other.

"Yeah," he replied. "Guess when you gotta go, you gotta go."

All three of them laughed together.

For the remainder of the period, Aaron did push-ups with the other youths, though it wasn't as bad as it could have been knowing that Stieffel was royally embarrassed. Plus, not swimming meant not having to wear his underwear in the pool; the

dreaded Saran Wrap effect had been averted.

When it was time to go in, Kyna came down from the bleachers and met him where he was getting dressed. She pecked him on the cheek.

"Not bad," she said. "When you get better, you'll be able to control yourself while controlling someone else at the same time."

Aaron pulled on his shirt. "You mean I can take a piss while making someone else take a piss, too?"

She smiled, rising up on her toes so she could briefly slip her tongue into his mouth. "I'll see you at lunch," she said, and started across the pool deck, towards the exit.

A thought occurred to him before she'd left completely. It wasn't really important, but it was a prickle in the spine nonetheless—a peripheral nag that had been with him since waking in the morning. He called out her name as he ran to her.

"Just a quickie," he said, cocking his head to one side. "Last night, with Edward...that was all just in his head, right?"

"Of course. It was all mental. We didn't really do anything to him."

"So then...we killed him, like, mentally?"

Kyna didn't answer him. She was chewing the callous on one of her fingers.

"Kyna..."

She sighed. "He was a bad person, Aaron. He did bad things to people. You saw what he did to those women in his memories... what he did to your mother. He deserved what he got."

Of course, he agreed with her. Had Kyna and himself not intervened, Edward would be out there right now, sizing up his next victim. And it wasn't as if it hadn't felt good to wake up in the midst of a psychic culmination that had put any masturbatory session to shame. Almost as euphoric as those first few hours after Kyna and himself had slept together.

And yet...

"I know," he responded, suppressing whatever was attempting to climb its way out of his gut. "I was just wondering, that's all."

He smiled, kissed her once more, and jogged into the gymnasium.

Since the showers in any given boy's locker room were pretty much just cesspools for male students to stand around with their dangling parts hanging out whilst they swapped fuck stories and fungus, he went straight to the bathroom to fix his ponytail. However, mere seconds after he'd planted himself in front of a mirror, there was Stieffel, standing behind him red-faced and foam-mouthed. The man lunged at him before he could react, grabbed him around the neck and lifted him several feet into the air.

Oh, shit, he thought, feeling Stieffel's influence dominate his senses within a heartbeat. *Shit, shit, shit...*

"Interesting stunt you pulled out there," Stieffel said. "Childish, indicative of a lack of self-control." He squeezed harder. "Now, I want you to listen and listen good: I don't give half a crap how good you think you are at this little game you're playing, but if you disrupt my class like that again I will expel your sorry little ass. Is that understood?"

"Yes...sir," Aaron rasped. He could hardly breathe, let alone do anything but agree with the man who was rapidly cutting off the blood-flow to his brain, making him choke on his own saliva, his own fear—

—Stieffel let him go.

He collapsed onto his knees on the floor and rubbed his neck, coughed harshly. When he looked up, Stieffel was gone. The only witness to the event, a boy who'd been using the urinal, looked pale enough to have experienced some sort of post-traumatic blindness.

Damn, Aaron thought. *Don't mess with coach.*

CHAPTER 26

Thin as paper, and lighter than air, Joshua made his way down the hallway of Savanna's main building. Though his face was pale and though his breath reeked of raw meat (his recent lunch, courtesy of his mother's freezer), he was otherwise none the worse for wear. In his hand he clutched a piece of paper, folded meticulously and bearing what could only be described as a dire message. Had he been several leagues more normal, as teenagers go, someone in passing might have thought he was about to deliver a love-letter to a potential sweetheart during the crux of the courting process. In Joshua's case it was a grim final notice, a thinly veiled cry for help, to be delivered to a friend whom he'd never had the chance to actually make friends with.

If he'll listen, he thought, bitterly, halfway down the hall and ready to turn back. *But no one listens. Not to a ghost like me.*

"Just a moment, young man."

He stopped, turned around to see the attendance lady, her pudgy body wrapped in the flowery bandages of yet another shower curtain dress. She was huffing towards him.

"Are you just getting in?" she asked.

He sighed—a long, empty puff of air, the like of which might have exited a set of closet-ridden bagpipes. "No, ma'am."

"But you just came in through the main door, now didn't you? What class are you supposed to be in?"

"Um...505. Biology." Truth to tell he couldn't remember his schedule at the moment. However, he didn't have to, for though the attendance lady had begun to interrogate him further, though her mouth was forming words and sentences, she wasn't so much talking *to* him as she was talking *through* him. As she did this, he found himself studying her features, thinking of how

good it would be to feast on her soul a little, perhaps nibble at her rotund arms a bit. He was no cannibal, but living flesh was living flesh, and after being empty for so long, after what Kyna had done to him—*using my body to prostitute herself and then draining me and leaving me for dead...*—even a fat whale of an attendance lady would be like eating five-star Italian cuisine. No doubt she was still single and laced with pastry-inspired self-pity and memories of diets-gone-bad, but it was energy, nonetheless, and he wasn't above taking advantage of such a situation.

Boy, would she provide for a slow burn...ah, but that wouldn't work. Not here, anyway. No one can see me when I'm Just Josh, but they might see something—a strange trail of blood, the glint of a freshly-bloodied body morphing through the air—if I do the deed right now. Then it's cops and cuffs and Heather's parents all over me for raping their daughter. Not as if she could remember her own name after the way I finished her off, but there's always the chance, always that opportunity for revenge...forget it, though. Just go to Aaron's locker, drop off the letter, and get out of here.

Keeping his aura extended, keeping the attendance lady locked into a cyclic redundancy check, he turned away. She kept right on talking to open air as he moved down the hall once again. At some point she forgot who she was talking to, for he heard her voice trail off confusedly, heard the swish of her curtain-clothes as she retreated to her office.

He found Aaron's locker. He slipped his note through the grate and then walked away.

* * *

On his way to sixth-period P.E. Aaron stopped by his locker to deposit his unneeded books; the note was waiting for him on the top shelf. Immediately his apathy and embarrassment concerning Joshua came flooding over him in a blush with all the fervor of a boiled lobster. He took the note in his hands. It read:

Dear Aaron,

I know you think I'm a big asshole, and a freak on top of it all. I know I can't change that, and I'm sorry we couldn't be friends, but I still think you should know something about Kyna. I've messed things up a lot this last week, but I know if I didn't at least tell you the truth, then I'd really be a bad person, so here it is: Kyna and I used to go out. This is back when we were in junior high. We thought we were hot shit for each other, but I guess not all things work out right sometimes. I found out that she has this mental problem, sort of a power trip thing—it's not her fault, but she hurts people, sometimes more than she expects or even means to. She fucked me up pretty bad, and it was more than just emotional stuff. I think you get my drift.

I don't know what else to say. If I'm full of shit, then I'm full of shit, I guess. You don't have to believe me. I just wanted you to know the truth.

Be careful.

Josh

Aaron crumpled the letter and stuffed it into his pocket.

So that's the game he wants to play, he thought. Telling little lies in sneaky letters because he's too much of a wuss to face me in person and admit he's jealous I'm with his girl. Well, he can rot.

He closed his locker and left the hall.

* * *

Kyna waited for him after school. Together they walked to her

place, sneaking in an assortment of playful kisses and butt-grabs along the way. Aaron didn't mention Joshua's letter because it didn't occur to him to waste any more of his time than necessary when dealing with stuck-up ex-boyfriends who couldn't "get over it."

That, and he was too busy meeting Mrs. Miller for the first time.

Their meeting was unintentional: Kyna and himself initially spread themselves out on her bed and started their homework. Ten minutes into a silent stretch of crunching geometry equations and he was rolling onto his back, yipping like a puppy dog and asking for something to drink.

"Can't turn down a face like *that*," Kyna said, and kissed him on the nose. "What do you want?"

"Something with ice in it," he responded. "If you've got any."

"Coming right up." She smiled and left the clubhouse.

Aaron stood, stretched, and went over to the weight machine, where he started an impromptu circuit to pass the time. When he'd gone through a number of exercises without Kyna's return, he decided to go and search for her. He stepped out into the backyard, looked toward the rear of the house, where the kitchen door (rusting off its hinges) stood slightly ajar; voices emanated from within—

—Kyna was arguing with someone.

Probably none of my business, he thought. Then again, hiding out in the yard and listening to the whole thing wasn't his business either, so he tossed aside any second thoughts and went to the house, pulled open the door, and stepped into the unkempt kitchen—and nearly swallowed his tongue when he found himself in the presence of a nude woman. She was mostly skin and bone, with pale blond hair hanging down the sides of her head. It only partially concealed her malnourished breasts, which were stretched across a chiseled topography of ribs. Below, her unkempt pubic hair was thick and dark. She stood at the far end of

the kitchen, a can of beer in one hand. Kyna was closer, and when she became aware of Aaron's entrance, she blushed bright red and moved quickly, taking off her jacket and draping it over the woman's front.

"Mom," she hissed. "Put some clothes on!"

Aaron felt himself blushing as he locked his eyes with the ceiling and started to back out again. "I-I'm sorry. I'll...I'll wait outside, Kyna."

"Aw, is that *him*?" asked Mrs. Miller. "Hang on there, sweetie. Let me get a look at you."

He started to turn around, reached for the door as he heard a scuffling behind him (Kyna's attempt, no doubt, to restrain her mother). Mrs. Miller took hold of his shoulder before he could leave.

"Come on, baby. Don't be shy! Let's see you."

He swallowed and faced her full, boiling inside his skin as she slapped him playfully against the chest.

"Oh, *Gawd*," she cooed, giggling like a teenage girl—totally shameless, it seemed. "How'd you get a strapping young stud like this?"

Kyna attached herself to her mother, started pulling her away. "Mom, *please*! You're embarrassing me!"

Mrs. Miller fell into Kyna's arms, belching and mumbling something unintelligible into the side of her daughter's neck before passing out.

"Shit," Kyna uttered, struggling with her mother's weight as she desperately dragged her towards the hallway.

Aaron had fixed his eyes upon the floor at this point, but looked up when he heard Kyna clearing her throat uncomfortably, asking for his assistance (despite the audacity of the situation). It was most likely worse for her than it was for him, though he complied without protest. Crossing the kitchen, he looped one of Mrs. Miller's arms around his shoulders and helped carry her to her bedroom, where he and Kyna spread her

out upon the rumpled bed. Kyna promptly covered the comatose woman with a blanket and then motioned for Aaron and herself to step out into the hallway.

"She's, um, sort of an at-home nudist," she explained on the way back to the kitchen. "Usually she's at work until five, but I guess she stayed home sick today or something. Pretty fucked up, huh?"

There was pain in her voice (something more, even, than was warranted by the exhibitionism of one's mother), though she didn't explain any further. Instead she went into the cupboard, found a pair of glasses, and filled them both with spring water from an Arrowhead bottle.

"Sorry, no ice," she said, handing him a glass.

"That's okay," he replied.

He sipped quietly for a moment, the oppressive afternoon heat making the air seem heavy, making the sweat cling to his face and neck. A fly buzzed somewhere near a stack of dirty dishes, bringing attention to the fact that they hadn't been washed in far too long. His mother's kitchen had never deteriorated to a state even remotely close to this...but, then, his parents had stuck it out as a family. There was no such unity here.

He kept quiet, finished his drink and handed the glass back to Kyna, who placed it (beside her own) in the sink.

They went back into the clubhouse. Kyna promptly locked the door and started undressing. "Let's work some more on your abilities," she said, and helped him with his belt buckle, practically pulling him into bed as he hopped and stumbled out of his pants and underwear. At first he thought she was merely referring to sex: she straddled him at the onset, maintained her position on top throughout, keeping her own pace—timing him. However, when his moment came and he gasped, instinctively scrunched his eyes shut, she grabbed him by the ears and growled, "Open your eyes—look at me!"

He obeyed—vaguely curious as to his partner's sudden

brusqueness but too inebriated to wonder about it much—and suddenly realized she was tricking him, using his orgasm to knock his soul out of his body. In an instant he was spinning up into free space, bouncing off the walls of the clubhouse like a rubber ball.

Kyna was there, too, and she was laughing hysterically.

He lunged playfully at her with arms that had no substance. Though he'd become more adept in this shadow world, she was nevertheless still the agile acrobat while he remained the blundering fool. Beneath them, their bodies—now relatively motionless—remained interlocked.

Don't we look good together? Kyna asked.

Aaron saw his flesh face developing a blush, mimicking his unhindered emotions; he still felt like a voyeur, even though it was his own body he was spying on. *I thought we were going to work on my abilities.*

Kyna snickered. *We will...in a minute. First I want to finish something else.*

Her presence receded into the ether, and Aaron found himself somewhat alone. He turned his attention to the bed once more and discovered that Kyna had reanimated her body and was now kissing his face and neck and hair—putting on a show for him, for he realized he'd climaxed too early a moment ago; now it was her turn.

This is so dirty, he thought, though he knew his body was responding dutifully, the sensations welling until Kyna reached her pinnacle. The force of it was like a tidal wave, and it pitched Aaron backward, forced him through the ceiling of the clubhouse.

Whoa.

He was tingling all over now, floating outside, above treetops and telephone poles. Kyna was somewhere nearby, though she hadn't joined him fully. He sensed that she was still in her body, still recovering from the aftermath. He could hear her fading

gasps.

With time to spare, he wandered, letting his soul float out across the city. He wasn't really afraid of drifting off into oblivion, for he could feel the invisible thread connecting himself and Kyna. He knew if he got lost, he could feel his way back along the thread to the clubhouse.

He practiced mingling with the breeze, wriggling between forming storm clouds as the horizon flared bright orange and late afternoon began the descent into early evening.

Still, Kyna kept herself occupied elsewhere.

More time passed. Aaron was patient. Eventually he realized he was floating over his parents' house, settling down somewhat, drifting southward just the tiniest bit so that he could sense the iridescent green tarp that covered Nathan Brown's backyard rain forest. He sank even further, passing through the tarp and finding himself entangled in the myriad foliage. His phantom toes brushed damp soil, his shadow eyes scanned the details of the miniature jungle.

Nathan's garden doppelganger waited against the rear wall.

* * *

Kyna caught her breath, smiled as she ran her tongue over Aaron's parted lips. The kitchen incident, grappling with her mother for a sense of misplaced decency, had been forced aside and was now replaced by the only underlying concern that really mattered to her: Aaron.

Fuck mom. Fuck the world. I've got my hunky Banana Boy.

She crawled off him, cleaned herself off, settled down on her haunches. Glancing at Aaron's feet, she giggled, noticing that his pants (and underwear) had clung to his right foot the entire time. She reached over and pulled them off completely.

A piece of paper fell out of one of the pockets.

She picked it up, unable to refrain from taking advantage of

Aaron's mental absence. She unfolded it, started reading—almost choked when she recognized Joshua's handwriting.

The maggot, she thought, clenching the letter tightly, digging her fingernails into the paper. *Still trying to bleed every last drop.*

She gazed at Aaron's tranquil face, so smooth, so angelic. Resting, dreaming...planning, scheming—no. *If he'd been brainwashed by that creep he wouldn't have come here. If he'd been into using girls for sex, he wouldn't have settled for me. No, Aaron is still mine. I control him, totally. No problem there, no. But Joshua...*

There was a problem with Joshua.

She slipped out of bed, waving the imaginary wand of her influence over Aaron's sleeping form so that he would remain that way until she deemed it time for him to wake up properly. She donned her clothes, then, and left the clubhouse, left her partner alone and locked in slumber as she stepped into the alleyway, ran between patches of mutated crabgrass and fossilized concrete littered with broken glass and used condom wrappers.

Everything will be fine, she thought. *Once I fix this...once and for all.*

Everything will be fine.

* * *

It was just as he remembered: an earthy cadaver, held together by fleshy roots and some ungodly sort of magic that allowed eyes—human eyes—to function, to focus, to see Aaron's bodiless approach as he drifted closer.

Shit, Aaron thought, suddenly afraid. *I don't even need a body for him to see me.* He flinched figuratively, started to pull away, but there was a tide drawing him along, moving him forward until he was nose to nose with the doppelganger. He wanted to look away, but he had no eyes; there was only his awareness, and he was aware, at this moment, of Nathan's haunting likeness. The smell of the soil, the texture of the roots permeating Nathan's

torso—the unmistakable presence of the face. It was as if someone had peeled off the man's flesh and planted it in a patch of dirt. Somehow, a mask had taken root and grown into this irregular monstrosity; he half expected to find a living brain buried somewhere behind those glistening, beady eyes—eyes now holding his gaze, surer of his presence than he himself was. Nathan's crusted lips moved, and he began to utter a string of throaty noises. Somewhere amidst the cacophony was a string of coherent words:

Dreaming, are we? Or have you learned a thing or two about astral travel from your little girlfriend? Yes, you can hear, you can see...and all in real time, eh? Leafy arms extended themselves. Hands swished thin air. *Not the fractal patterns of sleep at all. But do you know? Are you the wisher or the wish?*

Aaron felt his essence convulse. He wanted very much to get away, though without a physical body, there was no part of himself he was familiar enough with to make good on his wish. And Nathan's presence was somehow holding him here, keeping him in limbo.

Kyna! he shouts.

No response.

* * *

The window was wide open, as expected. Kyna climbed through without a sound, lowered herself onto Joshua's bedroom floor and crouched, watching him. He was lying in bed, apparently dozing. She clenched her fists, ground her teeth, for as furious as she was, she knew she couldn't bring herself to attack someone unaware.

Bastard, she sent, digging a sheer mental spike into the tender innards of his brain. *Don't make me take you down in your sleep!*

A sudden movement from the bed, Joshua's toes spreading, curling as he lurched into a sitting position, his eyes glazed over

with sleep, his breath ragged.

“Kyna...what...?” he began, but she was upon him immediately, pinning him down with her legs, cutting off his words with the sleeve of her jacket.

“Why did you tell him?” she demanded, throttling him, acting so violently that the whole bed shook. “Why, Josh? It’s not your game anymore!”

Somewhere beneath the bloodless face, the terrified eyes, Joshua squeezed out enough breath to say, “He...had to know, Kee! You know why...he doesn’t deserve to be...toyed with like you did to me!”

Kyna let out a feral growl and punched him in the face. He yelped feebly as blood began to gush from his nose. *Like I did to you?*

My mom’s going to hear...Kee...

Let her hear what’s going on! Let her come waltzing right in here so she can see the piss-stain of a son she’s produced!

Another blow to the face. Joshua’s eyes rolled back in his head. *You’re the...problem, Kyna. Not me.*

She grabbed him around the neck, hauled him into a sitting position. *I gave my whole life to you, Josh! You swore yours to me, remember?*

A feeble nod. Blood trickling down his chin and chest.

We were kids. I didn’t know what love was—neither did you. Christ, I’m sixteen—I shouldn’t have to deal with this, shouldn’t have to feel like I’m forty! I don’t need you, though...I don’t need you to make me feel good about myself.

Immediately, Joshua’s expression paled even further (if that was even possible at this point). He threw his arms over his face, trying to look as pathetic as possible—you wouldn’t hit a helpless person, would you?—as Kyna lunged again, digging her fingernails into the flesh of his neck.

I know what you are! she screamed mentally. Don’t pretend you can hide from me!

She squeezed harder, momentarily allowing her rage full access to the disciplined array of her muscles as she dug deeper, her fingertips penetrating skin and touching the frantic warmth beneath.

Joshua started to gurgle. His eyes rolled back in his head again—he was trying to black out, to escape the pain. *She'll kill me for it, over and done with—*

No, she thought, suddenly letting up. Not that easy. No good just killing you so you can go off to heaven or hell or whatever and be free of the mess you've made.

She relinquished her grip on his neck, dug in with her mind, took hold of his soul so that it wouldn't submerge until she wanted it to. This way, he was adrift, fully awake, fully aware, but unable to move his limbs. She scooted down a bit, between his legs, and worked her hands into his underwear.

Remember what I said...if you screwed with me...

She pulled and twisted and made good on the idle threat she'd sent him on so many occasions since their breaking up. Only now it was real: real Joshua squirming beneath her in agony, real blood spurting all over his belly, soaking the sheets as she worked to dismember him with her own two hands.

It didn't matter whether or not she finished the job. After an indeterminate amount of time, the pounding of her heart, the ringing in her ears became too much to bear and she tore herself from the bed. She left him there—convulsing, gasping without breath, bleeding to death in his own bed—and climbed back out through the window.

A sudden shower had darkened the sky, and raindrops pelted her, soaked her hair and clothes. A dozen yards off, barely into the alleyway that ran behind Joshua's house, her knees buckled and her gut spasmed as rage and bile combined into an acidic, unpalatable brine.

She fell to her knees and vomited.

* * *

Kyna. The girl's name, perhaps?

Aaron fidgeted, imagined that he still had sweat glands and that his clothes (which were, in fact, still resting on the floor of Kyna's clubhouse) were soaked. He could feel a gentle probing, invisible fingers reaching into his essence, and he hadn't the slightest idea how to defend himself.

Nathan's doppelganger continued to feel the air with his hands, though the rest of him remained immobile. *Ah, but of course. There she is, bound to you, engraved upon your soul. A stout young woman your age.*

The man was sounding more like Yoda than the beer-touting conspiracy-theorist he'd met a week previous.

How would he know anything about Kyna? Aaron thought, forgetting that Nathan could obviously sense his memories and thoughts quite clearly.

Her flesh is imprinted on your mind, as is her soul. When a man and woman join in sexual union, the connection is fused and is never lost despite time or distance.

Aaron recoiled shyly, a recent image of Kyna—her face flushed and sweaty, her nose pressing into his cheek as she whimpered passionately—flashing through his mind. He grabbed the memory, stuffed it down somewhere Nathan hopefully couldn't see.

The garden cadaver leaned closer, chuckling. *No need to be shy about it, my boy. We all experience the wonder of unity at some point in our lives. Flesh to flesh or soul to soul. But your initial experience with her is relevant, as are all subsequent ones. She is taken away for that brief moment in time when unity is achieved. She is free from the inner turmoil that she has unwittingly been harboring for most of her life. Physical pleasure is a marvelous catalyst, and when it's delivered by one you love, peace is close at hand...but often just out of reach. A momentary pause. Glistening eyes scanning Aaron's soul. The intuited sound of rain hitting the tarp above. Can't you feel it? Can't*

you sense her predicament even now? She's caused someone else great pain, and now she herself is in great pain, for there is a battle being fought, between self and self. She's afraid she's losing. That's why she doesn't come for you right now.

Oddly enough, now that it had been brought to his attention, Aaron *did* feel something—a vague pull, a twisting deep down inside himself—and he realized that half of what he was feeling was actually being caused by something external, something outside himself, something being funneled into his essence.

Kyna.

Suddenly, he didn't want to be here anymore. He wanted to be back in the clubhouse, back in his body so he could assess the situation, figure out just what was going on—but he didn't know how.

Nathan—Mr. Brown, he sends, suddenly anxious beyond belief. *How do I...*

A pause from Nathan, whose gaze lifted, focusing on something distant. Aaron felt himself becoming suddenly lighter, and it was as if a violent wind had kicked up, hurling him away from the doppelganger, up and out of the garden, into the storm-charged air and across town—

—she is with you now.

