

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Behind the Green Door

January 22, 1988

Wearing a t-shirt, vest, black pants, and scrunched down hat, I sat across from Mitchell in his Drama classroom. We were doing a dress-rehearsal reading of the *Honeymooners* skit script we put together. I played an outraged Ed Norton, sick of eating the same bagged lunch every day at work. “All I get is peanut butter sandwiches, peanut butter sandwiches, and more peanut butter sandwiches! I’m telling you, I’m tired of it, Ralph!”

Wearing a makeshift blue bus driver uniform, Mitchell slipped ably into the Ralph Kramden role. “Why don’t you complain to Trixie?”

I threw my hand in the air. “What for? I make my own sandwiches!”

On loan from Shop, I was happy to get away from that class, happier still to be doing a *Honeymooners* bit, and completely delighted to be spending time with Mitchell. The pregnant drama teacher, Mrs. Navarro, moved about the room, offering personalized attention to the various groups of rehearsing students. “We’re ready for her to hear us do a run through,” I said.

Mitchell changed the subject abruptly. “What’s this I’m hearing about you and Marina?”

I toyed with denying the rumor, but was tired of not being honest with Mitchell: “I like her. She’s not into me. It’s the worst thing I’ve ever felt. I want to make it stop.”

“I’m sorry,” said Mitchell.

“These aren’t even real feelings I’m having,” I complained. “They’re just hormones, but they’re making me think about Marina *all the time!* She’s become my *idée fixe*.”

“Emotions are real. If you’re feeling it, it’s real. Are you sure she doesn’t like you back?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah. She pines for me day and night.”

“Have you even tried talking to her?” Mitchell asked.

I took my Norton hat off and played with it absently. “I wouldn’t know what to say.”

"The thing about girls is they get up in the morning and put their pants on, just like us."

"I know that!" (Actually, I didn't.)

"I'm lucky," Mitchell said. "I live with my older sister and my mother." Mitchell's mother was a diminutive nurse young enough to be mistaken for his older sister. During my visits, I sometimes found her collapsed in a heap on the living room couch, recovering from an all-night shift in the emergency room. Mitchell's sister was around less often but had an urbane air. Once, she fed carrots to her fat white rabbit as I watched. "He's an asshole," she explained, "or I'd let you feed him. He'd bite your finger off." Living with those two women would be an education, for sure. I had the impression they were intensely cool. Mitchell continued, "Women are just people, you know? Knowing that means I can talk to anyone. Too bad you haven't known many girls. If you'd grown up with a sister, you'd be dangerous."

"Yeah, a regular Casanova."

Mrs. Navarro came by to see how we were doing. Mitchell pretended to read the script. "'Why don't you complain to Trixie?'"

I caught on. "'What for? I make my own sandwiches!'"

Mrs. Navarro smiled at us. "*Honeymooners*? That should be fun. I'm looking forward to that." She moved away.

"Is it possible to fall out of love with someone?" I asked. "Because I'm not buying the idea that it is 'better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.'"

"Pick her apart. Where are her flaws? Does she have gnarled toes? She snaggle-toothed?"

I squirmed. "That's hardly gentlemanly behavior. I like this girl as a person. I don't just lust after her, you know. She's big-hearted. So, if she has flaws, I choose not to see them."

"I'm trying to help you, here. Stop being obstinate. Listen, take Lucy Ghiaccio over there in the corner. You see her?" When I didn't turn around to look, he continued talking. "She's got her back to us right now. She's got an ass you can bounce quarters off of, but she's dumb as a post. That's *not* sexy. Focus on Marina's flaws if you want to disenchant yourself."

I shrugged. "I guess. That's a little mean for my taste, you know."

"Check Lucy out now," Mitchell urged. "Her jeans fit just right."

"She didn't put those jeans on for me."

"This is for your own good. We're helping you fall out of love with Marina."

"That ass isn't for me. Besides, I'm more of a breast man."

"Would you just look at Lucy, please?" Mitchell growled.