* * *

The entire bed jolted upon Aaron's waking. He took several deep breaths, willing his heartbeat to ease up somewhat as he reached for the sheet with shaking hands. He drew it up to his chin, as a child might do, and shivered from head to toe as he listened intently to the sound of the rain pelting the aluminum roof of the clubhouse.

"Kyna?" he called out, his voice quavering uncontrollably. He wondered why he was shaking; he'd left his body hundreds of times during his lessons—it shouldn't have been anything new.

Then again, he *did* just have a mental conversation with a talking vine corpse...

The door rattled and slid open. Kyna entered, rain dripping from her hair and clothes, mud sloughing off her shoes in unsightly gobs. It was hard to make out the exact details of her face, but he knew without seeing that she wore a haggard expression, and he also knew (now) why he felt the way he did.

"Kyna..." he whispered, moving to get out of bed.

She closed the door, met him halfway. She threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, Aaron," she whimpered, and started crying.

Unsure of what to do, he held her for several minutes, not caring that he was still naked (and getting soaked). He asked her what was wrong, but she wouldn't tell, so he merely continued to hold her.

Patiently, he waited for it to pass.

CHAPTER 27

Aaron's sophomore year ended with little fanfare. The transition from school to vacation was a welcome one, and the best part about the onset of summer was not having to wake up every morning to Coach Stieffel.

As he'd promised to himself, he never returned to Edward's warehouse, never offered an official resignation (it had been, after all, an under-the-table arrangement), and only thought about it when, perhaps a week after the nightmare incident, Daniel happened to bring up the fact that Edward was undergoing therapy for some sort of mental trauma. No one said anything forthright, but Aaron sensed that his father (and mother) was quietly elated by the news—a sort of vengeance, if you will, for Edward's molesting his wife.

In late June, Aaron got a job as a bagger at the Ralph's supermarket across the street. Initially, Kyna was dubious about the notion, insisting that he could get whatever he wanted or needed with just a little mind power here or there (she herself had acquired her clubhouse for free from the local Home Depot). Aaron was a tedious sort of person, though, and he knew it. Summer was only tolerable if he had something to do, and so Kyna acquiesced, going with him when he picked up an application, influencing the store manager to overlook Aaron's youth. Under the false pretense of "a community service program," he was hired in order to satisfy Savanna High School's credit requirements.

When he wasn't stuffing grocery bags full of ground beef packages or canned goods, he was with Kyna. They often played basketball or sneaked into movies together. When they were in the clubhouse, they worked out on Kyna's weight machine or practiced out-of-body navigation. They very rarely entered Kyna's

mother's house.

They slept together often. Aaron, always with a mischievous smile on his lips, called it "fucking," and he had no problem with Kyna's steady appetite. His first afternoon on the job at Ralph's he filched a box of condoms from the shampoo aisle. When he presented them to Kyna, however, she turned them down, said he didn't have to worry about getting her pregnant because she knew how to control her monthly cycle. He'd dallied on that occasion, stuck to kissing and fondling long past the point where Kyna could be satisfied by merely "making out." She'd taken matters into her own hands, rolling on top and insisting that it was okay, that they'd been together for a month and he'd never brought up the subject before. He'd blushed, then, guiltily admitting that he hadn't really thought things through when it came to "protection and making babies and all that." He trusted her, though, and, as was usually the case, ended up giving in shortly thereafter.

June became July and life continued to drift lazily by. Aaron found that, as the days and weeks passed, his relationship with Kyna never dulled. Though theirs was certainly a quiet relationship, it was more than enough to satisfy both. Other teenagers might have scoffed at such consistency, but Aaron found it satisfying to focus his emotional (and hormonal) energies on a single girl.

Still, beneath the pleasantness, beneath the afternoons and evenings spent sweating enthusiastically together on the weight machine or in bed, there was an itch. Nothing major just yet, nothing that couldn't wait for the day when it "felt right" to really discuss such things, but Aaron felt it: a subdued curiosity, a dull recognition of something he would have to face someday.

Like when, on that rainy evening in May, he'd gone to sleep with Kyna at his side, only to wake up (after a rather unusual mental visit to Nathan Brown's backyard Amazon) with her returning from somewhere, her hair and clothes sopping wet, her

demeanor ripped to shreds. She never revealed to him the details of her whereabouts during that time, and though he knew it perhaps wasn't his business to pry, he often wondered why she couldn't bring herself to share such things with him.

Even when he knew it was festering on the inside.

Like today, he thought on a sweltering Tuesday afternoon in mid-July, when Kyna and himself were laying together in her bed and listening offhandedly to a Jonny Lang album. *Not much to talk about, so we haven't talked at all—just in case the subject comes up.*

He sighed, heard the sound of drunken laughter coming from inside Kyna's mother's house.

"Your mom have a friend over?" he asked.

"Probably just Dead Man," Kyna replied, scowling.

Dead Man, he thought, recognizing the nickname she'd given to her father. He'd never met the man, but he'd pieced together enough of Kyna's reactions to be able to tell she loathed him. "How come you call him that?"

Kyna's eyes went opaque. She stared up at the ceiling. "It's not important—let's talk about something else."

Shot down, once again.

"Okay," he said. He quieted for a moment, considered pursuing the matter further, though there was no real reason he needed to earn this specific piece of background information at the moment. So he thought of other things—typical tangents that often fluttered through his mind when he wasn't concentrating on something. "I was at work the other day, and I came to the realization that I'm too average."

Facing him, Kyna propped herself up slightly, one broad shoulder showing above the sheet. She set her lips into a melancholy semi-smile, with just the edges curling upward. "Not at all." She tapped his crotch affectionately.

He smiled halfway, a bit disappointed at how easily she'd warmed to the prospect of mere idle talk, and scooted into a sitting position, with his back resting against the headboard. "Naw,

I mean it. I feel like a statistic sometimes.”

“Why’s that?”

“Dunno. I just get to thinking like this sometimes.”

Kyna sat against the headboard as well. “But you have something that sets you above all the others. I’ve taught you.”

“Yeah...but I’m still just *me*. I’m still just some dude who works at a grocery store. I mean, what am I supposed to do with my life? I’m not all that good in any of my classes. I get B’s and C’s most of the time. I like sports, but it’s been years since I was on any teams.” He chuckled. “No scholarships for me. Once I’m out of high school, no one will even remember me, unless they come into Ralph’s ten years down the line and I’m still working there.”

“Nothing wrong with a guy who’s just himself,” Kyna said, resting her head against his shoulder. “If everyone in the world did something to be ‘remembered by,’ we’d have a memorial the size of the Empire State Building in each and every city. Besides, you’ve got plenty of talents.”

“Like what?”

“You can dress yourself.”

Aaron sighed, forced himself to mellow out just a bit despite Kyna’s unspoken insistence to ignore his desire for sincerity. “Thanks.”

Kyna seemed to catch a bit of his sarcasm. “Oh, come on. There’s a place out there for Banana Boy and Bubble Butt Girl to make their own little niche. Doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. We don’t even need a house. A nice apartment would do, some place we can cram all the little Banana Boy Juniors and Bubble Butt Girls we’re going to have.” She rested her hand on his groin again and giggled; it was a hollow sound. “Maybe there’ll be some humongous earthquake next year, and California will finally slip into the ocean, and the tsunami will wipe out ninety percent of the Earth’s population, and then it’ll be up to you and me to help repopulate the planet.”

Aaron groaned. “Assuming we survive.”

“Yep.”

“That’s a lot of work.”

“Uh-huh.”

He bit his lip, then, and considered, forcing his mind to project itself beyond sixteen, beyond the eleventh grade—five years down the line, maybe, when he would be twenty-one. Living on his own, away from his parents, for sure. With Kyna? Most likely. Small apartment, cool...but children? That was unfathomable. Almost as audacious as actually trying to repopulate the Earth with two horny teenagers calling the shots.

“What could a couple kids possibly learn from us?” he asked after a few minutes’ listening to the muffled sound of Dead Man and Mrs. Miller’s merriment. It sounded like cats being massacred.

“Lots and lots and lots,” Kyna replied, closing her eyes. “The boys’ll be sweet, charming and handsome; the girls’ll be beautiful and smart, and they’ll make all the other kids at school jealous because they’ll have the hunkiest dad on the block.”

“Dream on. The boys will be little hooligans, the girls will be smart-alecky as shit—just like their mother.”

Kyna scowled. “But you’d love them anyway, wouldn’t you?”

Aaron thought for a moment, then said, “Yeah...I would.”

A moment’s pause, Kyna’s expression going opaque. “What if I told you I was pregnant?”

For a moment, Aaron experienced utter panic as an almighty “oh-shit” escaped his lips—along with a gasp that, had it been just the slightest bit stronger, very well could have expelled his heart. Kyna merely stared back at him, eyes level, lips perfectly relaxed...waiting.

It didn’t help to hear Dead Man’s climactic grunt emanating from Mrs. Miller’s open bedroom window: “*Argh! I’m coming!*”

“I...I thought you said you-you could control y-your cycle,” Aaron began, grasping for words, squirming beneath the sheets. *Oh-shit-oh-shit-oh-shit...*

Mrs. Miller's harried cries (now emanating from the bedroom window as well) seemed to echo his thoughts.

"Christ," Kyna scowled, glaring in the direction of the house. "They sound like animals." She faced Aaron and slapped him against the chest. "As for you, I'm only kidding about the being pregnant thing. Geez, Aaron! Way to take it like a man."

"Very funny," he responded, wiping his brow.

"You're such a big baby. I couldn't resist seeing that cute little thing you do with your eyebrows whenever you get upset."

Aaron merely grunted, still trying to get a hold on his pulse.

Kyna made a sympathetic face and moved between his legs, pulling the sheets from his midsection. "Let me make it up to you." Not waiting for an answer, she set herself to work.

But we just finished! he thought, incredulously. *Does she ever get enough...or is she just doing it to keep her mind off her parents?*

Kyna continued, and he was left to wonder. It was, however, the nature of their relationship (or so he told himself). She knew everything about him, knew where all his secret buttons were—knew how to illicit whatever response she wanted. He, on the other hand, knew almost nothing about her besides what she'd already agreed to share: that she'd had a dysfunctional childhood piloted by a half-coherent nudist mother and an on-again-off-again father named "Dead Man." That was it. Whenever he took a tentative step further into her personal realm, she clammed up. Oh, she told him that she loved him every day, and often demonstrated it quite physically, but how did a boy know what love was? How did he know how to interpret the signals being sent to him via the highly influential lie-detecting organ slung between his legs?

The answers weren't coming, though he was, and (as usual) Kyna took it all down with infallible enthusiasm. She cleaned him off afterward, gently handling him as if she'd just won him at an auction. Coming off a rush like that, he found he really didn't mind all that much. It really didn't matter if his new girl-

friend thought she owned him because she'd shown him things he couldn't have dreamed of experiencing with anyone else. Sure, she was his first, but in time, she would most certainly open up.

He closed his eyes as she settled back into his arms, drifting off in the still afternoon heat. With her in his arms, with the intoxicating smell of sweat and sex filling his nostrils, he was reminded once again why it wasn't all that difficult to tolerate the not-knowing, and he vowed patience, to wait for the days, weeks, and months to unearth all the secret memories and experiences that made Kyna Miller who she was.

Because it'll never be this good again, and you know it.

CHAPTER 28

Time didn't heal all wounds, but it *did* provide a suitable Band-Aid for those in need of a workaround. Kyna was counting on time to carry her away from the nagging trauma of the incident at Joshua's, though the image of his grief-stricken face was always hovering around the periphery of her thoughts.

Doing things with Aaron helped: The weekend after he received his first bona fide paycheck, they went together to the Eastridge Mall for lunch. Afterward they stopped at Sam Goody. Kyna didn't have more than a few dollars on her, though she still picked out a handful of albums, which she paid for with little more than a keen glance at the cashier. Aaron seemed a bit dubious about this, offering to pay, but she turned him down, whispered to him on the way out that it was no use having a special ability unless she was going to use it.

"I guess so," he said, shrugging.

He also mentioned that he wasn't confident enough with his own skills to filch the majority of his store purchases just yet. He was good at it, no doubt about that; he just needed to become more comfortable with himself. Kyna herself had worked steadily at this, practicing every night with him once summer began. By mid-July he could easily manipulate strangers on the streets, no blood or semen required. With Natalie and Anthony, it had taken a good, solid year before they could do relatively well without the assistance of a person's bodily fluids. Yet, here was Aaron, a supposed dud before Kyna had met him, a virtually endless well of energy—a prodigy whose knack was on-par with her own—and what did he do with it? What did he use his overflowing abundance for? Small things: a free drink here, a free bus ride there...free movie rentals on Fridays.

It was like owning a shiny-new Ferrari and never taking it out of the garage for a spin.

"If you won the lottery," she said, one Saturday evening when she was bumming around the frozen-food section of Ralph's with Aaron, "and you had, like, a million dollars just chilling in your bank account...wouldn't you do something with it?"

"I'd never win the lottery," Aaron answered offhandedly, apparently trying to decide between two relatively similar packages of frozen burritos. "But if I *did*, I guess I'd get a savings account or something."

Kyna frowned, inside and out. "Your ingenuity never ceases to amaze me."

"Hey, ease up," he replied, shrugging. "You know I'm not the kind of person who *wants* things."

"Doesn't matter. It's...it's like marking your territory. Keeping everyone else aware that you have a certain status so that they don't start picking on you or treating you like a dud. I mean why *wait* for a confrontation to happen? Why go through all the anticipation of saving up for something special when you can have it *now*?"

Aaron sighed, glanced around the aisle. His gaze caught something, and suddenly he was off, heading down the liquor aisle. He hefted a six-pack of Coors from the freezer and presented it to her, a goofy smile on his face.

"Beer?" she asked, raising her eyebrows. "You're a drinker?"

He shrugged. "I don't know...yet."

"This is your big idea? Using your knack for a six-pack?"

He grabbed a second one. "Okay, one for you, too."

"You're such a dork," she said. She did, however, consider his offer. She herself had kept away from alcohol all her life, had never taken the chance that she might turn into one of those maniacal, suicidal drunks bellowing all her problems to the wind in broken English—like Dead Man, whose hands always seemed to be occupied with some variety of cheap booze.

Or my mother's boobs, she thought, a moment of bitterness causing her to scowl. However, with Aaron's offer, there was an element of laid-back playfulness; this wasn't an excuse for him to get laid, nor was it an invitation for a dinnertime argument. She could easily imagine him as a silly, lovable drunk, and so she nodded, agreed that this was a lame-but-acceptable stretch of his imagination.

They found a checkout lane, bagged the beer, a bag of corn chips, a small container of chilled salsa, and a copy of *Maxim*—all without the need for cash or ID. Behind them, a half-dozen other shoppers waited in line, some watchful of the transaction, others busy absorbing the tabloid headlines; thanks to Kyna's mindfulness, not one of them quite caught on to the fact that a pair of teenagers were leaving the store without having paid for their groceries.

Later, in the clubhouse, Aaron and herself got quite drunk and fornicated haphazardly until dawn, at which point Aaron gave in to exhaustion and passed out.

Kyna remained awake, laying still on her back and listening to the sound of her partner's light breathing. Gradually, she curled her fingers so that she clutched the covers tightly, a mental itch at the small of her back causing her to writhe slightly, to perspire, even, despite her lack of physical activity.

How many times, she thought, *did you imagine Joshua's face tonight? Trying to stay with Aaron, trying to keep your eyes open whenever you felt yourself starting to go over the edge—trying to concentrate on the energy flow, but it's too much, and you end up closing your eyes every time and seeing Joshua there, lying in his bed, always there, wasting away, turning to dust...slowly starving to death while you feast on Aaron's seed like it's Thanksgiving dinner—stop it. Stop acting like you care for him, goddammit. It's not you—it's the alcohol. Too much beer, and now instead of throwing it all up, you've absorbed every last self-deprecating drop.*

Morning progressed, and Kyna suffered silently, drifting in

and out of a restless sleep until just before noon, when she happened to glance down at herself and saw that her right forearm had acquired an unsightly scar. She felt her heart leap into her throat; she sucked in a breath, blinked, and found her arm was smooth again, that perhaps she had merely projected the scar onto herself during a moment of unsolicited anxiety.

Move along, she thought. Keep yourself occupied or else you'll really have a panic attack.

"Ugh," she groaned, yawning wretchedly, the heavy funk of her morning breath seemingly permeating the very fabric of the time space continuum. She sat up, making sure to move around enough so that Aaron would be roused.

Beside her, he mumbled something and burped. "Y'awright?"

"Pig," she replied, going through the moves, pinching his butt as she kissed him; her emotional state (and her exhaustion) kept her from enjoying it.

Aaron sat up and stretched. "I feel like garbage." He pulled random bits of sweat-dried hair from his face. "I need a shower."

"Me, too," Kyna replied. She could smell the beginning of a feral odor escaping her armpits.

Amazingly, Aaron's appetite seemed to have been spared by his hangover. He left the bed, pulling on his boxers, and went over to the dresser, where he had himself a makeshift breakfast comprised of the now-stale corn chips and half-dried salsa.

"Ugh," Kyna groaned. "How can you eat like that?"

He shrugged, scowling at the smell of his own morning breath. "I'm hungry."

Promising herself strict abstinence from any future alcoholic opportunities, Kyna pulled on some clothes and sat at the edge of the bed, where she worked at alleviating the symptoms of her hangover. She felt nauseous, claustrophobic—too tight in the chest and abdomen. She exerted her willpower, massaging her temples with her fingers and imagining the flow of invisible energy working its way into her brain, fooling her pain receptors

into thinking all was well.

Harder than it usually is, she thought, feeling the extra burden of the alcohol in her veins. *I hate this...why didn't I just tell him "no?"*

The answer was simple:

To keep him occupied...to keep him mine. Lower my standards a little bit because without compromise he'd feel rejected...maybe even suspicious. Maybe I thought I'd enjoy it, losing control and not caring for just a while—but I can't even do that. Not for a second, unless I want everything to come spilling out all over the place. Unless I want to chase him off too soon.

She continued the massage, watching Aaron slowly devour the last of the chips. She thought back to when they'd first officially become girlfriend and boyfriend, and she realized that since the onset of summer there had been a handful of instances when acquaintances from school had invited him to socialize. Parties, trips to the movies—Kyna had exerted her will on each occasion to convince Aaron that he would have more fun spending his time with her. If he ever affected indecision, she offered him sex, and, well, he was a guy, after all, so such an arrangement wasn't all that bad. He never begged for sex, but it was undoubtedly still such a new enough experience for him that he eagerly took each and every one of her offered amatory opportunities without hesitation. By now they'd slept together on many occasions, so it was no longer necessary to pretend she was an inept virgin. Subsequently, she did things to him in bed that he would never ever be able to replicate with any other girl—tricks and techniques she'd learned during her time with Joshua, only now it actually mattered. Now she felt she was putting herself to good use rather than simply pacifying a spoiled brat.

Woops, she thought, frowning. *Thinking of Josh again...as if I don't have enough of a bad taste in my mouth.*

She tried to laugh it off, but the thought was there: a mental portrait, framed in misery and pain, of the boy she'd once given

herself to. She could argue that she'd been young, that twelve and thirteen-year-olds didn't have the slightest clue what love was—that she'd let Josh have his way with her because she would rather have had *any* man between her legs, so long as it wasn't Dead Man—but she could never really forgive herself.

And what about your more recent mistakes? she heard herself thinking. She went over to the weight machine. *Have you really taken care of things by getting rid of all the old lackeys once and for all?*

No answers, as usual, though a month into her vacation had convinced her (mostly) that the more chronological distance she put between herself and the things she disliked, the easier they were to ignore. Likewise, the more time passed, the less she found herself thinking about how she was lying to Aaron—though what did it matter that he wasn't really her first sexual partner? He didn't need to know; any typical STDs she'd acquired from Dead Man or Joshua had long since been rendered dormant through her knack.

Still, on those occasions when they were alone together, when Aaron would gaze into her eyes, she would see the questions there, the curiosity—*tell me what you're thinking*—and it reminded her that while he had shared himself completely (and perhaps naïvely), she was still a relative mystery to him. Yet he was tolerating it, accepting it, perhaps. *But it all comes back to that conundrum, doesn't it? That notion of someone seeming okay, so that must mean they are...but it doesn't make it right.*

"What do you think about when you do that?" Aaron asked, after a time. He'd pulled on his pants and was now leaning casually against the dresser as he worked his hair back into a tail.

All the things I've found that are wrong about myself, she thought, starting a set on the pec deck. "Nothing."

"Aw. You never tell me what's on your mind," he said, smiling playfully enough.

She smiled back at him, forced a bubble of anxiety back into

the pit of her stomach. Deviating some of the effort from her workout, she exerted her will. "You wanna know what's on my mind?"

"Yeah," he replied, folding his arms. Not, she thought, out of resistance to her subdued mental probing (which he probably wasn't focusing on at the moment, anyway), but an example nonetheless of his lingering interest in what made her tick.

She brushed his curiosity aside, facing forward again and counting off as she worked her arms. "I was just thinking...your breath smells like crap."

Aaron smirked. He reached for his shirt, which had been carelessly tossed on the floor. "I feel like crap. You know, do me a favor and shoot me the next time I come up with a brilliant idea to get us both hammered."

"Deal."

CHAPTER 29

Aaron sat slumped in front of his bedroom window and remembered rain as he stared down at the parched driveway. He'd showered after coming home from Kyna's, and now the slight afternoon breeze helped to dry his hair.

What a strange day that had been, he thought. *Strange dreams, strange time coming home after the storm, after holding Kyna for an hour and wishing I knew what was going on.*

She'd never told him, of course—only sent him home with a thirst for answers, though he knew there was no sense in demanding to know what had happened that day, why she'd thrown him out of his body in the first place—*why she'd left me floating around Nathan's backyard while she went...somewhere.*

He sighed and cast his mind outside his body, alleviating the “heaviness” of his hangover.

Far enough, he thought, *to outrun this headache.*

Gradually, over a period of several minutes, he felt a knot within himself loosen, and the effects of the previous night's drinking binge faded away.

Nifty trick, he thought, smiling and recalling Kyna's lessons—though he wasn't about to make excuses for future drinking binges. His knack would probably take care of the aftereffects every time (and whenever he pleased), but it would be too much like being lactose-intolerant, eating dairy every day, and popping pills to clean up his digestion whilst simultaneously gasping miserable prayers in the bathroom.

He eased outward even further, and eventually he found himself literally floating outside, over his parents' house.

Must've fallen asleep, he thought, though he wasn't worried. A simple twitch of one of his toes, a wiggle of his nose, perhaps,

and he could easily wake up. As it was now, he was merely floating on his back in an imaginary swimming pool; he relaxed and allowed the water to carry him wherever it pleased.

Nathan Brown's backyard Amazon was a tentative lure as certain questions filtered into Aaron's mind regarding his last out-of-body visit with the garden doppelganger—a strange experience, for sure—but by now he'd come to accept such anomalies as everyday life in Anaheim.

What had the doppelganger told me? Something about Kyna and himself, but it was hard to recall. He *did* know that it made him embarrassed, as if he'd been caught in public with his pants down (which he had!). He couldn't fathom why this was, so he let himself be carried along.

Over the city, next: He brushed various locations, sometimes actually passing through buildings or people (who twitched or shivered upon the spectral contact). He passed Savanna High, where students in the summer sports teams and catch-up classes were sweating over footballs and pop quizzes. He slipped further south, to another part of town, somewhere he'd never been. It was a lower-middle-class neighborhood; the homes were all single-stories, with half-dead lawns and cracking streets—not quite a ghetto just yet, but a decade or so past its prime.

Orange curtains, he thought, and suddenly he was there, floating on the breeze as a stray feather might, brushing through an open bedroom window and into an oddly stirring scene: a rumpled bed, surrounded by several tables and plastic crates supporting water bottles, empty food bowls, a stack of magazines and comic books, and a beat-up television.

Joshua, bruised and bandaged, was at the center of it all.

Holy shit, Aaron thought, experiencing something like pity. *He must have been sicker than hell...or else he got in an accident or something. Geez...he looked ragged when I first met him, but this...*

Appalled at this blatant display of misery, Aaron moved closer and saw that Joshua was dozing lightly. He could feel the boy's

presence close at hand, and he sensed the true agony filling the room. It permeated the air, stuck to the stitched skin sweating beneath the bedsheets, where the stretched-thin flesh between his legs was healing ever so slowly.

Aaron? Joshua called, a swift feeling idling just above the bed.

But Aaron wasn't listening. Instead, he was reaching backward, tugging at the invisible cord that was attached to his own body—pleading with himself to get away from this horrific reality.

Wake up!

There were tears blurring Aaron's vision as he left his bedroom for a drink of water. He happened to step (quite shakily) out into the hallway at precisely the same moment Daniel was exiting the master bedroom; the two of them almost collided.

"Sorry," Aaron apologized, stepping out of the way and wiping his cheek with the back of his hand.

"No problem," sighed Daniel. He had a blanket and pillow in his arms. He seemed not to be in the mood for anything more, conversation-wise, but he was drawn in by Aaron's apparent unrest. "Something, er, the matter?"

Aaron shrugged and tried to make it look as if he were intensely interested in his toes. "Naw. I was just...napping. You know, you get all that gunk in your eyes sometimes when you sleep."

Daniel nodded, let out another, more subdued sigh. "Where were you last night?"

A shrug from Aaron, who had no answer. Even if he did, it probably wouldn't have gotten him in trouble unless he'd tracked blood or marijuana leaves into the house. Less to deal with that way.

"Well," Daniel said, after a moment, "you just...stay out of trouble, okay?"

"Okay."

Father glanced at son, swallowed, looked away; son glanced

back, bit his lip, and tapped his toes against the floorboards. Despite their relative detachment from one another, neither was quite ready to resume his previous activities just yet.

"How's the girl?" Daniel asked.

"She's okay," Aaron replied. He was unsure what he'd already revealed about Kyna over the past month, so he kept his answer simple.

A nod from Daniel. "That's good. You two get together often, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah. Summer vacation and all, you know."

"Ah."

Daniel looked like he was contemplating the whole Making Babies speech, but seemed to decide such an endeavor was useless at the moment. After all, Aaron had always had free reign over his burgeoning sex life, learning from hands-on experience, as it were; a lecture on prevention now would be like taking the keys away from someone who'd been driving for years and saying, "You shouldn't drive anymore because I never taught you about the basics."

"I'm not much of a family man," he said, looking down at the blanket and pillow. "I always tend to let the family run on autopilot most of the time, when I can help it. I guess it's something I should have looked after more carefully."

"It's okay," Aaron said. It really was, for though he'd grown up with a distinct rift between his parents and himself, he'd never felt neglected. They'd always provided for him, and though most of his social conditioning had come from friends, school, and television, he didn't feel cheated either. Things in the Capps household just *were*, and there was no reason to pretend that it should have been any other way.

Daniel seemed relieved. Still, he added a final statement once Aaron had moved down the hallway: "You've always been special to us. Your mother and me."

Aaron shrugged, started down the staircase. "I know."

In the kitchen he poured himself a glass of water and downed it in one long gulp. Through the window he could see Julia quietly kneeling in the backyard with her trowel as she tried her best to offset concrete with potted poinsettias. Somewhere at the fringes of his awareness he could see a boy whose ravaged body slowly shifted beneath the burlap texture of cotton bedsheets.

Somewhere between dying and dead.

CHAPTER 30

Joshua dreamed of school, most of all. Of course, during the surgery (and the initial week of recovery, thereafter), he was too exhausted, too emotionally and spiritually depleted to dream at all.

The microvascular surgeons had been quite somber throughout the entire process; an examination of his medical history—heck, just *seeing* him—was cause enough to make one think, “Christ, here’s a kid who’s not even old enough to drive yet, and already he’s been nearly burned to death, he’s got scar tissue over seventy-percent of his body, and now he’s back in the hospital again with a set of broken ribs and a mangled penis.”

Much like Humpty-Dumpty, he was reassembled again, sent home to begin the slow, steady process of recovery. How his body continued to function, he couldn’t fathom. Sick, injured—*dying*, he’d drifted in and out of sleep, on and off Vicodin-induced planes of consciousness. He fully expected, at every turn, to find himself materializing in some lower level of hell, though after the first week it became apparent he was still stuck in the flesh for the time being.

He was able to remove the catheter at the end of the first week; after the second, the cystostomy tube was removed. A month after the ordeal he was able to achieve a decent erection without fear of splitting himself like an overcooked sausage (the initial erectile response test, while successful, had been excruciating and embarrassing).

His mother insisted on checking on him often, especially during those first few days after he was discharged from the hospital. Normally, he kept her away, throwing his knack here or there so that she would bypass his bedroom altogether and find

herself absorbed in some other task whenever she wanted to see or speak to him. However, in his weakened state he was able to do little more than concentrate on his own breathing, and so he endured the unendurable: having his mother feed and coddle him, like a baby; having her help him whenever he needed to urinate; sitting beside him during the evenings, sometimes gently brushing her hands over his scalp as she spoke to him or cried softly to herself.

“Oh, Joshua,” she said one night, standing over his bed after she thought he’d fallen asleep. “What am I going to do with you?”

Through closed eyelids he imagined what she looked like, her weary face and lackluster hair drooping sadly, her shoulders somewhat stooped. No doubt she still wore her work clothes. Oftentimes she would come directly home and into his room like this...oftentimes she would be too tired to weep over her son’s sorry state or the fact that she was now locked into a decade of medical bills.

So she spoke to him. Softly, gently she would relate to him the stories of the day: little anecdotes here, little jokes there. If she thought he was asleep, she sang to him or told him children’s stories.

She sang to him now, and though her voice quivered and cracked more than once, though she didn’t know all the words, she sang “Always” to the best of her ability.

“To make up for all the time,” she explained afterward, “that I spent arguing with your father instead of taking care of you.”

She kissed him on the forehead, then, and left the room, gently closing the door behind her.

Joshua opened his eyes slightly, told himself not to let her come back during the night. *She needs her sleep, needs to go a night without knowing that there’s a dying monster sleeping in her house. I’m one big failure, and I’m dragging her down with me. It was supposed to be different, once dad left...but I had to go muck things up be-*

cause I was twelve, because I had a dick and it was all I could think about and no one warned me enough to keep me out of trouble when it mattered...but I wouldn't have listened anyway. I knew everything about everything and it nearly killed me—twice. It was all my fault, not mom's...let her feel normal for a change...like she raised a decent son and not a delinquent.

It was still fairly early, but he was already exhausted. Closing his eyes again, he bit the inside of his mouth, just hard enough to draw blood.

He swallowed what he could before dozing off.

* * *

Once, long ago, twelve-year-old Joshua Swaney strode across the Dale Junior High School blacktop with an assured smile on his face. On this particular afternoon he wore a tie-died T-shirt and baggy jeans slit across the knees and legs so as to resemble a type of grungy, contemporary leggings. With the sun wrenching every last drop of sweat from his pores, his spiky buzz cut looked slick indeed; he was aglow with purpose, mischief, and youth, and he knew it so well he could have planned out the entire day while having his morning shower.

Though he didn't consider himself a fashion buff or a mirror-hogging perfectionist, the precocious punk-skater/beach-boy image he'd cultivated had been, in a sense, crafted as the result of a driving desire to be noticed, to persuade others to direct themselves to him rather than the other way around. And when he really felt it, he glowed from head to toe in a way that not even the staunchest teacher's aide, hallway monitor, or schoolyard bully could resist. It was his way, his take on the inevitability of adolescence—his determination to enter puberty with a swagger.

His friends, Todd and Stevie were having lunch at one of the benches they'd resolutely claimed earlier in the school year.

Having endured the two-week Christmas vacation, the former had plumped somewhat, while the latter appeared to have kept to his bedroom for most of the time.

Joshua slapped hands with both boys and took his seat.

Todd nodded and immediately asked, "What'd you guys get for Christmas?"

"A new CD player...some pants," Stevie replied, shrugging nonchalantly.

Joshua smiled inwardly. He knew that secretly Stevie had been wanting a new CD player for the better part of a year, but he was playing it down because it was too much of a "girlie" thing to get really excited over those sorts of things. He'd even brought the gift with him; the headphones were draped around his neck, the shiny plastic glinting in the afternoon sun.

Waiting for me and Todd to ask about it before he shows it off, Joshua thought. *Waiting to grab our attention, like always.*

Todd looked at him now. "And you?"

My turn. "Not much," he replied, shrugging and holding back his own pent-up excitement. "My dad skipped out...for good."

Todd looked baffled; a blob of strawberry jam escaped his mouth. Stevie merely scowled as if Joshua had just informed him of the extrication of a clinging baby tooth.

"That sucks, dude," Todd said, after a moment.

Joshua feigned disinterest as he unpacked his lunch. In actuality he hated his father's guts with a passion and had long-since joined the school of thought that Mr. Swaney, besides having provided some of the DNA for Joshua's making (during what must have certainly been a disgusting sexual blunder), was no good at all. But, on the outside, he was cool as a cucumber, unphased by the apparent dysfunctional nature of his family, taking it like a real man would take a snake-bite—and the others were eating it up. Well, Todd was, at any rate; he'd always been easy to entertain. Stevie, however, seemed put off a bit, for he was no longer the center of attention.

Better luck next time, pal, Joshua thought, not unkindly, for to him such competitive business was merely a sort of unofficial race for social dominance—a game.

He dug into his sandwich and juice box while relating the tale to his friends: “Christmas Eve, and my parents are going at it, right? It’s the usual crap: My dad thinks we should open the presents at night because he wants to sleep in the next morning. My mom wants to do the morning thing because it’s how her family has always done it, and it’s supposed to be an experience for me and all. So they start yelling at each other—over *me*, like I’m still a little kid. Like I need this or that ‘family experience’ to grow up right when, the whole time, I’m just sitting there on the couch flipping through the TV channels. Then my mom starts ragging on my dad about how he’s never around as much as he should be, and if he really doesn’t like spending time with us he should just go—and so he grabs his jacket and says, ‘Okay, I’m out of here,’ and he slams the door on the way out.” Taking another bite from his sandwich, he chewed it halfway and then washed it down with some juice. “Me and mom just high-fived each other and had pie, and she even said, ‘Fuck it, let’s open the presents tonight!’ after we were done.” Another bite of ham and lettuce, another sip of juice. “It was the best Christmas ever.”

The jam on Todd’s lower lip was rapidly solidifying. He shook his head and offered his condolences once again.

Stevie seemed to ponder something for a moment. Then he smiled and said, “I got my brother’s girlfriend to suck me off on New Year’s.”

Todd was incredulous now, and even Joshua had to admit to himself that he hadn’t seen this coming. He’d been one-upped in a subliminal game of *Who’s Holiday Was Better?* because as momentous as it was to have just rid oneself of a flaky father, it was still not as big as when someone in the group got his first real initiation into sex. Especially since, up until now, Joshua had always considered himself the most experienced when it came to

girls.

"No way!" blurted Todd. "You mean Liz?"

"Yup," replied Stevie, nodding proudly. "My brother brought her over after this party, and they were all drunk and stuff. They wanted to screw, but I told them I'd tell unless they paid me off. So my brother just gets this dumb smile on his face, looks at Liz, and tells her to give me a blowjob. At first she's like, 'No way!' but he tells her I'm clean, I've never been with anyone—and she actually agrees to do it!"

"No way!" blurted Todd (again).

Joshua scowled and shook his head. He could see the slight blush spreading across Stevie's face, and he knew it had nothing to do with the act of supposedly admitting to one's participation in an act of fellatio; if it was true, Stevie wouldn't have been at all shy about it. "You're full of it. That's the plot of, like, a dozen of your dad's porno videos."

"You weren't there," Stevie said. "You wouldn't know, anyway."

"I'd *know*," Joshua retorted, feeling his cheeks flame.

"How's that? You've only ever made it to second base."

"Plenty more times than you've ever actually *done* it," Joshua shot back. His own intensity surprised him, and he could feel the sweat beading on his forehead. It was as if he'd come to class without his math homework, only this had to do with the natural progression he'd expected himself to generally be "first" in. He was already a looker, and had begun a hormonal rush recently that had helped him fill out somewhat, had caused an evident, growing coarseness in his voice—but Stevie already had a peach-fuzz mustache. That meant he was at the forefront of puberty, while Todd and Joshua were still left guessing.

"Quality, not quantity," Stevie said. "I don't play the girls like you say you do, but when I get one..." He trailed off, crossed his eyes and made a face intended to convey divine pleasure, though it was more the sort of face a circus clown might have made.

“Why not both?” Joshua asked, waving his hand in the air. “I bet I could hook up with any girl out here before lunch is over.”

“Okay,” said Stevie, nodding at one of the other tables. “I’ll make it easy for you. Hook up with the new girl.”

Joshua glanced at the table Stevie was indicating. It was empty, save for a lone female figure sitting with her shoulders hunched and her head buried in a paperback novel.

“You mean Kyna?” he asked after a moment.

“Sure,” said Stevie.

Under the table, Todd snagged his foot. “Go on, dude.”

Joshua swallowed and hoped his sudden anxiety wasn’t too evident. Talking about girls and actually *interacting* with them were two different things—and Kyna Miller was one of those girls who stuck to her own world the whole time she was at school (unless she was talking to one of her teachers). She wasn’t the kind of girl Joshua typically found himself pondering, sexually or otherwise, even though he’d seen her around campus since the first week of school. She was an eighth grader, and not that much of an item: long, stringy blond hair, narrow, bony arms and legs, pale skin. Her only comely feature was her face, which she often kept tilted towards the ground whenever she walked between classes.

And now Stevie thinks because she’s an introverted weirdo it’s going to be easy to just go over there and talk her into going out with me...like she’s just waiting for that to happen. Well, he doesn’t know that much about girls, then.

“There’s a certain process, “ Joshua began, in his most scholarly voice, but Todd and Stevie had already focused their attention on a growing bet that he couldn’t get Kyna to be his girlfriend before the warning bell rang.

(To be fair, they *were* only seventh-graders, and “going steady” was something theoretically as simple as asking someone if they want vanilla or chocolate ice cream for dessert.)

“Who cares?” said Todd. “Girls like Kyna *need* attention. You

just know she's never been kissed. Probably never even *talked* to another guy besides her own dad."

"Yeah, go on, Mister Smoothie," said Stevie. "Show us your magic and make her go out with you."

Joshua, though more than a little bit wary of Stevie's conscious intent to steer everyone's attention away from his blowjob story, decided to play the game. As part of his pre-programmed set of moves, he resisted the urge to accept the challenge outright, and instead pretended to be either uninterested or shy each time another challenge came his way. *Can't just strut your stuff outright, because then you're conceited, and conceited guys always take crap from their friends whenever they screw up. Play it humble, though, stroke your ego quietly while your buddies pump you up, and they'll think they're puppeteering you for their own amusement when really, if it works, you're the one who gets to kiss the girl, to hold her hand or to touch her boobs, maybe. Even if her name is Kyna Miller and she's Dale's biggest bookworm and she's not that cute to begin with...maybe she'll go all-out with you because she knows you're the only boy she'll ever get.*

This could be a momentous occasion!

"But she's an eighth grader," he said, after apparent consideration. "She's older than me."

"So?" chimed his friends, in unison.

So? he echoed, mentally. It wasn't, of course, that big of a big deal. He'd given (and received) amorous looks from girls who were older than him. Lisa McCabe, the sister of one of his friends from English class, was nearly sixteen and had once given his crotch a good, hard look during a recent sleepover. It had been after midnight, and he'd been in the kitchen, getting himself something to drink; she'd come down at about the same time, caught him there in his underwear—at which point she'd smiled mischievously, grabbed a soda from the fridge, and commented on how much he'd "grown" since she'd last seen him. Needless to say, his ego had been inflated to gas-giant proportions.

Another year or two, he thought, and I'll be able to charm her into sleeping with me—and then there'll be a good blowjob story to pass around the table.

For now, from the rest of the female crowd, it was still casual glances, mostly—the sort of thing that girls did when they saw a cute stuffed-animal in a store window. But recently, since his last growth-spurt, there had been hotter, less-subtle looks as well, and it had led Joshua to believe he knew exactly what girls wanted. As much as the stereotypical norm involved hungering after older, more mature guys, guys on the football team—big, tall, hunky guys to initiate their partners into the world of *bang-ing*—there were girls who liked being the teacher, liked seeing the reaction on a boy's face when he was being touched for the first time. If you were “cute” enough, if you knew how to sweet-talk them, then it was like asking to be taught how to ride a bike—and the girl got free practice, too.

Everybody won.

At last, Joshua cleared his throat and cast his next move. “She’s just not into guys.”

“How do you know?” Stevie asked.

“Because...well, just look at her.”

“Because,” Todd cooed, wagging his index finger in the air, “you can’t do it.”

“I could, if I wanted to.”

“Then do it.”

A few more of the standard challenges were flung his way, though he ignored them all as he planned his conquest. He was handsome, and he knew it (he’d even considered modeling, though such an endeavor perhaps required more dedication than he was willing to give); he often used it to his advantage, knowing that someday soon he would be grown-up, and his boyish good looks will have blossomed into full-grown sex appeal. But now it was still a game, and he wanted practice.

When Todd finally put his lunch money on the line, Joshua

took the bet and walked over to Kyna's table. She didn't look up until his shadow passed over her; when she did, she had a look of stone-cold apathy on her face.

"Hi," he said, flashing a sunny smile.

"What," she said, flatly. Not a question but a flat statement: what.

"Nothing," he replied, unphased by her acid-in-the-face social technique. He took the seat opposite hers. "I was just wondering what you were reading."

She looked down, snuggled closer to her book. "It wouldn't interest you."

"Sure it would."

"Get lost."

"I was just making friends."

"Well, go make friends with someone *else*. I'm busy."

Despite the growing heat at the back of his neck, Joshua remained seated and forced his lips to hold a smile. "You're an eighth-grader."

Kyna lowered her book, glowered at him. "Uh-huh."

"You got Mr. Schall?"

"Uh-huh."

"You're so lucky—I hope I have him next year. He lets you watch movies on Fridays, right?"

"Are you just going to sit there and ask stupid questions until lunch is over?"

He made a point of shrugging nonchalantly. "I just thought you'd be interesting to talk to."

Kyna shook her head in apparent disgust and stuffed her book into her backpack. She stood, then, and pointed her finger accusingly at him. "You think I'm dumb? You think I was born yesterday? You're only talking to me because your friends put you up to it. A bet or something—or a joke. Mess with the weird geek girl and they'll give you props and you'll get off feeling like a big man because you made fun of me."

Joshua got up as well, grabbed Kyna's arm as she turned to leave. "Kyna, no," he said, and slipped his hand into hers. He didn't let go until she faced him once again. "It's not like that at all. They're just...my friends. Same old dumb jokes everyday. But I saw you over here and I thought you'd be interesting to hang with. I thought you and I could *talk*, you know? Not just pretend we're having a good time trying to ignore all the other idiots."

She was a few inches taller than he was, so she had to look down somewhat as she caught his gaze, bit her lower lip. Still defensive, but seeming to crumble slightly inside, she softly said, "You're joking."

"No, I'm not. I swear." He spread his hands, smiled again. "I... it's just...I've seen you around since the beginning of school. I know you, um, don't have a lot of time to spend with friends. I've been wanting to say hi, but I didn't want to come on all pushy, or like I was hitting on you or something...you know?"

Something in her demeanor softened. She still seemed to be on guard, but he could tell he'd struck a chord somewhere deep down inside her. "You mean it?" she asked in her you-better-mean-it-or-else manner.

"Well, sure," he replied, and nodded towards the cafeteria. "Lemme prove it by buying you something from the snack window."

"I don't know..."

A puppy-like smile from Joshua. "Come on. Please?"

Kyna was finally rendered helpless. The slightest hint of a smile spread across her lips. "Well...okay—but only so you'll quit your whining."

They left the table and made their way across the quad, Joshua resisting the urge to turn his head and stick his tongue out at Todd and Stevie. He couldn't help but notice Kyna was holding her head higher than usual, and she was actually smiling. Proud, no doubt, that she was actually going to spend her lunch with a friend, and a boy, at that. Sure, she was a little ratty, more skin

and bone than butt and breasts, but she was also an unspoiled garden, an unopened Christmas present gone unnoticed by the other boys.

She'd do nicely.

* * *

Over the following weeks and months, Joshua's relationship with Kyna progressed from basic lunchtime chats to full-fledged conversations over the phone, after-school homework sessions, and, finally, illuminating snog-fests held in her upstairs bedroom. Mrs. Miller (whom he discovered, much to Kyna's embarrassment, was an at-home nudist with an affinity for incense and Enya music) seemed to find him utterly adorable, and was charmed beyond reprieve on the occasions he walked Kyna home or offered to take her out for a *matinée* movie.

Mr. Miller, for whatever reason, was not around much. When he was, there was tension. Joshua couldn't understand what it meant, and Kyna never offered to explain, so he mostly kept out of their business whenever he was over (save for the occasional sly glance at Mrs. Miller's tantalizingly bare anatomy, whenever possible).

By April, he'd ditched Todd and Stevie almost entirely (save for the occasional conversation-in-passing); Kyna provided all the friendship and tingly feelings he needed, and was far more interesting to talk to.

One day, when he was sitting with her in her bedroom and participating in a homework-turned-make-out-session, he daringly slipped his hand into her jeans and searched for that special spot he'd heard so much about but only imagined. For a moment he was sure he had it right—but suddenly she was breaking away, separating herself from him.

"I can't," she said, and cleared her throat as she fixed her hair, buttoned her jeans. Without further explanation she picked up

her notebook and resumed her work.

Joshua sighed. *So close! Damn...thought today was going to be the day...but there's no reason to rush it. Go too fast and she'll dump me, and then I'll have to start all over.*

He said, "I'm sorry, Kyna. I didn't mean to."

She smiled at him briefly; he smiled back.

They finished their homework.