Slow, stiff, and unnatural, I signaled to half the class that I was turning around to gape openly at a girl's undercarriage. Unfortunately for me, Lucy's homicidal brother, Armand, was also visiting today to rehearse *Glengarry Glen Ross* with one of Mitchell's classmates. The mad-eyed, werewolf-hairy man leapt across the room, seized me by my t-shirt, and raised an open switchblade to my right eye. Armand's breath was hot on my face. "Are you starin' at my sister's ass? Huh? Are you? Huh? Are you?"

My prop hat fell off my head to the gray tiled floor.

No lookie heinie. Lookie heinie, get eye poked out with switchblade.

"Hey, get away from him!" Mitchell yelled.

Time had slowed. It was as if someone else were being attacked.

Inching towards us with her hands up, Mrs. Navarro tried to intervene without getting me killed. "Dear God, what is happening over here?"

I wasn't really here. I was swimming underwater.

Snarling like a rabid dog, the black-haired Frank-Zappa-lookalike bared his clenched teeth at Mitchell and Mrs. Navarro. "He was starin' at my sister's ass."

Mrs. Navarro cleared her throat. "Damian was just looking at the clock, Armand."

I felt warm and weird. I examined my pants to see if I had urinated over myself. No.

The color drained from her face, Lucy appeared at our side. "Armand, stop doing this!"

Fancy that. She looks just like Paulette Goddard in Modern Times. And I'm going to die.

"Papà said I gotta look out for you, Lucy!" The sweat from Armand's hands seeped into my Ed Norton t-shirt. "Papà says you're too young

to date. You got the body of a woman, but you're still his little girl. We gotta protect you from slime balls, like this guy!"

Lucy kept her voice steady. "I'm not dating!"

"All eyes are on you, all the time. I can't rest for a second!"

"I know!" Lucy yelled. "I walk into a room and everyone is staring at me! It always feels like I have ants crawling all over my body. That's all the eyes in the room roving all over me!"

"Exactly!" Armand waved the point of his switchblade around in front of my pupil. "What about this ant? I should poke his fuckin' eye out!"

Lucy gave me a despairing look. "No! Leave him alone."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" Lucy yelled.

Armand released his grip and shoved me away in one quick motion of his arm. "Fine! But you gotta stop wearing those 'fuck me' jeans. They're way too damn tight."

Lucy glared at her brother. "I'll wear whatever I want to wear, Armand."

"You're just askin' to get stared at, dressin' like that," Armand groused.

I'm not sure what possessed me to speak, but I wanted to help the girl who had just helped me. "It ain't her clothes, man. She's gorgeous. Guys'll stare if she's in a burlap sack."

Mrs. Navarro looked like she was about to wail in horror when I said this, but Armand seemed to hear what I was saying. "She'd still be a beautiful in a burlap sack, wouldn't she?"

Mrs. Navarro cut in. "Can we all return to our seats now?"

Lucy grabbed Armand by the wrist and dragged him out into the hallway to give him a piece of her mind.

Mrs. Navarro looked me over, trying to see if I had any cuts of me. When I seemed fine, but only shaken, she asked me to sit down. She left to pour me a glass of water from her sink.

Mitchell put a protective hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"If your right eye causes you to sin," I croaked, "'gouge it out and throw it away.'"

"That was all my fault." Mitchell seemed twice as shaken as I was.

As usual, I was numb. The horror wouldn't settle on me until later, when I tried to go to sleep.

I forced a smile to reassure him. "Think about it. I'm lonely and heartsick. She's ripe. Armand's a maniac. That encounter was inevitable."

"Yeah, but I brought you here and made you look."

"Listen, you're absolutely right about her having some Serious Badonk able to pass the Quarter Test. The real irony is that Armand sees me as this enormous threat to his sister's chastity, when I don't know the first thing about sex."

"You know, there's not that much to know about sex. It's just people squelching, really."