* * *

On the Friday following that first near-score, Stevie happened to announce, in passing, that there was going to be a make-out party the following evening.

"At Andy's place," he said, winking. "He told me to invite whomever I wanted. Couples only."

Joshua had his arm around Kyna (which looked somewhat odd, since she was taller) despite the school's untoward policy regarding public displays of affection. However, there were no teachers at this end of the hallway, and so he tightened his hold ever so slightly, gauging Kyna's reaction.

"I don't like parties," she said, after Stevie had left. "Nothing but a social catwalk."

"Aw," said Joshua. "It's not a big deal. I know Andy—it's just a party. Stevie makes it sound dirty because, well, he used to eat a lot of dirt when he was little. His brain's all gritty."

Kyna giggled. He could feel her ripple beneath her clothing. It reminded him of all the times they'd made out together, how he'd felt the various parts of her body through shirt or jeans, but never skin to skin. He saw other couples around school and couldn't help wondering how far they'd gotten with each other. Surely most of the eighth-grade boys already knew what it was like to go all the way—how long did they have to wait before their girlfriends gave the go-ahead? He wanted it bad—more than anything else in the world, at this point—but he also

wanted Kyna to have a good time. He wanted her to enjoy talking to people other than himself, wanted her to enjoy being social, because if she saw how other girls interacted with their boyfriends, she might be more willing to open herself up to him. Sexually, and as a friend.

So it doesn't look like I'm dating a prude.

Not that he was embarrassed at being seen with Kyna. She was an obvious introvert, the kind of girl who would never know boys or love unless she took what she could get; Joshua knew he could do better, if he really wanted to, but he knew he wanted practice first, to polish his bedroom skills with Kyna so he could have more to offer prospective girls when he got older.

He spent the rest of the afternoon patiently pressing her; on the walk home, she finally agreed to go with him to Andy's party, and he kissed her on the cheek.

"You're awesome!" he said.

* * *

The following evening, around six o'clock, Joshua picked Kyna up. She emerged from her room wearing a flowered dress (a dress!) and knit sweater. It was quite an unexpected (but not unwelcome) departure from her usual jeans/sweatshirt ensemble.

"Whoa," he said, whistling. "Where'd this come from?"

Kyna shrugged, blushing. He could tell she'd been waiting to spring the outfit for a long time. "Just something I had lying around."

"Well, you look...awesome."

Exposing her legs was a milestone. *She must really be excited about this*, he thought. *Her first boy-girl party, and she's showing off her legs for a change. Still skinny as hell, but she doesn't look half bad this way.*

He could feel her trembling slightly as they made the journey, hand in hand, to Andy's house.

First time...first time. Tonight's going to be our first time!

Stevie hadn't explained the setup beforehand, so, when they arrived at Andy's, Joshua rang the doorbell and prepared a variety of appropriate greetings, should Andy's parents be the ones to answer. Luckily Andy himself was available to let them in.

"Glad you could come, guys," he said, leading them through a suspiciously empty and dark living room. At first, Joshua thought they had arrived early, but then he heard the muffled music, and as they descended into the basement, he suddenly found himself in the presence of two-dozen friends and acquaintances from school. There was food, music, a pool table, a PlayStation hooked up to a big screen television; there were no adults in sight.

Kyna linked her arm in his, pressed close, as if they had suddenly walked into a zoo cage filled with uppity tigers.

"Relax," he said, somewhat disappointed to find that no one seemed to be making out just yet. "It's just a kickback, see? Look. There's Stevie. Let's go say hello."

With Kyna stuck to his shoulder, he crossed the room, exchanging greetings with the more familiar of those in attendance. The general mood throughout was friendly, though more than a handful of the evenly-paired boys and girls gave Kyna a second glance.

Stevie was standing with his newly-acquired girlfriend, Clarissa, by a long table cluttered with several three-liter Coca Cola and Sprite bottles, an assortment of multi-colored plastic cups, and an opened tin of Altoids.

He nodded at Joshua, smiled politely at Kyna. "So how does it feel to be in with the big boys?"

"Shut up," Joshua replied, playfully jabbing at Stevie's shoulder. In all honesty, he was more than grateful to be here, but, of course, he was trying not to show it.

"You can thank me later for convincing Andy to let you come."

"Whatever. Say, Todd's not going to be here?"

Stevie rolled his eyes and made a masturbatory motion with his hand.

Joshua nodded. It was a given that Todd, while possessing an infamous appreciation for *Hustler* magazines and hand lotion, was not as bold with actual girls as he was with the back of his own hand. Besides, he hadn't shown the slightest interest in securing a girlfriend this year; he seemed to have relegated himself (for the time being) to the fact that he was pink-faced and pudgy, and not the sort of boy who had an easy time drawing the ladies.

He continued chatting with Stevie for the next few minutes, during which time Kyna was able to overcome part of her shyness as Clarissa offered her a drink. She left Joshua's side with a nervous smile on her face, though in a moment she was absorbed in a conversation at the other end of the table and having a good enough time of it.

Watching her go, Joshua nudged Stevie and gave him a full report on just how far he'd gotten over the past few months. "She's *this* close," he said, afterward, as he sipped soda and watched Kyna. "She just needs someone to tip her over the edge."

Stevie shook his head. "Jeez. You're the youngest guy here, and she looks like she could be in high school already."

"I got it all worked out," Joshua retorted, knowing full well that the average age of those present was fourteen-ish. He made an extraordinary effort to act older and more mature than he actually was. After all, he was ready for this; it was his hairless body and teetering-on-puberty voice that was holding him back, making everyone judge him as a little kid. All he needed was the right opportunity to explode from his childhood shell.

Half an hour passed, and several more couples arrived to make the crowded basement even more stifling. Joshua passed the time by mingling with the others, playing a couple rounds of *Grand Theft Auto*, and patiently swallowing his anticipation.

At long last, Andy made his way towards the staircase, raised his voice above everyone else's and announced that he was going

upstairs to check on his parents; he promised that when he returned, “the real fun will begin.”

There was a subtle shift in the room. Boys and girls rearranged themselves in and around the sofa pit and on the floor. Some were holding hands, others were giggling and whispering to each other. Heart hammering away in his chest, Joshua backed into a position on the fringes of the pit, and he felt someone brush up against him, felt a warm hand slip into his own. He turned and found Kyna was at his side. She looked nervous, like she wanted to say something, but it had become so quiet, so hesitant, she was undoubtedly afraid of being overheard.

Andy returned momentarily and made his way into the center of the sofa pit. He grinned deviously as he announced that his parents were “knocked out for the evening” and that the Make-Out Room was open for business. He gestured towards one end of the room and Joshua craned his head, noticed a utility closet that had been arranged as a miniature bedroom. He could just make out a candy dish, filled with condoms, that had been placed on a low table set beside the bed.

“Each couple gets fifteen minutes. Throw your shit out when you’re finished, and try to keep the moaning to a minimum. Now...who wants to be first?”

A slight commotion arose. Several people called out names, others just giggled and cooed. Joshua felt Kyna pulling at him, silently urging him to move back away from the pit. In response, he gripped her hand firmly and charged forward as, from somewhere behind him, he heard Stevie and Clarissa chanting, “Go, Josh, go! Go, Josh, go!” In a moment, they were the center of attention.

Andy considered him. “Fifteen minutes enough for you two lovebirds?”

Joshua nodded and smiled, though Kyna had let go of his hand at this point and was now glowering at him.

“No,” she murmured, and started to pull away.

"Come on, Kee," he pleaded. For the first time that night his smile began to falter. She could turn him down in private, and he could deal with that, but here, in front of everyone else...if it got out that Joshua Swaney couldn't even get some from the school dweeb (and after going steady with her for almost half a year!), well, that would haunt him until he graduated high school. It would label him as either too desperate to get a girl, or too much of an immature prick to keep one.

He held her tighter now, cupping her buttocks and squeezing like he'd seen the high-schoolers do. "Kee—"

"Stop it," she snapped, this time disregarding her social grace completely as she squirmed out of his grip and pushed through the crowd, stumbled off towards the snack table. For a moment everyone watched her go, then they all turned back to Joshua, their faces expectant, curious.

Damn! he thought, feeling as if he were twisting down hard inside his skin, trying to hide deeper in the recesses of his body. *Okay. So not everyone who comes to these parties gets laid. It happens, but...aw, hell. Why is everyone looking at me like that? God, I'm going to die...*

Fortunately, Andy knew how to keep the show rolling:

"All right, who's next for an all expenses paid trip to the Make-Out Room?"

Everyone cheered and started yelling out names again. Joshua bowed his head, stuffed his hands into his pockets and receded as another couple took center stage. He was at his boiling point, though he refused the childish urge to cry or stomp off angrily or do any of the other things the others no doubt expected him to do. Kyna was still at the snack table, holding herself, trying to catch his attention, trying to get the point across: *Take me home.* They could talk it over, he supposed. He could apologize and make it up to her by being really sweet—sweet enough, maybe, to get some tongue action in before the night was through.

Instead, he veered off towards the opposite end of the room.

There was a game of Twister going, and he decided he'd rather have even the slightest bit of fun, as opposed to an hour-long discussion with his girlfriend about relationships. As he pulled off his shoes, he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, that Kyna was leaving, hurrying up the stairs. A few people passed him questioning glances, but, for the most part, everyone minded their own business.

During the next hour, several couples used the Room. Joshua found himself pretty much ignored by the other partygoers as the subliminal focus of everyone's merriment turned to kissing and fondling. He was nearing the end of his patience, about to leave by himself when one of the older girls—she looked like a high-schooler—came over to him.

"Hi," she said, smiling. She was dark-skinned, with curly black hair.

"Hi," he replied unenthusiastically.

"My name's Mya."

"Josh."

"Where's your friend?"

He shrugged. "She went home, I guess. Not her thing."

"Aw, I'm sorry." Mya paused, looked over her shoulder, then back at him again. "Don't take this the wrong way, but...how old are you?"

"Almost thirteen."

"Oh. And have you ever, you know...with a girl?"

A sigh. *No doubt she finds me a pathetic curiosity and she's come over here to satisfy her curiosity.* "No."

"Let's go for a walk, then," she said, and took his hand.

* * *

They didn't go far. A shabby patch shrouded in shadows was enough to make Mya comfortable. Joshua sat, leaning against the side of Andy's house, as she scooted in close, unzipped his fly,

and went to work. At first, he was nervous, thinking of what might happen if they got caught, thinking of what Kyna would do or say if she saw him here like this—but it was too late. He'd turned over complete control to his hormones.

He hardly knew what to do or say, so he said nothing and let it happen, let Mya work him into a delirium so that he didn't have the slightest bit of mental room to think of anything but getting past the point. In a moment, it was over and Mya was sitting straight again, shimmying out of her shirt as he caught his breath. She looked pleased, as if he'd passed some sort of test.

She pulled off her jeans and underwear and embraced him, eradicating his virginity in an embarrassingly brief instant.

In such a fashion, Joshua Swaney was satiated, Joshua Swaney was satisfied—Joshua Swaney learned the answers to all the questions he'd been asking, and there was nothing else in the world better than what was happening to him tonight.

CHAPTER 31

Night shifted past, the Earth rotated beneath him, and in a time lapse memory Joshua found himself waking up the morning after his first lay with a roaring headache and a slight fever. He got out of bed and systematically recalled, with a fair amount of pride, the events preceding last night's encounter in the bushes: what he ate, what he drank—had anyone sneezed on him?

It wasn't until he was showering that he began wondering about STDs, whether or not Mya had been clean, and how it related to how he was feeling now. For a split second he was alarmed, scared that he might have exposed himself unnecessarily—but then he recalled various school lessons concerning incubation periods for the flu, colds, and he convinced himself that what he was experiencing now was probably something he'd picked up last week.

After his shower, he stood in front of the mirror and checked his groin for anomalies, his mouth for cold sores. He found no problems in either area, and so relaxed somewhat, though the symptoms grew considerably worse by the time he stumbled out into the kitchen for breakfast.

His mother was there, scrambling some eggs. When she became aware of his sorry state, she left what she was doing and rushed to his side. "Joshua? What's wrong?"

He slid into a chair and sat slumped, rolling his tongue over the salty-dry roof of his mouth. "I don't know...I woke up like this." In actuality, he'd awoken feeling merely wretched; now he was absolutely abysmal.

Mrs. Swaney placed her hand against his forehead and whistled. "You're burning up, kiddo. Probably picked something up from the other kids at school."

“Probably,” he said, and shrugged away, as he always did whenever his mother called him “kiddo.” A moment ago he’d been almost hysterical, in need of a little motherly attention. Now that he had it, he was back to his old, autonomous self. “We got any orange juice?”

Mrs. Swaney nodded, and told him she would pour him some, but he had to go lie down first. So he sighed and returned to his room, where he settled into bed, his body aching, his blood boiling. However, as he closed his eyes, he was able to stave off most of his discomfort by going over his memories from last night—sweet, searing, cherished memories of himself and Mya, clenched together in an infusion of carnal abandon. Whatever annoying bug he’d happened to pick up, it couldn’t detract from the fact that last night had been the best night of his entire life.

The orange juice forgotten, he dozed off.

* * *

On Monday, he stayed home from school to recuperate. When, three days later, his condition worsened to the point where he was almost unable to get out of bed at all, his mother took him—*carried* him—to see the doctor, who could find nothing physically wrong. A number of tests were run, each one turning up inconclusive. Yet here he was, overrun with fever, aching from head to toe with some unknown ailment.

Something was wrong.

The doctor asked him about his diet, his exercise and sleep habits. In these areas, he was a typical twelve-year-old, and he should have been healthy as a horse. Indeed, last week he was the model twelve-year-old. Of course, he hadn’t yet made a habit of swapping bodily fluids with girls he hardly knew, and it dawned on him, as he sat shivering miserably on the x-ray table, that he’d made a terrible mistake in allowing his hormones (and his ego) to get the best of him at Andy’s party.

During a string of inconclusive doctor visits, he considered divulging his transgression. Naturally, since he was only twelve (and since he looked a year or so younger than that, even), his sexual practices weren't part of the questioning process. Perhaps, he thought, if he indulged such information, it would be easier to track down the cause of his illness. However, his pride had not yet been totally defeated, and so he chose silence, the preservation of his mother's faith in him as a responsible young man over the certain embarrassment and shame of admitting his own statistical shortcomings.

Medically, there was nothing wrong with him. Vitamins, fresh air and bed rest were prescribed until further test results could be analyzed. At the end of the first week, Joshua insisted that he felt a little better because he couldn't stand to see his mother worry, and he couldn't stand knowing how much the blood tests and laboratory work cost without medical insurance.

The second week of his illness offered little improvement. By now he'd adjusted slightly to the nagging drag within himself—as if all the biological motors of his body were struggling just to turn over—but he still had a long way to go before actually feeling better.

On a Monday morning (the third week in) he found himself back at Dale and standing in front of his locker again (the combination to which he'd nearly forgotten, by now). His time out of school had set him back, set him apart from the collective consciousness; he wasn't sure which textbooks he usually kept and which ones he left. He ended up compromising, to the best of his recollection, and left for the quad.

Sniffling and swollen, he stepped between the other students as if he were making his way through Bangkok. His friends and acquaintances were likewise alienated, for they seemed to view him as they would an outsider. Their looks expressed wonder, curiosity, and fear concerning his absence, as well as his rapidly-decayed appearance. When he wasn't able to find Todd or Stevie,

who most likely hadn't yet arrived on campus, he decided to search for Mya instead (lest he should risk sitting down somewhere and not being able to get back up again).

Savanna High School was only a few blocks away. At a quarter to eight, there wasn't much time to snoop around—but then again, what were the odds of him being able to make it through an entire school day in his present state? No, the real reason he'd forcibly convinced his mother to let him get out of bed this morning was so that he could get some answers.

Tardiness would be dealt with later.

There was a small gathering of trees residing between the student parking lot and easternmost portables. Mya and several of her friends were sitting on the grass and working on their homework when he found them.

"Mya," he said, his voice quavering. "We need to talk."

Mya looked up, passed him an annoyed look—sans any sort of concern for his obvious physical state. "Not now, Josh." She looked back down at her notebook.

"*We need to talk*," he repeated. He'd spew it all right now, in front of her friends, if need be.

"Fine," she said, after a moment, and rose from the group, walked with him a ways down the sidewalk to where they were relatively out of earshot of anyone. "What do you want?"

He spread his arms and coughed inadvertently. "Look at me. What do you *think*?"

Mya snorted. "You had a rough ride. So?"

"You did this to me."

"Oh, boo-hoo. No one made you do what you did. You wanted it, remember?"

"Not like this. I can't sleep, I can't stay awake, I can't eat—I always feel like my heart's going to just stop. You gave me something, Mya."

She scowled and folded her arms. "Fact of life, Junior. What do you want me to do about it?"

Joshua caught his tongue. He wasn't sure what he wanted from her, wasn't sure what he'd expected in coming here. An apology? A magical elixir to cure whatever STD he now had? A time machine, perhaps? Some sort of cosmic burp that he could utilize to reverse the events of the previous weekend so that he'd never set foot in Andy's house?

"I don't know," he said, at last.

Mya sighed impatiently and glanced across the way at her friends. "Look, Josh. I don't even like you, but I screwed you anyway. You know you wouldn't have left the party unless you got some. That's why you stayed when your little girlfriend left. Well, you got what you wanted, so now you have to deal with the consequences."

"You should have told me first."

"And you should have known better."

"So should you—"

"I'm not going to stand here and toss the ball back and forth. If it hadn't been me it would have been some other girl. We all get it eventually. Just be happy you got to lose your virginity before all your other little friends. Now you can go off and tell them all about it and you'll be their new hero."

Joshua bypassed the suggestion. "Is this some STD, like they teach us in health class?"

"Sort of, I guess." Mya sighed. "I'm not an expert. I don't think anyone is. Whatever it is that makes you wake up the next morning feeling like shit, that's what's coursing through your system right now. It's not anything you can cure by going to the doctor, but it has its benefits, and you can keep it under control."

She raised her hand, and a funny thing happened: With a mere twitch of the eye, she somehow willed his hand into hers, as if she'd attached an invisible cord to his wrist and yanked. Once their fingers were locked together, she squeezed hard, digging one of her fingernails into his knuckle.

"Ow!" he started, but she caught him with a cautionary gaze,

somehow forced herself into him so that he was suddenly frozen solid, his breath caught at the back of his throat. She dug deeper, drawing blood; then she held his hand up to his mouth.

"Taste," she instructed.

Under her command, he brought his bloodied knuckle to his lips, swabbed the salty wound with his tongue—and felt himself shiver from head to toe. His extremities tingled, and somewhere deep down inside a knot loosened, an iron fist eased its grip on his lungs. Suddenly he was able to breathe easier, he was able to stand straighter; for the first time in two weeks he felt *better*.

"That'll hold you over for a while," Mya said, letting him go. "It's sort of a fake-out. Blood or jizz, either will do. It's always better when you get it from someone else. It's been my experience that it's easier to suck off a guy than it is to get a girl's blood, but you can deal with that however you like."

She left him, then, standing there at the edge of the parking lot, his fist stuffed into his mouth as he suckled eagerly from a newly-discovered fountain of life and mulled over an unfolding revelation.

* * *

A bedroom mutilation session, performed later in the afternoon, confirmed Mya's story. Recycling his own blood, as unpleasant as it was at first, actually worked. He was able to stave off the worst part of what was affecting him—though there was still an underlying ache.

He tried moving inanimate objects with his mind as well, sitting at the edge of his bed and staring intently at a battle-scarred basketball he'd unearthed from the back of his closet. Mya had said there were benefits to being sick; somehow you became weaker in one sense, and stronger in another.

Able to move a person's arm without his thinking about it, at least, he thought, and concentrated harder on the basketball, to no

avail.

That evening, when his mother came home from work and found him, eating a bowl of cereal and lounging in front of the television (instead of lying prostrate in his bed), she dropped her bag and rushed to him. She hugged him close and muttered a prayer of thanks to whatever divine intermediary had restored his vitality. He merely attributed it to the vitamins and, shortly thereafter, informed her that he would be in his room doing “homework” for the rest of the day.

* * *

The next morning, he began completely anew. He made the walk to school with a sparkle in his eye and a swagger in his step as he went over the details in his mind: First, he’d apologize to Kyna, tell her how sorry he was about being a jackass at Andy’s party. He would offer her the handmade friendship bracelet he carried in his pocket, and he would beg her forgiveness with a look of such puppy dog innocence on his face that she would melt instantly into his arms because, after all, he was the only boy in the entire school who paid any attention to her.

She’d never give up a good thing like this, he thought, because I’m all she’s ever had.

Because, admittedly, he needed her to need him. More than ever, now that he’d done what he’d done with Mya. Rumors would almost certainly spread, and he would soon be branded as “unclean,” one of those boys who, good looks or not, mismanaged his sex life early on and paid the penalty. His friends (and his prospective girlfriends) wouldn’t touch him with a ten-foot pole because they’d all know the story.

Kyna was his only other option (besides perhaps prostituting himself on some street corner). She was a loner, apart from all the schoolyard cliques where incriminating information regarding “who’s snogging who” was passed around. If he could charm

her well enough, and do it *right* this time, he'd be able to benefit from the steady inflow of her blood...and he might get to sleep with her (finally!) as well.

No problem with that, he thought. Sticking to just one girl for life. Doesn't matter if I wanted to use her for practice. Doesn't matter if Mya was full of shit when she said it was better to have someone else's blood or jism. If Kee's mine, I'll always have a backup plan. I won't need anyone else...and isn't that what love is, anyway? Sticking together. Thick and thin? She'll understand. She's that sort of person.

Fetching his things from his locker, he went out to the quad. Kyna was nowhere to be found; Todd and Stevie were waiting outside one of their classrooms, and they approached him immediately when they saw him.

"Whoa, dude!" Todd blurted, evidently taken aback by his appearance. "Where've you been all this time?"

He shrugged, aware that there were dark circles under his eyes, aware that he'd lost a couple pounds—aware that it took more than a little effort to ignore his friends' reactions. "Caught the flu. Had to kick it in bed for a while. You guys seen Kee?"

"No," Stevie replied. "She hasn't been at school since the party. With both of you leaving Andy's so early, I thought maybe you'd gotten into trouble or something."

"Yeah," Todd added, glaring at Stevie. "The party *I* wasn't invited to."

"Shut up, fool," Stevie retorted. "You would've asked to go home after all the potato chips were gone, anyway."

"It's the thought that counts."

The boys began an impromptu argument. Joshua furrowed his brow and recalled how Kyna had indeed left early on the night of Andy's party. He'd been too involved with socializing—too involved with Mya—to really give thought to the matter, but he supposed Kyna must have walked home alone. Considering this, his heart missed a beat.

What if she got jumped or raped or something?

She lived in the ghetto; what if he hadn't been there the one time she'd needed him most, the one time some drunk, horny asshole decided to have his way with the skinny, out-of-place white girl who was too introverted to even scream when she needed help—what if?

* * *

Kyna was absent for the rest of the day. During lunch, Joshua hung out with Todd and Stevie and pondered what it would be like to taste them. Surely it was impossible to get their blood, and the thought of offering a blowjob to either was quite distasteful, though with every free moment he found himself teetering on springing the question.

More troubling was the not-knowing, the fear that, should he be unsuccessful in wooing Kyna indefinitely, he really had no alternative course of action. He had to get blood or semen from somewhere, and if he couldn't get something from a friend, then his only choice would be to scavenge the streets, to seduce total strangers—to steal the lifeblood of people whose lives meant absolutely nothing to him.

To truly be alone.

* * *

He walked to Kyna's house after school, knocked on the door and waited. Momentarily, Mrs. Miller (clad in her usual robe and holding a smoldering cigarette butt) answered.

"Hello, Joshua," she said, her frog's voice flecked with grit. She looked as if she hadn't slept in a week. "What can I do for you?"

He swallowed. "I just wanted to check up on Kyna. Is she home?"

"I'm sorry, baby," Mrs. Miller replied, frowning. "She's, um, not feeling well. She's sleeping right now. I wouldn't want to

wake her." A tear trickled down her cheek.

"Who's at the door?" someone called from inside—Mr. Miller, Joshua realized.

"I'm sorry, hon," Mrs. Miller said, stepping back so she could close the door.

Before she did, Joshua quickly said, "Tell her I came by—tell her I hope she feels better soon."

"Okay, baby."

He retreated into the ghetto, heading homeward. *She knows*, he thought, and kicked at a crumpled beer can. *Kee told her what happened at the party and now she thinks I'm an asshole—now I'm off-limits, banned from stopping by anymore. God, what am I going to do?*

* * *

The following day was as cheerful as a funeral. Joshua hardly spoke at all to Todd and Stevie, as he found his brain in a repetitive cycle, trying to solve a problem he knew was impossible to solve unless he gave up all his moral values.

I'd have to be pretty desperate to start hitting on strangers, he thought bitterly as he entered the boy's restroom, *even though I'm hungry enough to do it*. He would have spent the remainder of the lunch hour in one of the stalls, had all the doors not been taken down.

Outside, he wandered the campus in search of a place private enough to allow for a quick masturbation session. Everywhere he looked, however, resulted in a constant cacophony of people. Too many teachers, too many students—too many bodies in motion, walking around in clusters, sitting in lines along chain link fences, at tables, with ham and cheese and peanut butter and jelly sticking to teeth, slurring laughter—*kids!* he thought, wiping the sweat from his face. *Little damned brats, all of them! Taking up too much space, not leaving anything unseen or untouched! I can't eat because they're always watching me, keeping tabs on everywhere I go,*

everything I do! They don't understand what's it's like to be stuck like this, so hungry and no one understands—

He stopped when he reached the library, which, he remembered, had a restroom with a door on the stall. Suppressing a shout of joy, he started towards the entrance with the intent to perform the unthinkable—and unexpectedly spotted Kyna, her arms wrapped tightly around a bundle of textbooks, walking quickly towards the double doors. She looked even skinnier than before, her hair now more the color of pale ash, rather than golden wheat, but he'd be damned if she hadn't just brightened his entire day.

He ran to her, stopped her before she could enter the building.

"Hi," he said with a clumsy smile. She moved to pull away from him, but he held her firmly as he retrieved the friendship bracelet from his pocket. "I made this for you." He held it up. "I was such a dumbass at Andy's...I couldn't forgive myself if I knew I'd hurt you. I want us to stay friends, Kee. Forever."

Kyna looked hard at him, no doubt seeing the telltale circles under his eyes. She seemed to search him, studying—missing what she was looking for. She said, "Leave me alone," and pulled away.

He let her go, watched as she disappeared into the library. His instinct was to follow her, to plead for her forgiveness until she caved in, but doing so now only meant creating a scene and possibly getting in trouble, so he stuffed the bracelet back into his pocket and reverted to Plan B: the restroom stall.

By three o'clock Joshua was waning. Expectation, combined with the symptoms of a hunger not-quite-satisfied, had him anxious and aching. He was crossing the street, heading for home, when he heard Kyna calling out to him. He turned and saw her standing tentatively at the edge of the campus lawn, as if she were facing rushing water instead of ordinary asphalt.

"Can you walk me home?" she asked.

She was crying.

An hour's walk was enough for her to explain most of what had happened during the past week. At first Joshua expected it to be trivial—her usual morose persona in need of scheduled maintenance—but when she mentioned “father” and “rape” in the same sentence, when she told him how she'd gone home from the party early Saturday night only to find Mr. Miller, drunk and aroused, waiting for her...he almost burst into tears.

“I...it's m-my fault,” he stammered, trying to hold her, trying to be the support she so badly needed at the moment. “If I hadn't s-stayed, if I'd walked you home, m-maybe—”

Kyna put her hand in his. “It's not your fault. I'm not telling you this because I want to blame you. It's just...I have no one else to talk to, Josh.”

Perhaps another boy would have recoiled at such a confession, but not Joshua, not after what he himself had experienced recently, and not when the listening and comforting meant the possibility of a rekindled friendship.

Kyna cried some more as he held his arms around her and took her to his mother's house. Once there, he settled her on the living room sofa and went into the kitchen to fetch something for the both of them to drink. He was pondering how to (tastefully) approach her with a certain question regarding their relationship when, as he handed her a glass filled with orange juice, she answered it (quite unexpectedly) for him:

“I need to tell you something,” she said, taking a sip and then solemnly holding the glass between her legs.

He nodded. “Okay.”

“After my dad...after he did what he did to me, I got real sick. I can't explain it. I was too weak to get out of bed, even, and I thought I was going to die. My mom didn't know what to do—she hates doctors, so she just kept me home from school and tried to get me to eat fruits and vegetables, and to drink juices and herb teas. I kept getting worse and worse until he came by again, and he...” She trailed off, biting her lip. Then, “It's like an addiction, I

think. I feel hungry all the time. I have to have it or else I get sick again.”

She looked up at him, her face flushed, and suddenly Joshua had it: a way to make everything right, if she accepted. She didn’t even have to know about his own bout with the unnameable ailment they’d both obviously contracted—she would merely think he was being valiant by offering himself to her. *And I don’t have to worry about transmitting it to her because she’s already been infected.* Even if it was her own father who’d done it (through a grotesque act of incest), he was too famished, too close to getting what he wanted to be put off by his moral outrage.

“It,” he said, playing dumb. “You mean...?”

She looked away, took a long, uncomfortable moment to get the words out. “He...he makes me swallow...his...his...” She pointed to Joshua’s crotch and started sobbing again. “It makes all the pain go away—I hate it. I hate *him*. What am I going to do? Who am I going to tell? My mom’s too worked up over it all—she drinks all the time, she hardly leaves the house anymore. If I call the police...I-I don’t want to go to an orphanage or be put away in a mental hospital. Then there’d be no one to take care of her.”

It was a nightmarish predicament. Joshua couldn’t imagine what it was like to be forced into such a situation, and on the one hand he was inclined to comfort Kyna and offer his unquestioned support—but on the other, he was aching with a need that grew more insistent with each passing minute, and he knew Kyna felt it, too. She was vulnerable, yes, but so was he—and if neither of them got what they needed from each other, it would be a grim life, for sure.

We can make it better, he told himself. Clearing his throat, he said, “Well, first off, your dad’s lying. I’ve, um, read about this.”

Kyna looked genuinely surprised. “You have?”

“Yeah. On the Internet. Health sites and stuff. They say it can be *anyone’s* bodily fluids.”

“Blood, too?”

"Yep. I forget the scientific name."

"Oh." She looked away again, grossed out...considering.

He said, "Kee, he has no control over you. He just wants you to *think* you need him so he'll get what he wants. Anyone can give you their blood..." *Here we go.* "...even me."

His offer seemed to affect Kyna in such a way that she almost dropped her glass. He reached out and caught it, then placed his hands on hers and waited patiently for her to accept or reject his offer. She started to shake her head, but he could see the hunger in her eyes, feel the aching need for what he was offering with every heartbeat.

"Please, Kee," he whispered, imitating the desperation of a thousand impassioned film stars. "I don't want you to go through this alone. I've been doing some real hard thinking...there's no one else I'd rather be with."

She looked up at him, no doubt searching for the brave, fearless man hiding behind the twelve-year-old's eyes.

Still undecided, but open to the possibilities.

"Wait here," he said, and he left her momentarily, went to his bedroom, where he found a pushpin. He returned to the living room, knelt before her and pricked his index finger.

"Here," he said, offering his hand to her. "Taste it."

She squirmed. "Josh, no—"

"Please, Kee. I want to help you. That's why we're friends: to help each other."

When she failed to respond, he raised his finger and gently decorated her thin, cracked lips with his blood. To his delight, she opened slightly and took his finger inside her mouth. It stung at first, but seeing the expression on her face as she tasted him, as whatever gluttonous flow pulsing through her veins slowly became satisfied, he could feel a warmth surrounding him, and he knew she felt it, too. More than just a simple exchange of microbes, it was an intimate moment—better than what he'd experienced with Mya, for he *knew* Kyna; there was a

connection here that ran beneath the flesh.

She was shaking afterward, but her eyes were brighter, her posture straighter. He could tell she wanted more, but was too shy to ask. He told her she could have him, that they could belong to each other exclusively, and for as long as they wanted. They would never need to depend on anyone else ever again.

Ultimately, she gave in, and he took her back to his bedroom, locked the door for privacy. Mrs. Swaney wouldn't be home for another hour and a half, so they had time to experiment.

* * *

They officially became a couple. This, of course, meant matching friendship bracelets, bragging rights, and daily "quickies," held after school in Joshua's bedroom, during which they effectively traded bodily fluids. Following this regime, Joshua's physical state (Kyna's, too) quickly regained its former ardor. His mother, catching him one day with his shirt off, commented that he looked better than ever—no more skin and bone. She also mentioned that his "little girlfriend" seemed to make him happy.

"We're just *friends*," he groaned, doing the typical "boy thing."

Though he knew Kyna and himself were much, much more than just friends, he played the relationship down, and restricted their meetings to that brief daily window of opportunity between three and five o'clock. (It would do no good to have Mrs. Swaney discover, and likely disband her son's after-school amatory arrangement and get herself overly worked up about something she couldn't possibly understand. Well, he supposed she knew something about sex because, after all, she'd had him, but beyond that, he was afraid she would overreact, scolding him and demanding he wait until marriage before he so much as removed his pants in front of a girl.)

Pregnancy was also a concern. Kyna said she hadn't started getting her period yet, so unprotected intercourse was (however

foolishly) an acceptable risk. Joshua knew they could get by just fine with a blood-only exchange, but it wouldn't be much fun simply performing a chore. Whatever pleasure he could glean from the whole situation, that was his prerogative—and, he figured, the arrangement was far less dangerous than if he'd decided to sleep around with numerous other people from school.

Sex, while a large part of the mix, wasn't the only thing they did together. On some days neither he nor she felt the need to exchange bodily fluids; instead, they practiced what Kyna called "mind magic." Supposedly, her mother had a small collection of new age books on the subject, and supposedly it was what Mya had used to influence Joshua on the morning of their revelatory conversation in front of Savanna. He never told Kyna about the experience (nor did he relate to her the details of his tryst in the bushes outside Andy's house), though he was quite interested in developing his own malnourished abilities. Citing the Internet (once again) as a reputable source, he remembered what Mya had told him and explained that people infected with the blood-leeching disease often showed an enhanced ability to perform mind magic.

They didn't have much luck with it at first, though on one particular afternoon Joshua was sure he saw Kyna move a penny with nothing more than a wave of her hand. She seemed embarrassed about this, though, and refused to replicate the trick.

Their relationship reached a crescendo with the shift into summer, when Joshua was miraculously released from the seventh grade (and Kyna, the eighth). With more free time to spend together, they shared themselves often, and for longer periods of time. If Joshua knew his mother was going out for a while, he invited Kyna over; if Mrs. Swaney took them to the movies, to the park, or to the beach, they arranged it so that they met up in the restroom at the same time, or behind a clump of bushes—anywhere a moment's privacy allowed them access to each other.

During the longer sessions, they often experimented with

varying degrees of overindulgence. Initially, the exchanges were within the boundaries of reason, but sometimes, at the crucial moment, Joshua would become almost delirious and find himself nibbling on her shoulder, breaking the skin with his teeth. Kyna wasn't overtly alarmed by this (she always told him she trusted him); the problem was, Joshua's own boundaries inevitably became blurred, and eventually they disappeared altogether. Nibbling became biting, and soon biting was accompanied by post-coital self-mutilation sessions.

It didn't occur to him that things might be getting out of hand until he started wearing long-sleeved shirts, rain or shine, to cover the wounds on his arms. He even started doing his own laundry, insisting that his mother stay out of his room so she wouldn't see the stains on the sheets. One afternoon, he even yelled at her for accidentally entering without knocking, and that's when it occurred to him that too much of a good thing, well, might not have been a good thing.

This became frighteningly evident one afternoon when Mrs. Swaney left him home alone while she ran errands. The moment she pulled out of the driveway, Joshua phoned Kyna. When no one answered, he slipped on his shoes and ran all the way to her house. He knocked, called out her name as he tried the door. It was open, so he let himself inside. The downstairs area was still; Mrs. Miller, who was usually sprawled on the living room couch, was nowhere to be found.

Still at work, he hoped, starting up the stairs. A thrill ran through him as he considered the possibility he and Kyna could spend some time alone together (Mrs. Miller *never* came upstairs—that was Kyna's territory), and he called out her name again as he turned down the hallway, into her bedroom—

—and there she was, sitting half-dressed at the edge of her bed, gazing down at herself. Her arms, her chest and belly, her thighs and legs—almost every inch of her body was marred by scars, some healed over, others barely clotting. Many still leaked

blood.

He stumbled past the threshold, stopped a few steps in. She looked up at him, tears streaking her face. Her lips were stained red.

Did I do this to her? he wondered, suddenly chilled by the realization that he *had*; he simply didn't want to remember the times when he'd gone over the edge, allowed his passion and his hunger to run rampant. It was easier for him because all she needed was his semen. He, on the other hand, needed her blood, and she'd trusted him—trusted herself—to stay within reason. Now it was too late to ignore the fact that the both of them were out of control.

"I get so hungry sometimes," Kyna said. "I can't help myself." She held out her arms for him to see. "Josh...look at me. I'm a monster."

He forced himself to take a few more steps into the room. "No...no you're not." He sat beside her on the bed, took her hands in his own. He couldn't stand to look at her wounds, so he concentrated on the carpet as he spoke words of love and encouragement—subliminal justification for what he'd done to her, what he'd taught her to do to herself for gratification.

"It's just...I can't take it sometimes," she said, sobbing. "I have to come home every day after school, and *he's* always here, yelling at my mom or throwing things. Sometimes he just looks at me and licks his lips, like he's thinking of how he raped me and how he wants to do it again. I can't help myself: I come here to my room and I cut myself and I drink as much as I can... enough to take me away, Josh. Enough to make me feel so good I don't care about a single thing in the whole world...but it always goes away. I always come back."

Yeah, thought Joshua, wistfully. *We always have to come back, don't we?* He wanted to just sigh and perhaps give in, share his own emotional fallacies so they could be miserable together, so that maybe they could discuss their dilemma and come to a ra-

tional conclusion—but instead he only felt that familiar twitch in his gut, that steady burn in his blood.

Leaning in close, he brushed his lips against Kyna's in an attempt to affect an acceptable distraction.

She squirmed away. "No, Josh."

"Kee—"

"Please...I...I want to be alone."

He put his arm around her. "You don't understand. We can't just give up. I need you. More than ever. We need each other, don't you see? Together we can be happy, we don't need anyone else." He tried to kiss her again—

"Get away!" she screamed suddenly, and pulled away, stood up on trembling legs. She reached for her clothes.

Joshua got to his feet. "Aw, Kee! Don't do this! Not now!" His mind was racing: If he left now, without her blood, how long would it be before they next saw each other? How long would it take her to calm down enough so that they could share again? If he didn't somehow fix this now, how long would he have to wait?

"Kee," he said, stepping towards her and reaching into his pocket as his mind decided itself for him. His fingers brushed polished metal. "You don't understand. It's not our fault. We need each other, we need this." *And I'd be a fool to leave empty-handed. This is survival—it's not my fault if she can't handle it. I'm not going to start looking for partners out on the streets.*

Kyna kept her back to him as she wriggled into her jeans, then pulled on her shirt. He stepped behind her, close enough to feel her body heat, close enough to smell her hair. He reached out and touched her neck—at which point she whirled around to face him—and that's when he stabbed her. Without even knowing, without even *thinking*, he slashed her abdomen. She screamed, fell backwards; he caught her midway and lowered her onto the bed as she gasped and convulsed, trying to sit up. Though she was bigger and taller, he was stronger, and so was able to hold her down as he lifted her shirt and buried his face in

the weeping wound.

By the time he realized what he was doing, it was already too late. Trembling, choking—sick to the stomach, he lurched away from the bed and stumbled out into the hallway. He squinted through a veil of hot, acidic tears as he searched almost blindly for the staircase. His gut clenched and his soul twisted in on itself with every step.

God, what did I just do?

* * *

Joshua fully expected his life to end that afternoon. He went home, cleaned himself up a bit, and then sat at the edge of his bed, waiting. No one came for him. Not the police, not Kyna's parents. He tried to fathom why this was, why he was being let off when he should be on his way to juvenile hall, and he could only come up with the explanation that maybe he hadn't cut Kyna too deep. Maybe he'd imagined it all, even. He was sick, after all; sometimes the piercing hunger alone was enough to make him delirious.

The bloodstains on his clothes, however, were quite real. He was almost certain he'd killed Kyna, and he could not imagine a world where something as horrendous as that was allowed, either by the local authorities or by God—and yet evening fell without incident. Mrs. Swaney returned home and busied herself in the kitchen, preparing dinner as if nothing were wrong.

With hours to go before bedtime, Joshua slowly peeled off the blood-encrusted layers of his clothing like layers of extra skin, flakes of weatherbeaten bark, rusted armor off a tender, sweaty body—the mussel out of its shell. He stuffed the soiled garments at the bottom of the hamper and shifted into bed, draping himself between the sheets and falling asleep even before his head hit the pillow.

* * *

Days passed, then weeks, and summer eventually wound itself down. Kyna never came around, and Joshua never followed up on her condition (optimism convinced him that she could possibly still be alive, though at this point he was too afraid to find out, one way or the other).

The weekend before school started, he fell ill. Despite having leeched off Kyna, despite harvesting his own seed and collecting his own blood on a routine basis, the baseline of his condition gradually slumped. He awoke on Saturday morning in a cold sweat and knew his reserves had been depleted.

You know what this means, he thought bitterly, and rolled out of bed, threw on some clothes.

He told his mother he was going over to Todd's to play video games. Instead, he wandered eastward, to Brookhurst street. From there he went south, passing liquor stores and bars. He stopped outside a pawn shop, where he was approached by a man in a car who offered him fifty dollars. Hungry enough not to care about disease or moral issues, he climbed into the car and performed above and beyond his own expectation. The stranger became inspired and tried to remove Joshua's pants, at which point he grabbed his switchblade and slashed the man's neck, creating a geyser of blood that would have put Old Faithful to shame. Joshua pounced, growling like an animal as he fastened his mouth to the wound and swallowed down every last drop until the man had passed out entirely. Then, grabbing the predator's wallet, he stumbled, tingling and twitching, out into the street again.

Grotesquely satisfied, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and held his head low as he made his way home. No police arrested him, no half-dead zombie, spurting blood all over the sidewalk, staggered after him demanding its wallet back. As humiliating, as absolutely disgusting as the whole ordeal had been, he'd got-

ten what he needed. He'd taken care of business.

He could handle his life without Kyna.

He could survive.

CHAPTER 32

Joshua's eighth grade year began, and he attended his classes with a newly entrepreneurial outlook on the students he interacted with. Making friends was no longer a pleasantry; rather, it was like recruitment each time around: How likely is it so-and-so has an affinity for males? Is he likely to blab to too many of his friends afterward? Will he cling too tightly when it's time to move on? He considered girls as well, but they required an overtly delicate courting process before intimacy was even considered. Boys, besides being physically easier to access, seemed to be more daring when it came to Joshua's brand of "play."

He was able to cajole a fair number of his male peers into spending their lunch periods with him in the restroom. On weekends he arranged sleepovers, mostly at his place. Some boys hung around long enough for blood exchanges, others found they didn't like the idea of same-sex intimacy (even though Joshua insisted he wasn't a homosexual) after their first time and called off any further interactions. Overall, though, he had a growing reputation, which meant that those who were curious about the subject often got indirectly referred to him. It wasn't the ideal solution, but it meant a steady stream of patrons—and if he had to choose between living the life of a closet whore and a being sickly bedbug, enduring the nightly sweats and searing pangs of withdrawal, the former was undoubtedly more preferable over the latter.

His relative luck in sustaining supplemental bodily fluids didn't mean there weren't problems. Once word of his somewhat blatant promiscuity got around, the bullies started in with various taunts and pranks. In the showers, they accused him of ogling other boys, and often pushed and shoved him until he

slipped and fell. Between classes, he had offensive letters taped to his back and rotten cafeteria leftovers slipped into his locker. Even Todd and Stevie became disenfranchised once they heard the rumors, and they stopped hanging out with him entirely by early October (he spent his thirteenth birthday watching movies at home with his mother). Explanations were useless and only tended to get him in deeper trouble—it didn't matter to anyone that it was actually the bodily fluids he was after, not the sex. All he knew was that he was driven to feed, and that it didn't matter so much *how* he satisfied himself so long as he did it routinely enough to keep the symptoms away. Certainly, he was, in a sense, more miserable now than he'd been at the start—but he wasn't hungry. He took every day as it came, took every emotional (and sometimes physical) blow with as much dignity as he could muster.

In the middle of it all, Kyna decided to reappear.

It was a Monday morning, the week before Halloween. He was sitting alone at one end of the Dale quad, notebook propped in one hand as he went over his homework. He happened to look up at just the right moment and caught her crossing the blacktop, and he couldn't help but stop and stare, delayed recognition slowly sinking in. Though he was relieved to see her, to finally know that she was still alive and well, he was perplexed as to her physical condition. Gone was the skinny, sickly-looking bookworm he had once approached during a lunchtime interlude at the opposite end of a seemingly eternal year. In her place was a strong, self-assured punker dressed in sweats and a tank top and bearing the swagger of someone who had found her place in life early on. With her broad shoulders and closely-cropped haircut, she could have passed for a boy, striding proudly up to the food wagon, paying for a bottle of spring water, and leaning coolly against the side of a breezeway support beam as she sipped.

Inevitably, her wandering gaze fell upon him, and he felt an instant heat rise just beneath his skin.

Hello, Joshua, he could almost hear her say, and she didn't take her eyes off him as he got to his feet and walked over to where she was standing.

"Hey," he said, unsure if he'd come to apologize, gawk, or both.

"Hey," she echoed, taking another sip from her water bottle. For a moment she just stared at him, her face devoid of any sort of emotion (besides a slight twinge of annoyance), and he feared he'd mistaken someone else for Kyna—but he knew it was her. Same face, same eyes; it was just her body that had been swapped out for this new overtly-athletic machine standing before him. She'd never had the feminine padding so many other girls possessed, and so she'd compensated by building herself up in other ways. A little too chiseled, a little too masculine, but strong nonetheless.