"Squelching?" I stuck my tongue out like I'd licked a toad. "Dude. That's mad gross." A thought struck me and I laughed. "Hey, guess what? I'm not sure Lucy's dumb."

Mitchell joined me, laughing. "I was wrong about that, too!"

"That was pretty hot when she defended me," I said. "You think I should ask her out?"

"Don't you dare!" Mitchell punched me in the shoulder.

My crooked smile was back. "So, let me see if I understand your line of thinking here: You wanted to teach me how to forget wanting Marina. Your strategy was to point out a second hot Italian bitch I'm not allowed to have? So's I can obsess over her, too? I'm not sure that improves my situation! And how's ogling a perfect ten supposed to teach me to pick girls apart?"

Mitchell ran a hand through his hair. "I thought Lucy would show that there are better looking girls than Marina. And that we could also find something wrong with Lucy, too."

"I'm not sure there's *anything* wrong with Lucy."

"Okay, so I didn't pick the best example for my lesson."

I sighed. "That bit when she was talking about the ants on her? I felt awful for her."

"It's true for all attractive girls. That's how us guys make them feel. It must be something walking into a room knowing everyone in it wants to fuck you."

"And she's stuck with that brother of hers!"

Mitchell frowned. "Yeah."

I felt myself getting angry again. “I bet real money that guy’s Sicilian.”

Mitchell smashed his fist down on the table in frustration, startling me. “I hate this fucking school!”

January 22, 1988

That same day, in chorus, Mrs. Laird reshuffled the positions of the singers based on our rapidly changing voices. The sopranos were now in the front row. The altos were in the middle, and tenors and baritones in the back. Now a baritone, I remained in the back row. My two shoulder-pad-wearing tormentors moved up a row to join the altos. Funny how the smallest change could resolve one of the biggest problems. A terrible chapter in my life had ended with a wave of the teacher’s magic wand and no fanfare at all.

Kyle Ahearne joined me in the back. He’d dropped from soprano to tenor overnight. Sandy haired, with a strong chin, and crystal eyes, Kyle reassured me with his “young Franco Nero” presence. *If I find a genie in a lamp, one of my three wishes will be to look like Franco Nero in his prime in Django or Camelot.* A tennis instructor in training from an extended family of police officers and nurses, Kyle harbored a lot of secret anger and pain that he released through wise-cracking, teasing, and unexpected outbursts. He didn’t tell me much about his life other than that his mom divorced his father for gambling and drinking too much and replaced him with a man who was a hundred times more abusive. Kyle’s favorite book was *This Boy’s Life* by Tobias Wolff, because he said it was essentially his life story. Other than those tidbits of information, and his angry references to his stepfather as “Mr. Personality,” Kyle was guarded and his home life mysterious. Whatever demons Kyle had to deal with in secret, he was unusually kind to me. While most others found my perspective irritating or unfathomable, Kyle was perceptive about my thoughts and feelings even when I left them unexpressed.

Reseated, it was time for us to take the first exam of the spring semester. “Damien will be singing the song ‘The Green Door,’” Mrs.

Laird announced. "It was written by Bob Davie and Marvin Moore, and most famously sung by Jim Lowe in 1956."

I stood and made my way to the front of the room, hoping that the lyrics wouldn't give away why I picked the song. The students weren't all watching me, but enough had their eyes on me to make me self-conscious. My performance anxiety flared up, causing ghost nausea and a dread of making eye-contact with my audience. Mrs. Laird played the intro and I started to sing. "The Green Door" is a song about an insomniac finding himself wandering the city at night, coming across a green speakeasy entrance. Not sure if it is a bar, jazz club, brothel, or something even cooler, the insomniac knocks on the door. It opens a crack, but his attempt to guess the password fails and the door slams shut in his face. He stays outside the green door, listening to the sounds of laughter and an old piano playing up-tempo, sensual music, wondering what secrets the closed door is keeping from him. I did a respectable job singing, starting tentatively, but getting better as I went along. By the time I reached the line, "All I want to do is join the happy crowd behind the green door," I sang it with a melancholy so profound I surprised myself. When I finished, every instinct urged me to sprint to the back of the room and hide my head under my seat. Smiling through gritted teeth, I willed myself to stay in place.