"So," she said at last, sizing him up as if she were considering a train wreck. "I hear you've become quite the *oral specialist*."

He felt his tongue catch. "I'm...managing. How about you?"

"I'm good." She took another sip from her bottle and looked the other way, her neck muscles bulging. "Where are your friends?"

"Doing their own thing, I guess," he replied.

"Too bad. I guess not everyone's into sniffing ass."

Again, Kyna's contempt bubbled to the surface, and he had to make a conscious effort not to respond similarly with an insult of his own. He supposed part of the reason he was allowing himself to be verbally abused like this was because, deep down inside, he'd felt a faint glimmer of hope, a dull smudge of a chance that she might take him back—thereby eliminating the need to whore himself.

But there's no connection between us now, he thought. *She only wanted me to see her, to let me know how she's pulled through on her own and become a better person while I'm still crawling around on all fours begging for what I can get.*

Damn right, little man, Kyna's expression read—so intense it was almost as if she'd somehow broadcast herself into his head for a split second.

He had to swallow and look down at the ground. "Well...I guess I just wanted to see how you're doing. See ya'."

Turning to leave, he allowed himself the small satisfaction of purposely ending their meeting of his own accord. However, he'd only taken a handful of steps when suddenly he felt unnaturally, uncomfortably hot again.

Impossibly, Kyna's voice sounded inside his head:

That's right, Josh. Take a little walk. Right off campus. Screw school, right? Nothing to do here but be miserable, watching all the pretty girls you'll never have because you screwed up, screwed the wrong girl. Yeah, I heard the story—word gets around, didn't you know? But it's okay, because now all you have are the guys you service in the toilet, people who'll never love you for more than that brief couple of minutes when they're stuffing themselves down your throat. Every time you finish one off, that's one less person who respects you, one less person who'll pay attention to you when you slink around school each day.

Her words gripped him, and he felt his body being animated by some unseen outside force as, with five minutes before the warning bell, he left school, strode mechanically along the streets toward home—and wondered how, how could this be happening?

We've both been busy, Josh, Kyna continued. *You've decided to stick a Band-Aid on your life, but I've been working on the source of the problem. That day when you cut me and left me for dead, my mom happened to come home early, and she found me lying half-unconscious in the hallway. I spent a couple days in the hospital—the hospital, Josh. My mom was terrified, but she went through it anyway because I would have bled to death or gotten some kind of horrible infection otherwise... and you know how we paid for it all? Dead Man. He smiled the brightest bullshit smile you ever saw and said he'd "take good care" of my mother and me. He came to me one night, while I was recovering, and*

he told me to get better soon so we could fuck again. Well, I decided right then and there that the day would never come again when I let him so much as touch me.

I discovered something, Josh. Something wonderful hidden away beneath all the pain and misery. You think it's just about sex, but it's not. This disease or whatever it is we both have, it's all about how our bodies channel their own energy. You think you're sick because you catch something from someone, but if you look at it differently—if you use it the right way, you can do anything.

Joshua was flabbergasted. He didn't understand completely what was going on, but he knew it was real, and he knew he was afraid.

Remember "mind magic?" I know you used to think it was just a joke because you never figured out how to do it, but I had some time on my hands, so I did a lot of reading. My mom brought me a stack of her spiritual books, stuff I thought was just ridiculous before—but imagine my surprise when I figured out I could make it all come true. I was lying there in my bed one night and listening to the sound of my mom and Dead Man fighting; I got so sick of it that I demanded more strength from myself. I insisted that I heal up instantaneously so that I could get up right then and there, leave that insane place where my mom and I always have to walk around naked whenever he's around. "No more," I told myself, over and over, closing my eyes and pretending I was made of clay, molding my body into what I wanted it to be.

It didn't happen instantly. I kept at it all night, every night until every muscle was sore—even my brain was sore. But I kept at it and at it until I saw results. And without you there to distract me, I was able to change myself. My wounds disappeared, Josh. I got stronger. I became someone else, someone who wouldn't be messed with so easily by her rapist father or her blood-sucking ex-boyfriend.

His mother's house in view now, Joshua fought helplessly to stop his feet and legs from betraying him. Whatever Kyna had learned during her absence, she'd obviously cultivated it to the fullest extent; whether or not he wanted to, he was going home,

where he would be quite alone with the thoughts of a girl who somehow was able to manipulate matter with her mind.

We're special, Josh. I don't think just anyone can read a book and make it happen like that. We have something only those like us have; we're free to do whatever we like with ourselves. Dead Man knew it and made the mistake of thinking I'd never have the guts to stand up to him. He thought he'd always be able to have his way with me, just like he'd always done with my mom, but he was wrong, and on that night when he came up to my room with a beer and a boner, I made it clear that I wasn't his little play toy anymore.

And he didn't touch me.

There were tears in Joshua's eyes as he unlocked the front door, stumbled inside, and threw himself onto the floor. His breath came in ragged gasps. Sweat stung his eyes. Most of it, he realized, was his own terror at being manipulated, but a fair amount of what he was feeling was being funneled into him from Kyna's own consciousness. As she relived her own memories, so did he, and it was a curious experience, to be so afraid of and exhilarated by emotions not his own. For the first time, he was able to gaze down upon Joshua Swaney from an outside source—like he was hearing his own recorded voice for the first time—and he didn't like what he saw.

Yes, Josh. Look at yourself, crawling around on all fours like a dog. Such a fearless bad-ass when you were feeding off me all summer, acting like you actually cared for me...but you were just like Dead Man, and now...now I see through it all. Your pretty-boy looks can't hide the monster inside.

He got to his feet again and started towards the kitchen. Images of knives, cheese-shredders, and flickering gas-burners filled his mind. At Kyna's whim, he thought of what he might do to himself if left alone long enough...how he might exorcise his own personal demons if allowed the opportunity to really see them all clearly for the first time.

I was a scared little girl, Josh. I needed someone to take me away

from it all. You know, I'd never kissed anyone before you, never even held hands with a boy until you came along. I thought you were my one true love.

Standing in front of the stove now, he lifted the top, took a deep breath and blew out the pilot lights. Then he turned on all four burners at once, moved awkwardly along the counter, reaching into the various drawers until he found a box of matches. All the while Kyna sent him more images of misery as the pungent smell of natural gas filled his nostrils. As his fingers probed the inside of the box for a match, he suddenly realized that it really wasn't Kyna controlling him anymore. She was merely opening up every single self-doubt in his mind until he himself could see what a horrible person he was, how greedy and ignorant he'd been—how it would be a benefit to everyone if he just ended it here and now.

So that's how it works, he thought, holding up an unlit match in his hand and staring at it dumbly. *Not her at all...it's me. She's just pointing out all the bad spots.*

Somewhere in the back of his mind he felt a shudder, and he knew Kyna was crying, too (perhaps overcome by it all). Overcome by pent-up rage and raw emotion, she was also a prisoner of the mental vortex: a span of many, many lonely nights spent lying awake in bed, listening to the sounds of a house being devoured alive by Dead Man's insatiable ego; a living nightmare in which Kyna bears Dead Man's weight as he thrusts away, trying to split her open at the seams; a frozen moment when Joshua comes into her room and steals the last remaining part of her for himself before scurrying away like a common thief.

These were the reasons he stood here now, trembling in his sneakers and accepting himself as the vampire he'd always been (and always would be). There was no other way for it to end.

No more pain.

He struck the match.

* * *

Back in his room, back in the present, fifteen-year-old Joshua Swaney shifted in his bed and winced from the unwanted memories of a life accelerated to early completion.

No need to relive anything past that moment, he thought, still seeing the match light dance before his blinking eyes. He hadn't anticipated the true agony back then, and he didn't want to replay it now. Funny thing was, he couldn't help but remember the frantic desire to live, once the flames had begun to devour him alive. More than anything else in the world, he'd wanted to continue; despite all the misery and guilt, he'd wanted to live.

And he had. Through some miracle (or cosmic prank), he'd pulled through, been given an encore—and now here he was, still in bed, wasting his second chance and feeling as if he'd just written the epilogue of an autobiography that should have ended pages and pages ago.

What would it be like, he thought, *to have been a normal twelve-year-old? To just do kid's stuff and not spend every waking moment wanting to be eighteen, wanting to be over and done with it all—wanting to know everything about everything in one short year. I could be out skateboarding, or riding my bike, or swimming; instead I'm stuck here, so old...old as Methuselah because I tried to prove to everyone that I was better, more mature.*

He'd tried and failed, miserably.

Well, he thought, *no more. Time to end this.*

Forcing himself to sit up, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and slowly eased himself into a standing position. He kept still for a moment, allowing the blood to circulate before he took a tentative step towards the bedroom door.

CHAPTER 33

Two weeks before the beginning of school, Aaron volunteered to patch up the wooden fence that ran along the rear of his parents' house. Most of it was cosmetic work: A sun-dried thicket of weeds and thorn bushes had infiltrated the chainlink fence and swallowed up the bottoms of the beams, while stray animals (and perhaps ornery youths) had, over time, knocked several of the posts askew.

With clippers in hand and magic on his mind, he set forth into the yard and went at it with a combination of brawn and brain. To his delight, the nastier weeds shriveled up under his gaze—the result of his lessons with Kyna. When he needed to loosen a few of the two-by-fours, all he had to do was imagine the rusted nails uprooting themselves and *voilà!*—they obeyed.

Shortly after twelve noon, he took a walk down to the hardware store for supplies. When he returned, Daniel was sitting on the back steps and sipping a Coke.

"Hey, dad," Aaron said, setting down the lumber and wiping his face with his shirt. "What's up?"

Daniel didn't answer at first, but merely held his soda can at arm's length and studied the list of ingredients. After a moment he said, "I'm wondering how to work this out."

"Work what out?"

"Me and your mother."

"Oh." Aaron bit his lip, glanced at the kitchen window to see if Julia was there (she wasn't). "She loves you, you know."

It looked as if Daniel were about to cry, but he held the tears back. "Then why did she do it?"

She didn't do anything—it was Edward, Aaron thought. He said, "Maybe she didn't want to." *Maybe she was forced into it.*

Daniel looked up at him. "Optimistic, huh? Well...after sleeping on the couch for a nice long while, after not being able to talk to your mother since the whole thing happened...I think we need some time apart."

"You mean...like a divorce?" Aaron felt his throat tighten.

"I don't know the details yet. Something like this affects us all, of course. I just thought you should know up front what's going on. We've always been very open with you before, and there's no reason to break the trend now. You're old enough to handle this."

Aaron studied the grass at his feet. He almost wished Daniel *hadn't* told him; the thought of spending his remaining years at home with only one parent was intimidating. Sure, he knew he was destined to strike out on his own—college, job or otherwise—the day he became a legal adult, but something like the separation of his parents...it was a premature step into that (as of yet) untouched "someday" future, which wasn't supposed to happen until, well, *someday*. Yet he understood, somewhat, what it must be like for his father having to live in the same house with a woman who (he thought) fancied another man. He imagined walking in on Kyna and another boy, then having to actually live with her, to sleep with her in the same bed knowing there had been someone else all over her, inside her—

He cleared his throat and, hearing Julia's movements in the kitchen, thought of something. "Dad," he said. "Think you can get me a soda from the fridge?"

Daniel nodded and went inside. Closing his eyes, Aaron imagined the inside of the kitchen, pictured both his parents standing there together, surprised, at first, to have bumped into each other, but turning now face to face, interested, curious—wondering what it was they'd been upset about. Using his knack, Aaron stripped away the emotional scabs: From his mother's mind he stripped away the memory of Edward's advances, of his final conquest in the shed; from his father's mind he stole away the

hurt and betrayal at losing his wife to another man. Then, for good measure, he pretended he was directing a film and thought the words as they left his parents' lips:

"I love you, Julia. You know that?"

"Of course, Daniel."

"More than anything. You and Aaron mean the world to me. I don't know what's come over me these past few weeks...I've been so busy with work, I guess...never spend enough time at home anymore...I want you to know that's going to change. I want you to know that our family is what's most important."

"Oh, Daniel..."

"I don't want to miss anymore of it. I don't ever want to lose you because of some dumb job."

"You know that will never happen. We're a team, right? Aaron and I...we're rooting for you. Always."

"I want to do better. I want us to be in love again."

"We *are* in love, silly."

"Prove it. Kiss me..."

Pleased (and a little giddy) with the results, Aaron receded from the kitchen and reanimated his body once again so that he could resume his carpentry work. Several minutes into it, he heard the refreshing sound of laughter.

"Aaron!" called Julia. "Come have lunch! There's watermelon! And iced tea!"

He set down his tools and went inside. Even though it was something of a fake-out, his mental play being continuously enacted in the flesh, it was wonderful seeing his parents sitting happily together at the kitchen table. Julia was propped on Daniel's lap, and he helped guide her hand as she carved the watermelon. There were happy tears streaking both their faces, and, as Aaron took his seat, it became evident they had reached some sort of resolution. Coerced by him, yes, but happy now; enough of a family to actually have lunch together—and that was what they did. Mother, father, and son sat together and ate,

drank—talked to one another. They told jokes. They laughed, even, and Aaron could feel the immaterial thread cast from his soul that bound them all together now. It was a subtle hum at the back of his mind, an auxiliary biological process, perhaps, that he exerted day and night; he'd only recently come to notice it more fully, and he knew as long as he kept it going, the Capps family would keep going.

The conversation gradually switched to old high school stories. Aaron pushed his chair slightly back from the table and squinted, wide-screening his vision so that he could survey the scene from a third-person perspective. There was Daniel, sitting in soiled T-shirt and sweats, smirking as he dispatched some sort of inside joke concerning an old friend; there was Julia, with her hair tied back, the summer sweat on her brow augmenting a face that had presently become ten years younger; there was himself, shirtless and barefoot—a hopeless ragamuffin, for sure—and leaning back contentedly in his chair. He had a smile on his face, and he was more than a little grateful for a moment's repose in which his parents and himself acted less like a bunch of room-mates and more like a family.

It had not been like this in a long while.

Eventually, they ate all the watermelon, drank all the tea, and one cherished moment passed inevitably into another. Aaron stuck around long enough to help with the dishes before heading for the backyard once again. Halfway to the door, the phone rang, and he spun on his heel, winked at Daniel, and made a playful lunge for the receiver (there was no contest, really, as both his parents had relegated themselves to each other's arms once again).

He picked up the phone. "Hello?"

It was Kyna.

"Hey, Banana Boy. What're you doing today?" Her tone was monotonous as usual.

"Nothing much," he replied.

"Me neither. Why don't you come over for a while?"

"Cool."

* * *

Whatever the reason for Kyna's perennial funk, the worst of it was dissipated (without sex, amazingly) by four o'clock. Listening to the sound of a distant car alarm, he lay with his shirt off in Kyna's bed and stared up at the clubhouse roof. Kyna had arranged herself beside him, and was resting her head on his chest, toying with the light peach fuzz that dusted his solar plexus. Silence seemed to be her therapy of choice.

After a while, Aaron said, "I worked my parents today."

Kyna smiled dreamily. "Oh?"

"Just like we practiced. In and out of my body, like *this*." He snapped his fingers. "I gave them the first happy afternoon since...since...well, it's been a long time. I didn't even feel the drain when I was finished."

"Good for you."

"I mean, if I can keep them happy...then why not? They don't have to know that they're supposed to be depressed and all. As long as I keep an eye out for them, they'll never know."

"That's cool..." Kyna snuggled closer, closed her eyes.

Aaron let her doze. At a quarter to five, he nudged her gently and asked if he could use the shower.

"So I won't smell like a total bum when I go in to work tonight," he said, smirking.

Kyna smiled—that wan, faraway curling of the lips she'd polished to an exact science—and nodded.

The house was empty (Mrs. Miller was supposedly at work and wouldn't be getting off until six). While Kyna rummaged in the fridge for something to eat, Aaron made his way into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He undressed and stepped into the shower, which was impeccably clean (no bathtub ring,

no mildew stains). In fact, the bathroom seemed to be the only room in the house that had been given any sort of real attention over the years. Neatly-trimmed ferns hung in the window alcove, and they augmented an exotic variety of shampoos and body washes.

Aaron picked something subdued and lathered his hair, soaped himself, and had just reached that vulnerable shut-eyed moment before rinsing his face when he nearly jumped out of his skin as Kyna's voice sounded inside his head:

Aaron! Please, oh, God, Aaron! Come quick—he's here! Oh, God, Aaron!

It was a faraway sound, as if she were standing at the edge of a distant cliff and counting on the wind to carry the body of her voice.

What's the matter? he replied, but direct communication seemed to be nonexistent. Kyna's emotions, however, bombarded him with the ferocity of a hailstorm; her raw terror cascaded over him in waves, and it spurred him on as he quickly rinsed the soap from his eyes and reached for the knob to turn off the water. Halfway to the point, he reconsidered, and instead stepped from the tub, pulled his pants on, and cracked the bathroom door open.

The hallway was too dark to offer any insight into the situation, so he took a deep breath and flung the door open all the way, and as he strode through the hall, hoping he would know what to do if he came face to face with an ax murderer, he heard a whimper. Changing course, he entered the kitchen and saw Kyna standing backed up against the counter, a tall, curly-haired, ruggedly-built man—dressed completely in denim—hovering over her.

Dead Man.

As soon as Aaron stepped into the room, Mr. Miller (whose back was to him) glanced menacingly over his shoulder. Until now, he had only ever imagined the man who had inspired Kyna's intense hatred; seeing Mr. Miller in person presented a face

to go along with all the imaginings, and while it was not the stereotypical twisted face of an evil man, there was power in the eyes, danger in the overall complexion.

He must have just dropped by, thought Aaron. Great timing...the second I go for a shower this guy comes waltzing in...unless he's been here all along, waiting. He looked at Kyna, who was evidently rooted to the spot, and before he could ask what was wrong, Mr. Miller turned around to face him full.

"So," Mr. Miller said. "This is your latest boyfriend, eh?" He took a step towards Aaron. "The little punk you've been letting slam his cock into you night and day?"

Aaron hesitated, caught between "latest boyfriend" and the indecision as to how he should approach the situation.

"That's right," Mr. Miller continued, advancing forward until he was within arm's reach. "Serving number thirty-four!" He leaned in close; his breath reeked of beer and cigarettes. "Aw, look at the shock and surprise in those pretty blue eyes of yours. You didn't think you were her first, did you? No...you knew. Deep down inside, every boy *knows*, but he tells himself it's not true because he can't stand screwing a girl who's already been broken in. Ever wonder why it was so easy to stick it in her that 'first time?'"

Aaron couldn't believe his ears. As emotionally detached as his own family was (at times), he couldn't imagine someone openly trashing his own daughter like this. As such, there were no second thoughts: Whether or not he could take him, whether or not Mr. Miller was armed, Aaron knew he had to launch himself at the man and hope for the best.

The only problem was, he couldn't move.

Mr. Miller laughed, grabbed a handful of Aaron's hair and twisted painfully. "You think you've got game, huh? Hell, you look older than you are, but I bet you can't even drive yet—and you think you can come in here and help yourself to *my* family?" Shoving him back hard, Mr. Miller swore under his breath and

faced Kyna again. "That's right, sweetie. Doesn't matter how many boys you surround yourself with. None of them count, when it matters." He kissed her on the mouth and then moved towards the refrigerator.

Aaron glanced at Kyna, and it became apparent why she hadn't moved a muscle throughout: Dead Man had paralyzed her—he'd paralyzed them both. *He has the same knack we do*, he thought, and closed his eyes, attempting to break free. He could feel something inside himself moving and squirming, but the outer casing of his body was as rigid as if it had been cut in stone, and it effectively kept his soul from slipping out.

The fridge door slammed. Mr. Miller, beer in hand, was now skirting the counter. He opened and closed drawers, searching for a bottle opener, and he grumbled incoherently as he went:

"Damn bitch never knew how to keep a kitchen clean. I'm only paying every one of her goddamned bills...least she can do is wash a plate and mop the goddamned floor once in a while. It's like visiting the county dump...but I say you have to make your own fun, isn't that right?"

Aaron blinked. Of course, neither Kyna nor himself could answer, and this had the effect of creating an awkward silence, which Mr. Miller seemed to dislike. He swore again and gave up on opening the bottle. Instead, he hurled it at Aaron, who was unable to dodge and took a stinging blow to the shoulder; when the bottle hit the floor, he winced as the glass shattered around his bare feet.

Mr. Miller laughed and turned his attention back to Kyna. "Your boyfriend taste good, huh? Does he cry when he gives blood? I don't want a whiner. I'm fucking starved today." He embraced her obscenely, kissing her and fondling whatever part of her he pleased.

From his viewpoint, Aaron couldn't see directly what was going on, but he knew it was far beyond a simple show of affection between father and daughter—and he knew that Kyna was in ut-

ter agony over being totally unable to defend herself.

Leave her alone! he shouted, but the words were stuck in his head.

“Oh, hear that?” Mr. Miller said between kisses. “Your man doesn’t approve.”

With one free hand, he made an odd gesture—and suddenly Aaron convulsed, bursting with pain. Even worse, without the ability to move or cry out, the pressure inside him merely circulated, squeezing his heart, compressing his lungs. After half a minute of such torture, his knees buckled and he fell to the floor, his vision sparkling.

Now, more helpless than ever, he could only listen:

“It was always a contest with you, Kyna. Your mother knew her place, but you were always the third leg...no appreciation for what I provided. I took care of both of you, I gave you a home, I gave you money—all I asked in return was your love and your trust, and you wouldn’t give it. Well, a man can’t live on credit alone. As much as you would have me believe that you’re a dried-up well, I know your secrets. I know what you’ve got hidden away inside you...I’ve planted a garden, watched it flourish, and now it’s come time for the harvest.”

Aaron became acutely aware (through his mind’s eye) of rough fingers probing between Kyna’s legs, and he knew he could take no more. The unbearable pain, as well as his own panicked mental thrashing, made him feel as if he would explode if he didn’t do something to rectify the situation—so that was what he did.

He exploded.

Drawing from some undiscovered energy source, Aaron reclaimed control of his arms and legs as fire shot along his spine and lightning crackled at his fingertips. He tore through Mr. Miller’s influence as if it were nothing and jumped to his feet, grabbed the man by the shoulders, and hurled him across the room. He crashed into the kitchen table, knocking it aside and sending the chairs tumbling in three different directions at once.

Before he had a chance to right himself, Aaron was pouncing again, knocking him onto his front and slamming his elbow into the man's neck; there was a loud popping noise and Mr. Miller gurgled something unintelligible just before his body went limp.

It could have ended there, but Aaron was still surging out of control, anger, humiliation—pure, unfiltered rage—exploding from every muscle. He grabbed Mr. Miller by the neck, rolled him onto his back (the man was still breathing), then brought his clenched fist down, imagining, with all his might, the man's skull cracking, exploding, bits of hair and skin, bone and brain splattering outward in a grotesque spray.

And that's exactly what happened. Willpower sabotaged muscle, and muscle overpowered reason. Physically, Aaron's blow wasn't forceful enough to decapitate, but mentally he'd channeled enough energy to drill a hole in the floor. Mr. Miller's torso spasmed once, then became sickeningly still as blood drained out onto the kitchen floor.

Behind him, Kyna screamed something.

He didn't hear it.

CHAPTER 34

Kyna stood motionless, arms hanging limply at her sides, lips parted, and tried to make sense of the scene before her: the kitchen a mess, Aaron covered in blood and sweat and shivering as if it were twenty below zero...Dead Man's lifeless torso, soaking in a pool of blood. Watching Aaron kneeling there, panting uncontrollably as he lifted his hands from the mess, she wanted to scream, to vomit—to explode out of this grim reality and into another, but of course that was not possible.

I didn't mean to...I didn't mean to... she thought, over and over. On the one hand, she'd hated her father, had always hated him. She'd lain awake many a night wishing he would just drop dead, but now that it had actually happened—at her whim, no less—she was stunned beyond reprieve.

Aaron's body, my mind, she thought. *Doesn't matter if it was his hands doing the killing. I wanted it, I made it happen...I made him kill for me.*

Aaron turned to face her, bewildered horror distorting his usually tranquil facial features, and she knew she had to do something now, before the reality of the situation rendered them both useless.

"We have to clean this up," she said quietly, forcing her body into motion. Her legs trembled terribly. *Keep moving, don't think about it, just do something.* She threw her knack, numbing Aaron's nerves and (hopefully) keeping any real panic at bay until the matter was taken care of.

It wasn't easy. He looked at her incredulously, teetering on the edge of insanity. "Kyna, what did I just do...?"

She pressed harder, forcing his senses to yield to her mental

veil. "We need to take care of this. Mom gets home in less than an hour—we need to clean this place up, for God's sake."

"But...he's...we have to call somebody..."

Kyna felt a knot tighten within her gut. *Who? Who do we call? Our mommies and daddies? The police?* "We can't tell anyone, you understand? If this comes out, *everything* comes out, you end up in jail, my mom is sent off to a mental hospital, and I spend the next twenty years in therapy...no, Aaron. We need to take care of this ourselves—you know that."

Aaron shook his head, evidently trying to clear his mind so he could think his own thoughts, but she kept her influence steady. She kneaded his will as she set him into motion, walking carefully behind him and lifting him off Dead Man's carcass. Once he was standing, it was easier: She led him to the bathroom, helped him get cleaned up, helped him get dressed. Then she fetched a shovel and led him out into the backyard, where she set him digging a hole.

"But...won't it...um...won't he...?" he babbled uncertainly as he worked.

Won't he stink? "No, I'll take care of it. We just need a place to put him."

When the hole was deep enough, they dragged Dead Man's body out of the kitchen and deposited it in the makeshift grave. Aaron mechanically filled in the hole, patted it down, and waited for further input from Kyna. At this point, she was exhausted, for she'd been simultaneously directing her willpower in several different directions: keeping Aaron and herself sedated enough to dig; keeping the yard (and the rest of the house) under a mental cloak so that the neighbors—the *police*—wouldn't interrupt them. Now she stood over the grave and concentrated on accelerating the decay process, picturing dirt, roots, and insects weaving their way into Dead Man's flesh, pulling him apart thread by thread and ultimately leaving him as a mere smudge of dust. It took only minutes, though it felt like hours.

Aaron stood beside her, leaning on the shovel and looking like he was trying to ponder something infinitely complicated. With her influence over him, she knew it was like a curious dream to him, a random series of images that held no meaning, but he would wake up soon, and when he did...she knew she didn't have the strength to be there with him.

"Go home," she told him, her voice a pale whisper. "I'll clean up the rest by myself."

He shrugged, put the shovel down and leaned in for a goodbye kiss. She pecked him on the cheek and watched him as he disappeared around the corner of the house.

She waited a while, tracking his progress as he walked home; when she knew he was approaching his parents' house, she let go of everything—

—and collapsed onto the ground.

* * *

Blocks away, Aaron felt as if he'd been struck by lightning. It was enough to knock the wind out of him, and he spasmed inadvertently, missing his step and falling face-first onto the concrete driveway. As he tried to right himself again, he was bombarded by memories and experiences that had accumulated within his subconscious during the past months. Having been unnaturally suppressed for so long, they now came exploding to the forefront of his mind—as if his entire time spent in Anaheim had been a dream he was only now able to remember, only he wasn't just remembering, he was making room for a distinctly different person in his head.

All this time, to be walking around as Aaron Capps but not Aaron Capps, to realize that he'd been living under remote control...

The finale of the ordeal was a terrifying image of Kyna's father lying decapitated beneath him, the blood and gray matter soak-

ing his hands, his jeans. Indeed, as he rolled onto his back on the pavement, looked down at himself and saw the stains, he knew something terrible had happened, and he knew that he'd been an integral part of it.

It was a terrible feeling. His gut clenched, and he coughed vilely, started to vomit. He tried to cover his mouth, but the spray was considerable, and with each heave he felt as if his intestines were trying to wriggle out through his throat. Someone across the street called out, asking if he was okay; he ignored whoever it was, stumbled to his feet and made his way into his parents' house.

Trailing tears and vomit along the way, he half-walked, half-crawled upstairs to his room, where he closed the door and threw himself onto the floor. For a while he was unable to do anything but weep wretchedly; eventually, though, he became too exhausted for even that, so he let himself settle into a semi-trance. The mental footage of an Aaron Capps unknown to himself continued to play behind his eyelids as the sun gradually set and his room became a subdued purgatory. It was so quiet throughout that, at first, he thought his parents had gone out somewhere, but then he heard soft weeping coming from their bedroom and he knew that Julia was home. He also knew that since he'd collapsed outside, he'd inadvertently relinquished his willful hold over his parents. Without that binding thread, they, too, were remembering things better left to lost dreams and locked-up nightmares.

At the moment, it didn't matter much: Aaron had killed a man, buried his body in Kyna's backyard, and he'd done it without even thinking. Sure, Mr. Miller had been a terrible person with a terrible lust for his own daughter, but to have *killed* him...there should have been any number of alternatives to taking a person's life.

More time passed, and Aaron found himself slipping towards the opposite end of the emotional spectrum. Rather than having

to suppress a cyclone of raw emotion, he was now completely devoid of feeling.

Burned out, dead. Like Kee's dad.

He went through the motions of getting himself cleaned up: He undressed, stuffed his stained garments in a corner of his closet (he'd figure out how to deal with them later), wrapped a towel around his waist and stepped into the silent, darkened hallway. Julia's sobbing could no longer be heard; maybe, he thought, she'd gone to sleep early. He didn't know where Daniel might have gotten to.

Taking careful steps (not because it was dark but because he was afraid if he jolted himself too suddenly he might awaken all the terrible nightmares that had assaulted him previously), he let himself into the bathroom, where he soaped, scrubbed, and rinsed every part of himself numerous times. When he was finished, he returned to his room, locked the door—and froze as he noticed the window had been opened. A pair of jeans were draped across the sill. There was a shirt, too, and socks, and underwear—a trail of clothing leading to his bed—where Ashley Zurich lay.

Aaron backed up against the wall, fumbled for the light switch. He couldn't find it, so his view of Ash left some of her anatomy to the imagination, but he could certainly tell that she was nude, and that she had her legs spread invitingly. More troubling, though, was the fact that she seemed to be sopping wet, and her breath was coming in steamy puffs—as if she were reclining in a walk-in freezer.

"Do you think I'm pretty?" she asked after a moment.

He swallowed, his senses reeling. "How did you—?"

"I found you, you know that?" she said, thrusting her hips forward. "Kee might have picked you up eventually, but *I* was first."

Aaron looked away, feeling something within himself collapse. He reached for Ash's jeans, held them up. "Put your clothes on."

She shook her head, suddenly pouting. "No."

“No?”

“No. I won’t. I won’t leave until you help me.”

“Help you? How?”

Ash bit her lip, looked off into the shadows. “I’m sick. We all are—except for you.” She looked at him again; her eyelids were dark blue, and they twitched. “You’re a carrier. I knew when I first bit you, when I first tasted you.”

He lowered the jeans. “What are you talking about?”

Crawling like a cat, she slowly made her way across the bed. “It’s like a virus. Once you get it, it’s in you forever. It gives you power, but it also drains you. Most people have to have blood or jizz from someone else to keep themselves from starving, but you don’t have to worry about that. You have a natural immunity or something—you got the germs, but you don’t have any of the symptoms we do.”

Aaron’s stomach turned. “You’re nuts...”

Ash was off the bed now and walking towards him. “Come on, Aaron. Tell me you knew how to do the magic before I bit you, before Kyna taught you how to handle it...before you got the fever.”

The fever, he thought, recalling his bout with what he still considered an unfortunate flu bug. Now, for some reason, he could actually think about it without becoming distracted, and he realized that, of course, it had been something much more serious than a mere twenty-four hour bug he’d caught. He’d almost died, but he’d been too delirious to care much; afterward, Kyna had come to him, and she’d given him the mother of all wet dreams—of course he hadn’t seen it clearly before.

Kyna had been manipulating him.

Ash slid into his arms. Her body was cold, wet, and lifeless; her breath smelled like damp soil. “Kee’s just doing what she knows. She’s so afraid of losing you that she keeps you locked up tight. But I’d never make you forget just because I wanted you to stay with me.” She slid her hand under his towel. “I’d be yours, for as

long as you like.”

Aaron found himself without the slightest spark of passion. He looked down at Ash, who tickled his belly as she tried to rouse the beast within him and feed it her own subversive commands; she was trying to jump-start his male reaction, but instead, without the ever-present confusion clouding his head, she'd turned him off completely.

“That’s enough, Ash,” he said.

She ignored him, cuddled closer, still optimistic that her motions would be effective. Her breasts left circles of chilled moisture against his skin. “Everyone wants you for their own. They all want to have their way with you, but not me. I’ll be yours, Aaron. Yours.”

He pulled her hands away, held her by the wrists. “I can’t help you,” he said, and started to move away.

“Please, Aaron,” she said, reaching for the towel once again. This time she was quicker, more insistent, and she pulled it away entirely as he tried to maneuver out of her grasp. She surprised him, however, by jumping onto him and wrapping her arms about his shoulders, her legs around his waist. She wasn’t heavy, but he was already off-balance and so fell forward onto the floor.

“Ash!” he gasped. “Stop it! Let go!”

She ignored him, started bucking her hips as he pushed off the floor, squirmed into a crouch and tried to extricate himself from her grasp.

“Please, Aaron,” she breathed, her tissue-paper voice growing hoarse. “Please help me. Please, just give me a little...that’s all I need. Watch, you’ll see...just a little...”

He was getting frantic now. With all his might he stumbled to his feet and attempted to pry and shake Ash off, but her limbs were like talons, holding fast as she continued to buck on him.

“Get off!” he yelled, and spun on his heel, charging toward the dresser and slamming into it hard. Ash took the full force of the blow—and she screamed as, with one last erratic thrust of her

pelvis, her arms and legs seemed to shrivel and soften. Her body suddenly began to cave in on itself, her breasts becoming loose folds of ancient skin, her hair thinning and falling out in large clumps, her hands dissolving into papery claws.

Aaron screamed, stumbling backward and falling back onto the floor, the Ash-corpse still somehow alive, still clinging to him and flicking its beef-jerky thumb over his thigh in a last-ditch attempt to turn him on. Naturally, he was unresponsive. He screamed again and again, and grabbed Ash by the shoulders, shoved her off. Her torso separated from her arms and fell onto the floor in a dusty heap. Quickly, he rolled onto his knees and wrenched her severed arms from his shoulders, tossing them away; he didn't have to remove her legs because they dissolved of their own accord, blowing across the floorboards like the smoldering relics of a spilled ashtray.

CHAPTER 35

Kyna shifted beneath her blanket, her knees tucked firmly against her chest, her arms wrapped around her shins. Though the evening was still considerably hot (and though she was fully clothed), her body trembled and her teeth chattered.

It was the first time in a long while she'd ever felt truly drained, caught off-guard by her own deficiencies and shattered epiphanies—which was to be expected. She'd thrown everything she'd had at Dead Man, and still he'd overpowered her, had very nearly had his way with her for the umpteenth time. She hadn't been able to defend herself directly, but by using Aaron, by animating his body with pure animosity, she'd paid Dead Man back for all the years of excess. Now, after the fact, she didn't feel any safer, any better.

Even if it had been someone else's hands doing the dirty work.

She might have blamed it on her contracted aural deficiency. With her reserves depleted, she was physically weakened. Ideally, she should have killed her father, cleaned up the mess, and bounced merrily off to her clubhouse with Aaron, using his semen to replenish her stores. That way, there might not have been any symptoms afterward, and she would have been able to help him dampen the moral aftereffects.

Instead, she'd locked herself in her tin hut, away from the house and the mess festering in the kitchen, waiting to be found by her mother, who was arriving home, presently.

Maybe it's not so bad this way, she thought, listening intently as she heard movement in the house. She pictured her mother, just off work, draping her jacket over the sofa, setting her purse down beside the wilting fern on the coffee table. Moving into the kitchen, next, stopping as she saw the stains, curious, first—then

screaming, shrieking as she realized it was blood, so much blood soaking the floor tiles, bits of brain and hair stuck to the walls like dried hamburger meat—

—Kyna clamped down hard, squeezing her eyes shut and wringing her aura to extend itself beyond the protective shell of her body. It was rough business: Her inner gears groaned and throbbed, the machine of her soul reluctant to jump into action again so soon, but she knew she could not simply sit still and listen to the horrific sounds her mother made as she gradually realized she was at the scene of a murder. She floated her essence over Mrs. Miller's, soothing and calming, filling her mother's head with the rich, comforting ether she'd grown so accustomed to over the past handful of years. It was the only thing that made life bearable.

The noises faded away. Mrs. Miller became a flesh puppet as Kyna directed her to the refrigerator and persuaded her to avail herself of the remainder of a six-pack Dead Man had bought last week. Getting drunk would take care of the problem now, and it would allow Kyna a night's rest without having to keep a peripheral handhold on her mother's frail psyche.

Curling up in her cotton cocoon, she shivered and waited.

She didn't realize she'd fallen asleep until the sound of someone rapping gently on the clubhouse door woke her up. Yawning groggily and clearing her throat, she sat up, forced her mind to focus itself.

Aaron, she thought, sensing his presence.

She left her bed, unlocking and opening the door. He was there, standing in the sickly pre-dawn light with his shoulders stooped and his hands stuffed in the pockets of his sweatshirt. His hair, which partially obscured his face, was disheveled and caught in the folds of his hood; it looked as if he'd been wandering the streets all night.

"We need to talk," he said quietly.

Kyna nodded. "I know."

She stepped aside so he could enter. As he brushed past, she felt the slightest urge to work his will, to make everything the way it was supposed to be, the way she *wanted* it to be—but she knew it was too late, and besides, she didn't have the strength.

Closing and locking the door, she turned to face him. He was standing with his back to her, hands still stuffed in his pockets.

"I saw Ash last night," he said. "She crawled in through my bedroom window. She wanted me to screw her—she said she needed my help." He turned around now, his expression ghostly. "She died, Kee. Right in my arms. She shriveled up and dissolved into a pile of dust."

Something caught in Kyna's throat. She hadn't seen or heard from Ash since she'd turned all her friends away at the end of the school year. The hopeful part of her had been convinced the survival instinct would be enough to carry those who'd fed on her autonomously through their own lives; to hear that someone she'd been so close to had been unable to fend for herself...

Aaron continued:

"I screamed and screamed. My mom heard the noise and thought some kind of serial killer had climbed in my window. I told her I was having a bad dream. The whole thing, it was a bad dream." He looked as if he were about to cry. "Kee...things like this just don't *happen*. Ash told me something...something I've been trying to think about all these months, ever since I moved here, ever since I met you, but I could never concentrate hard enough to connect the dots. It was like someone was always confusing me...throwing their knack so that I wouldn't figure out the truth."

Kyna felt herself dwindle. She choked back bitter tears, tried her hardest to keep her knees from knocking. "I loved you...I didn't want to hurt you."

Aaron closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Kee...is it true?"

He didn't need to be specific—she knew exactly what he

meant, and she knew that she'd passed the point of no return. Everything had to come out, or else she would implode, collapse in on herself until she reached an unbearable singularity.

"Yes," she said, keeping still as a statue. "I've been...keeping a lot of things from you because...because I didn't know how to tell you the truth. I was afraid if I did..." How to get it out, how to get it out? "...you might not want me anymore. I-I have a lot of bad memories, you know? Things I try to forget..." She trailed off again, her throat closing up, the muscles of her jaw tightening, and she knew she had to make a conscious leap if she wanted to get the truth out. "Look."

She forced herself into motion, shrugging the blanket off her shoulders. She began undoing the buttons of her jacket.

"Kyna..." groaned Aaron, undoubtedly assuming she was undressing for his pleasure (which was her typical response whenever he probed too close to home).

"No," she rasped, pulling off her shirt. "It's not what you think. Just look."

Bra, pants, underwear and socks followed, until she stood before him completely unclad. He had, of course, seen her naked on many occasions, but he'd never actually *seen* her, as she'd never truly let go.

She let go now.

It was like releasing a long-held breath: Her muscles relaxed, her skin shimmered as the contour of her chest and arms, her legs and thighs became crisscrossed with textured scar tissue—the trophies of her disastrous relationship with Joshua, her continued, unsuccessful initiation into the world of sex and disease and suppression.

When the reversion was complete, she stood very still and waited for Aaron's reaction. Unlike Joshua, she'd been able to build and maintain her body through regular diet and exercise (as opposed to merely using her mental abilities to give herself the *appearance* of strength). As such, she retained her svelte

physique, her firm muscle build, though she knew she must have looked more like a stitched-together warrior rather than a chiseled-in-stone athlete.

Aaron remained quiet. Something flickered in his eyes—sympathy, perhaps, or perhaps pity—or maybe it was disgust at discovering he'd been sleeping with a shape-shifting liar all this time. At any rate, Kyna was able to find a small amount of comfort in the fact that he hadn't yet run away or stomped off in a fit of disgust.

There was still hope.

Precious seconds passed, turning into minutes, and still Aaron said nothing. No words of comfort, no show of support.

Kyna padded across the room, sat at the edge of her bed and looked down at herself, tracing the seams of one leg with her finger. "Dead Man raped me. He gave me the disease. I needed someone to feed off of after that or I would have died, so I took Joshua. We were going to share with each other and live happily ever after, but we were just kids. We didn't know what we were doing." *So long ago that had been*, she thought. *So very, very long ago...and I still don't know what I'm doing.* "At first it wasn't so bad. I had someone who liked me, I had a way of sustaining myself without Dead Man. I thought Josh could save me, I thought we'd be happy together...but, well, it's like eating your absolute favorite cereal every single morning for twenty years—only it's sex, it's blood. You love it, you want it so bad you can't stop having it, but eventually you get sick of it. You get sick of needing it. I can only imagine what it was like for him."

She paused, looked up at Aaron (who hadn't budged an inch). It was more than a bit intimidating, to be completely bare, inside and out, but it was liberating as well to know that she could reveal herself so completely to someone who was, at the very least, listening.

"I couldn't handle it anymore, after a while" she said, continuing. "I didn't like what I'd become. I started drinking my own

blood to fill myself up. I drank so much it was like being constantly high. I could ignore my problems that way...I just couldn't ignore the wounds. Eventually it caught up with me, and I realized I had to change.

"I disciplined myself, learned to aim my willpower outside my own head. It helped to build up my body as well—the stronger I looked, the stronger I felt, and the more powerful I became. Eventually I was able to influence others as if their will was my own, but I didn't do it for selfish reasons. I helped people who needed control in their lives. People like Natalie and Anthony... Ash." Kyna sniffed inadvertently, remembering. "She was one of my scouters. We tried to find people who would share. Sometimes it was really hard. We felt like deadbeats, prostitutes—it wasn't *our* fault we were sick. Ash tried to kill herself once...she should have died, but I wouldn't let her. Just because she thought she was useless to the world doesn't mean she really was. I made her my sister, shared my energy with her, and she stayed alive because she *thought* she was alive, see?

"Natalie, Anthony...they were all my best friends, really. They did the dirty work for me because they trusted me to give them the strength they needed. We depended on each other.

"When Ash found you, I knew she'd found someone special. You don't suffer like the rest of us do. You're immune—but that's not why I got with you." Modesty caused her cheeks to flame. "I thought you were cute, and once we got to know each other, I knew it could be different...we're not just a couple when we're together, Aaron." She looked up at him. "With you I don't need to beg anymore. I don't need to borrow from other people."

Aaron began pacing the floor in front of her. "So...you lied. About you and me. About me being your first. I mean...I read Joshua's letter, but it didn't *stick*."

"Why are you thinking about that now?"

"This whole time...I opened myself to you, and you never told me anything. I couldn't ask you certain questions without you

changing the subject or working my mind so...so I didn't care—I didn't *think* I cared—as long as we kept doing it like dogs.” It was obvious he was becoming increasingly upset, but he kept his voice level. After a slight pause, he faced her and said, “You know, I used to have other girls come up to me and ask if I wanted to sleep with them. They said I looked like the type of guy who was good in bed—that was all I ever got, sometimes. No relationships, just girls wanting to satisfy themselves. I always turned them down when it got too heavy too fast because I wanted to save myself for that special girl...I thought it was you, but when I woke up yesterday and all the memories came back...I saw myself just giving in to someone I didn't even know. Like I didn't care, so long as I got some.” His voice quavered. “Is that it, Kee? You just needed my jism?”

He was hurt—Kyna knew that. She wished she knew what to say. “No, of course not. I need you. Not because of some disease, but because I love you. You know that, right?”

“I don't know anything anymore. I didn't know your dad raped you. I didn't know you had this...this *disease*, or whatever it is. I didn't know you and Josh were together. Every time I came close to asking, you made it so that I couldn't hold the thought in my head.”

“It...it doesn't matter. I love you.”

“How do I know?”

Just look at me, she thought. *Would I reveal myself to just anyone?* Nevertheless, she couldn't convince him if he didn't want to be convinced.

“What if I'd just been anyone,” he said, after a moment. “Just an ordinary guy, new in town? No superpowers or anything—would you have gotten with me then?”

She couldn't answer the question, for she knew it had been Aaron's essence (and, admittedly, his body) that had drawn her to him in the first place; had his soul been less radiant, had he been less-than-gorgeous, she might have passed him by com-

pletely. However, that had not been the case. She'd found him, attached herself to him with the intention of having a taste and then moving on—but instead, she'd come to cherish him for more than his abundant energy supply. She'd truly fallen in love with him—enough so that she felt it necessary to humiliate herself as she did now, to sit here bare-bodied and defenseless, revealing everything that she'd been keeping from him and from herself.

Even with Josh it hadn't been like this, she thought. Doesn't he see that?

"Would you?" Aaron repeated.

"Of course," she replied, lips quivering. "The reason I got with you is because you're not 'just anyone.'"

He sighed, seemingly unconvinced. "I don't know if I can take this anymore."

"Aaron, please. Shit's fucked up right now. We need time to settle down and think rationally about everything—"

"You used me."

"I didn't use you. I loved you—I still love you. I just...I didn't know if you loved me. I wasn't sure...I was afraid."

"You *made* me love you."

Kyna faltered, gasping something that sounded like, "I know." It was, she realized, the first time in their relationship that he'd ever confronted her, and she was unused to being so unknowing. Without her influence, he could go either way: forgiveness or fury.

She prayed he would somehow understand.

"What about your father?" he asked.

"What about him?" she snapped, wiping newly-discovered tears from her face.

"Someone's going to find out. The police—"

"No police. They wouldn't understand—how could they? I mean, Dead Man raising me as a nudist, raping me, treating my mom like a prostitute—how we subsisted for all these years...you

think they'll understand that? You think they'll understand when we tell them we killed him and buried him in my backyard—you think they'll understand *that*? You think they won't lock us all away?"

Aaron shrugged. He had the look of a teenager longing to be ten years old again. There were tears trickling down his cheek. "You don't know...it wasn't you who bashed his head into the floor, Kee. I didn't even know him."

But I did, she heard herself thinking. I never wanted to kill him either, but I did want him dead. Someone who does the things he did...it was only a matter of time before it caught up with him.

"I had to make a choice," she said softly. "In that situation, under those circumstances, what would you have done? It was the only way. He would have raped me again and again, and he would have beaten the shit out of you. We had to defend ourselves." She couldn't think of anything more to say, so she merely sat at the edge of her bed with her hands resting between her legs and waited.

Aaron remained where he was, standing halfway between her and the door. He was quieter than ever, considering, sneaking glimpses of her gnarled body—proof of a ludicrously hard life.

Harder, even, if you have to go it alone...please, Aaron. Don't bail on me. Not when I need you.

He cleared his throat, went for the door. "I need to think about this. On my own."

Kyna felt her pulse quicken. She jolted from the bed, caught his shoulder as he slid the lock back. "I'll call you later, then."

"No," he replied, keeping his back to her. "I really need to think about this—about us—for a while. I don't know how long."

He slid the door open, and for a split second she thought it was over, that she'd lost him.

Too much. I clung too hard, I wanted too much and now he's suffocated. It's my own fault, oh, God, why did I make this happen?

She started to cry, her chest heaving and her eyes watering—

but something caught her before she was able to spiral relentlessly into the depths of despair, and the rippling baseline of her survival instinct flared. When Dead Man had frozen her in the kitchen yesterday, it was what had turned her from frightened animal to fearless hunter. It was happening now, a rush of adrenaline flexing muscle, tightening limbs as she grabbed Aaron around the neck and pulled him, stumbling, back inside the clubhouse.

She was herself for only a moment; once her aura flared and her ego soared, she became the Kyna Miller who, when faced with unbeatable odds, nevertheless won the battle, survived at all costs—

—and swallowed the souls of those who did her harm.

CHAPTER 36

At first it was just a dull ache pulling at the fringes of Aaron's consciousness, something he might have felt upon waking after too much sleep. He moved to turn onto his side—and that's when he was suddenly hit by vertigo, the feeling that he was too small for himself, that his arms and legs were not quite in their proper place.

Opening his eyes, he found he was still in Kyna's clubhouse, and he was lying on his back on her bed—which was odd, because the last thing he remembered doing was stepping through the door, intent on going home.

He sat up. The blood rushed to his head and a thousand hangovers converged on him, all at once. He reached for his head, certain that he had a concussion, and found that his hair was gone. Well, not *gone*, but most of it had been lopped off.

The biggest surprise, though, was his body—which wasn't *his* body but, rather, Kyna's. Looking down at himself he saw the telltale scars riddling his otherwise smooth, pale skin; he felt the absence of weight between his legs, an indiscriminate feminine cleft where his penis should have been. He'd somehow been transplanted, and his mind now commanded Kyna's sinewy frame.

Can she do that? he wondered incredulously.

He slid out of bed, wanting to get a good look at himself in the mirror. It was odd at first, walking around as a girl, the weight of his hips, buttocks, and breasts pulling at him in all the wrong places—and there was the fatigue, the drag that, despite Kyna's impressive muscles, made every step feel like wading through molten lead. It was like waking in the middle of the night during

a fever pitch: Everything ached, everything hurt.

This is what it felt like to be hungry—truly starving.

Aaron stumbled. Kyna had never told him she could swap bodies. Helping him exit his own during astral trips, yes, but it never occurred to him that a soul could step into another body like a new set of clothes.

He approached the mirror, reached up and felt his face, his shoulders and chest. He wanted to know why he was in Kyna's body, and why she'd undoubtedly taken his (a quick survey of the clubhouse did not reveal his male body having been stashed away anywhere).

Her clothes were still on the floor where she'd dropped them earlier. As quickly as possible, he dressed, though it was painful to bend over, as every little extra bit of pressure to his head magnified the knife edges poking his cerebellum. He realized he was feeling the hunger, the drag that Kyna had spoken of, the symptoms she constantly had to deal with in exchange for her enhanced abilities. She hadn't been lying, as he'd never felt more wretched than he did now. Indeed, he had to pause after he'd pulled his shoes on, as his head felt like it might very well explode.

He took a moment to compose himself and to reach out tentatively with his mind. Kyna's body was considerably weakened; it affected his aural energy and made it difficult to extend himself clearly, but after a few attempts he could sense Kyna (packed inside his body) being broadcast along the thread that connected her to him. Wherever she was, and whatever she was doing, she was definitely distraught and frantic—which worried Aaron, because that meant she was running around in his body and possibly not thinking too responsibly about it.

To get back at me? he wondered. He could sense jealousy amidst a kaleidoscope of emotions. There was also remorse. *Like maybe she swapped with me before she could really think about it.*

Regardless of the reasons behind Kyna's divergent theft, he

knew he had to find her soon, before her body gave in to exhaustion, before he was left with no place else to go.

* * *

An hour's aimless jaunt brought Kyna to the corner of Lincoln and Euclid Street. Slightly north, just before the 5 freeway, there was a recess in the wild oleanders; descending the dirt slope, Kyna found herself alongside the Southern Pacific railway. She crossed a small, desolate construction site and stepped onto the tracks, began walking eastward. The rising sun shone in her face, causing her to sweat, and, had the circumstances not been so grave, she might have laughed at such an idiotic display of senselessness. She had no idea what she was doing, where she was going, or why she'd taken Aaron's body at the onset; she only knew that she'd placed action before thought on this, yet another cataclysmic occasion.

What the hell am I doing? she thought, kicking at a discarded soda can. She'd been angry and upset—completely susceptible to her own rampant emotions—when she'd stolen Aaron's body, and now she didn't know if she'd done it simply to spite him, or if she just wanted to get away from her miserable life so bad that she'd donned his flesh and run off.

She actually laughed, considering what it would be like to spend the rest of her life in a boy's body. Aaron's was good, very athletic, and bigger, more well-proportioned than Joshua's had been. When she'd first left the clubhouse, she'd jogged consistently for the first twenty minutes and hadn't run out of breath. He was sturdily-built, for sure, but dating would be difficult, as Kyna's soul was feminine; just because she was inhabiting a male body didn't mean her sexual orientation suddenly flipped over as well. And there was the penis thing, though she'd always assumed it was easier for guys to urinate.

It was tempting, but physically impossible. Her soul had al-

ready been imprinted upon her female body at the moment of her birth, meaning she could only spend so much time outside her own flesh before the connection was lost and she died. Had it been possible to swap-out permanently, she would have done so long ago.

The question still remained, then: What to do in the here and now? She knew she would eventually cool down enough so that returning home and facing Aaron again would be bearable, but at the moment she was too wound up to give in to practicality. She wanted something, she just didn't know what. (Perhaps a final, childishly selfish attempt to spend time with Aaron—or a *part* of him, at least—before she let him go for good.)

A stretch of track ran behind an abandoned warehouse, where Kyna found privacy amongst a pile of withered orange crates and petrified tires. She sat with her legs crossed and closed her eyes, tried to rise above the terminal misery that was her life. It wasn't easy: There were so many bridges left unburned, so many paths leading back to the same obvious truth, and no amount of distance between her and the grave in her mother's backyard could change that.

"Hey, white boy. Got any money?"

She looked up. A pair of adolescent Hispanic boys were standing over her with menacing looks on their faces.

"Fuck off," she said, looking away nonchalantly and tensing her gut as she readied her aura for retaliation. Aaron's body responded immediately, layered muscles slithering beneath suddenly hot skin.

The boys exchanged amused glances. One reached into his pocket and withdrew a switchblade; the other scowled at Kyna and said:

"How about we just fuck you up, then?"

"Okay," said Kyna. "If that's how you want to do it—"

They pounced, but Kyna was ready—a little *too* ready, for when she jumped to her feet and lashed out mentally, channeling ev-

everything at once, she forgot that she wasn't in her own body, that this was Aaron's, and it was wired quite differently. In her own flesh, working her knack was somewhat akin to lifting a certain amount of weight: gaging how heavy something was, calculating the amount of brute strength needed, and lifting. Aaron's abilities were trigger-sensitive. The slightest touch had his molten core exploding in a torrent of pent-up energy.

Her vision flared bright white as a searing heat engulfed her, sent her tumbling to the ground in a cyclone of pain and pressure.

* * *

Unused to maneuvering from within a female body, Aaron made his way homeward feeling as if his joints had been mismatched. With every swing of his arms, every stretch of his calves, every flexing of his buttocks, he felt as if his center of gravity was about to topple him forward onto the pavement. Luckily, Kyna's body was more masculine than most girls'. Otherwise, he might have had to crawl home.

He reached Belinda Circle and strode quickly towards his parents' house, but stopped when he realized (duh!) he was wearing the body of a sixteen-year-old girl. He'd been concentrating so diligently on his predicament, on how to rectify the whole insane situation if he just had ten minutes alone in his bedroom, that he'd forgotten his own limitations. This had the effect of doubly multiplying his already frantic state, because, as much as he wanted to rush teary-eyed into the arms of the nearest parent, he knew he was utterly and absolutely alone right now.

And the hunger pangs were getting worse.

"You look lost," called a familiar voice—Nathan Brown's. Conjured out of thin air, apparently, he was leaning against the porch railing of his home and casually surveying the cul-de-sac.

"I'm, um, looking for a friend," Aaron replied, closing his eyes

inadvertently and swaying on his feet as fatigue washed over him. "His name's Aaron. I think he, um, lives next door, but I can't seem to get a hold of him."

Nathan chuckled. "I see. Why don't you come in for a bit, then? Maybe I can help you sort this out."

Eyes open once again, heart fluttering, Aaron nodded and stepped across the lawn, up the steps. Nathan led him inside and directed him to a small couch (flanked by ferns) in the living room. He rested his head against the soft cushioning.

God, I'm so tired, he thought. He wanted to roll onto his side and sleep for the next month, not caring that he was wrapped in girl-flesh—and if it turned out little old Nathan Brown liked to molest teenage girls in the comfort of his living room, there was little Aaron could do to stop it, at this point.

"Aaron."

He opened his eyes, saw Nathan standing before him, a steaming mug in his hands. "Yeah?"

"Drink. It'll clear your head."

Leaning forward, he took the mug in his hands, sipped carefully, letting the scalding liquid wash down his throat. Halfway through, he felt his strength returning, his mind becoming sharp once again.

He realized that Nathan had called him *Aaron*.

The old man winked and took a seat in the wicker armchair across from Aaron. "A concoction of mine, just a few herbs, really—but it does the job, wouldn't you say?"

Aaron nodded, amazed, for sure, at the tea's results, but far more interested in how Nathan had been able to see him, curled up in Kyna's flesh like a stowaway in a suitcase, without the slightest qualm. "You have the knack," he said.

Nathan smiled. "So, that's what they're calling it these days?"

"Well, I don't think there's an actual *name*, but it's something like that. A little trick people like to throw around. A lot of folks seem to have it...like a disease or something, I was told."

"Yeah," said Nathan. "Great Britain's got Mad Cow, San Francisco's got tuberculosis, and we have Aesop's."

"Aesop's?"

Nathan nodded. "Sort of like the boy who cried wolf. No one has ever proved a single case, though it's damned certain we're suffering from *something*—so they lump us all together in a miscellaneous category."

"So...you know something about this, then?"

"I've lived long enough to have met my share of the afflicted. All I know is from first-hand experience...years of doing my own research. You know, an 'if you want it done right, do it yourself' sort of thing."

Aaron studied the residue of bark and leaves at the bottom of his cup. "You know, I don't think I've ever had herb tea before. What's in this?"

"Buckthorn, White Oak Bark, and a short list of other herbs you can find at most health food stores. The trick is knowing the right combination."

"And it's the same as, um, bodily fluids?"

"I'd like to think it's a hundred times better. So, what's the story? How is it that you've decided to take a stroll through the neighborhood in such a getup?"

Aaron almost laughed out loud. "My girlfriend and I are having problems." It sounded ridiculous, the concept that his girlfriend had decided to somehow get back at him by stealing his body. Thinking about it now, though, helped him sober up, and it reminded him just how precarious his situation was. "She says I'm a carrier. I got sick for a couple hours, maybe, but then it went away...other people, I hear they have it much worse. She has it much worse. I guess that's part of the reason she wanted to get with me. The whole time I've been dating her, I never knew until...until some serious stuff happened recently." His stomach churned, ever so slightly. "I couldn't take it, so I told her I needed to think things over—I mean, I still love her, it's just...it's

going to be hard knowing the truth.”

“I hear you,” Nathan said, sighing. “We all like to believe there’s the chance we might be immortal, in some small way, but then something like this comes along and levels the playing field. It’s a lot like a textbook disease: Each person deals with it in his own way. Some will simply ignore it until it can’t be ignored, others will throw every last drop of blood at the problem to try and stave it off. Even in today’s modernized society, it’s become survival of the fittest. Some people become hunters; I became a gardener.”

Aaron felt a chill, recalling his experiences with the garden doppelganger. “The garden...that statue that looks just like you...”

“It’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Sorry...I can’t help it. When I first saw—I mean...it’s just so strange-looking and all.”

Nathan nodded. “It’s a familiar—*my* familiar. I keep it well-watered, trimmed, and it flourishes. As long as it stays alive, I stay alive, and it takes the burden off my shoulders...though I know a few other people who have the energy to keep themselves going long after death has come knocking on their doors.”

Death. The word had a delayed effect on Aaron. “You mean you...you’re...?”

“Dead? Well, not quite.” Nathan took a moment to stare into the air just above the coffee table, pondering things that weren’t there. “I used to live in the city when I was younger. I made a nice enough living as a broker, had a cozy little apartment with a jacuzzi—just give me a new gal every weekend and I was the happiest man on Earth...until I happened to bring the wrong lass home. Never used a condom back then—thought I was too good to attract a little bad karma, and that’s probably what she thought, too.

“After I got sick, after my doctor looked at me and shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment, I knew I was on my own. I spent a

small chunk of money on this house and moved into my new life, thinking it wouldn't be long before it was all mercifully over. Still, I read every medical encyclopedia, every alternative medicine journal, and every self-help book I could find. Somehow I survived long enough so that herbs made enough sense to do some good, and I realized that investing in my own miniature plant kingdom would be more than mere busywork.

"Quiet, humble—away from all the parties, drinking, and women; some would say I've missed out on all the fun of being young, but out here, outside the city, I can really *hear* myself in the silence. I wasn't ready to go, when it was my time. Death caught me off-guard, and would have robbed me of that slow-burn so many of us take for granted—I wanted to wind down, to watch the sun set for the last time rather than have the carpet yanked from beneath my feet."

Aaron thought of Ash, and he wondered how long it had been since death had made her a vampire by necessity. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be. I'm not. We all come into this world without a thought in our heads. It takes a lifetime to make sense from the senseless. The one thing we all have in common is the need to survive, so that maybe one day we'll be around when the answers are handed out. I'm just surviving."

It was a simple notion. Perhaps a little Draconian, but when you got right down to it, what was life except the need to survive?

Aaron smiled, set down his mug—
—and that's when the world exploded.

* * *

With hot hellfire raging all around, pinprick daggers speared Kyna through and through as she struggled to get a handhold, a foothold—any sort of control over the mad rush gushing forth

from Aaron's mighty reserves.

Her prospective attackers had long since fled, leaving her alone to crawl and gasp on the ground like a dying fish. She choked and screamed, felt her clothes catching fire, felt the gravel beneath her sizzling and smoking—and she heard herself thinking, *I'm going to die...really. This is it. This is how I'm going to die...*

To make matters worse, she was going to die in Aaron's body, leaving him on his own to sort things out afterward.

My own fucking ego, she thought. *Because I had to somehow have the last word, his life will be ruined just like mine. Not good enough for me that I could just crawl off into my own hole and die...I had to drag him down with me.*

The flames burned hotter, and she felt herself losing consciousness, her thoughts scattered and meaningless and devastating.

No wonder he hates me—he probably never liked me...all just my imagination insisting on keeping control, pretending I was just like anyone else...and all along, I was devouring him, his soul, his body—his beautiful body, dissolving now, destroying itself in an attempt to get rid of the virus, to get rid of me...

And that would have been it, her last, bitter revelation before the darkness of death, had not Aaron, accompanied by someone she had never met, suddenly appeared beside her in the mental whirlwind.

Kee—it's okay. I'm here.

She felt a steadying influence, a guiding vibration lifting her out of Aaron's body.

No, she thought. *Too much pain! I can't ask you to do this for me—*

Kee, don't worry...please. We'll deal with this later...I can handle it for now. You just go with Mr. Brown, okay?

Kyna felt her soul shifting past Aaron's as she slipped back into her body, Aaron into his. It was tantamount to sending him naked into a burning house. *Oh, Aaron...*

Shush. You know where to find me.
And with that his consciousness receded.

* * *

Kyna, now in her own body again, now sitting huddled in the passenger seat of Nathan Brown's Volkswagen as they sped along Lincoln en route to a dusty stretch of track behind a secluded empty warehouse, was shaking like a leaf. Expectation had her hoping for the best, but fearing the worst—and knowing that this day, once past, will have scarred both Aaron and herself for life.

He was there, lying face-up on the ground where she'd exited his body. His flesh was seared, his clothing smoldering. The burns weren't as serious as Joshua's had been, but there would be scars, memories.

He was mumbling:

"...not so bad, Kee. Really. I can stay just above my body and hardly feel it..."

Kyna wanted to cry, to throw herself upon the ground and beg for God to take her life so that she might not destroy another's, but she kept herself moving, not thinking but getting done what needed to be done: lifting Aaron into the car, smoothing his wounded skin with her willpower as Nathan drove them home. It was grueling work—she was already taxed beyond anything she'd ever felt before—but it helped the healing process, and she knew she would bleed herself dry if it meant she could repair at least a part of the damage she'd done.

When they arrived at Belinda Circle, Aaron was somewhat coherent, and able to walk, with help. Kyna continued to suppress her thoughts and emotions (to the point of causing stomach cramps) as she helped Mr. Brown carry him home. The final stretch was almost unbearable: knocking on the front door of Aaron's parents' house, waiting (seemingly) forever for it to open—and when it finally did, seeing Mrs. Capps standing there,

hand suddenly slammed over her mouth as she cried out at the sight of her incapacitated son.

Kyna watched the scene through tear-glazed eyes and prayed for the strength to carry on.

CHAPTER 37

A Saturday afternoon, the following summer: It was one of those days when spontaneity was in the air, and Kyna's restless mind was, at the moment, as clear blue as the California sky.

Today was Picnic Day, a sort of tradition started by both the Capps and Miller families the previous October. Every other weekend—barring rain or the Santa Anas—was spent at the local park and augmented by a cooler full of tuna sandwiches, lemoned cucumbers, Dr. Pepper, and a very special iced tea (Nathan Brown's recipe, which had become Kyna and Aaron's unabashed confection).

With her mother (who was wearing a lovely summer dress and looking healthier than ever) at her side, and Mr. And Mrs. Capps, not far behind (and walking hand in hand), Kyna ascended a shallow hillside and watched amusedly as Aaron bounded ahead to find that "perfect spot."

"He's like a faithful puppy dog, sometimes," Mrs. Miller joked.

Kyna laughed as Mr. Capps, overhearing, said:

"*Sometimes?* Ha! We *still* have problems with him drinking out of the toilet!"

"That's terrible, Daniel," said Mrs. Capps, slapping her husband playfully on the shoulder.

Presently, Aaron set down the cooler in a patch of shade offered by a trio of sycamores and waved his arm in the air.

"Over here!" he called.

Kyna helped set out the blanket—a colorful patchwork quilt that her mother had finally completed earlier in the year—and, once everyone had settled, distributed the sandwiches. As she ate, she listened to the conversations, laughed at the jokes, and generally allowed herself to slip into the languid flow.

Aaron moved beside her as the afternoon waned and the sunlight became golden, and she snuggled into his arms, smelling the breeze on his skin, in his clothes. She missed his sun-bleached tresses, which he'd sacrificed for a buzz-cut—something different, something to set himself apart from his first few months in Anaheim. (She, too, had changed somewhat, allowing her hair to grow out for the first time since her childhood.)

We're still the same people, she thought, and yet somehow different...somehow set adrift from what hurts most. At least for today...

She gazed up at Aaron, saw how the peach fuzz dusting his jaw caught the sunlight, spun into gold, and she knew it was the same for him, knew that sometimes he awoke in the middle of the night in cold sweats, with icy tears chilling his cheek—but it was never so bad that there weren't days like this, days when the mental storm front kept its distance.

And even on a day like today, when the warm routine had lulled her into a waking dream state, away from school, work, and worldwide worries, there was still room for a pleasant surprise—something totally unexpected in and of itself, but not unwelcome: Joshua.

She spotted him on her way back from the women's restroom; he was running to catch a Frisbee, and he almost collided with her, apologizing, dusting himself off as he recognized her and fell silent for a moment. She had a momentary flashback of the previous summer, when she'd slipped the recipe for Nathan Brown's special tea through his bedroom window—a peace offering, a final goodbye, if he'd chosen to accept it. Now here he was, looking healthy—looking *whole* for a change. He'd finally filled out, less a wispy youth and more a hardy young man.

The funny thing was, she found herself devoid of all the old adolescent reactions; she didn't feel the slightest pang from him, either.

"Hey," she said, after a moment.

Joshua nodded. "Hey."

“Beautiful day, huh?”

“Yeah. Had to get some Frisbee action in. Are you here alone, or...?”

“I came with my family. How about you?” She glanced past Joshua’s shoulder, saw his companion (an agreeable-looking boy dressed in cargo pants and a tank top) waiting patiently.

“That’s Ian,” Joshua said. “He takes good care of me...we take care of each other.”

Kyna nodded, understanding. She looked off into the trees for a moment, pondering various questions, random ways of catching up on the times. Then it dawned on her that she already knew everything she needed to know: Joshua was alive, healthy, and he had someone. Anything beyond that would be retreading old territory; it wasn’t necessary.

“Well,” she said, smiling warmly. “It’s nice seeing you again. Take care of yourself, okay?”

“You, too,” replied Joshua, with a nod.

They parted ways, and Kyna returned to the picnic blanket, where she and the others finished the soda and cucumbers, and, for the rest of the afternoon, it was good to be alive.

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