Jumping to his feet, clapping his meaty hands together, Kyle Ahearne of the blue eyes and blonde five-o'clock shadow yelled, "Go, Cavaliere, go! That was the bomb!" This fellow who had been so quiet all year that I hadn't known who he was when Marina mentioned him was now whooping it up on my behalf. Kyle wasn't clapping just because he felt bad for me, and the other students weren't clapping sarcastically. I had done well! My weak sauce opening hadn't spoiled the performance after all. I didn't want the spell to break, so I remained stock still. Since I couldn't express my gratitude through a stone face, I imagined Sally Field in my head, feeling the right emotion on my behalf, crying and beaming, "I've wanted more than anything to have your respect . . . and . . . right now, you like me!"

Only one fellow seated in the front row wasn't entertained: Eddie Squillante of the bushy unibrow. After the clapping subsided, Eddie started sawing his index finger back and forth in the air over his thumb.

"This is the world's smallest violin playing just for you."

My temper flared. "And it's being played by the kid with the world's smallest penis."

Kyle Ahearne guffawed.

Mrs. Laird held up a hand to silence us. "Okay, enough." She regarded me thoughtfully. "You've developed a nice baritone."

"Thank you, Mrs. Laird."

"For our next concert, we're doing music from *Phantom of the Opera*."

She had my attention. "Oh? I like that one! I listen to that CD every day."

Alto Arwen Undómiel Pokatny looked aghast. "Really? That musical is so trivial. One simple song played on repeat for three hours. And Sarah Brightman can't even sing!"

She can't? I think her voice is sexy. And there's lots of songs!

Mrs. Laird nodded at Arwen. "I know what you mean, but it is still a fun piece of popular music for us to perform." She looked at me. "We are performing three songs as an ensemble, but we need a soloist to play the Phantom during 'Music of the Night' and the title duet."

I didn't hear a shoe hit the floor. "Are you asking me?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Laird.

"Why him?" complained Eddie Squillante. "He gets too nervous!"

Assuming a measured voice, Arwen Undómiel Pokatny chimed in to help me. "With the right coaching, Damien could excel. He has a tinge of the romantic hero about him that we can play up for effect. Yes, he gets self-conscious and goes off the rails sometimes. Still, if he takes the time he needs to warm up before the performance, he'll be wonderful."

Mrs. Laird inclined her head at me. "You'll just have to work extra hard to channel the spirit of the Phantom. You're at your best when you stop mimicking other people's styles and make a piece of music your own. You'll need to infuse these songs with genuine emotion."

I regarded my bitten-down fingernails. "I don't think channeling him will be a problem for me."

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January 25, 1988

Mrs. Hall sat at her desk, scanning my fifth-grade report card. She noted a steady arc of improvement from the array of “U”s for “Unsatisfactory” during the first quarter period that built gradually to all “E”s for “Excellent” in the fourth quarter. She also held a letter by Mr. Altman, who voiced his confusion over my placement in mainstream and vouched for my belonging in the gifted program in at the Robert Loggia School based on my performance in his ALEC class. Mitchell and I sat across from her as she perused these materials.

“Mr. Altman makes a strong case for Damien, right?” Mitchell asked.

Mrs. Hall regarded Mitchell with amused interest. “Are you his lawyer?”

“I’m the Sherry in Sherry, Bennett, Robbins, Oppenheim, and Taft.”

Mrs. Hall chuckled and kept reading.

Nervous, I looked about the room. I decided that I liked Mrs. Hall’s office. It was far more tastefully decorated than the other administrative offices I knew, and I’d never been thrown out of it. She had real plants instead of plastic ones, original framed art instead of the usual mall prints, and bookshelves filled with books worth reading. A song I’d never heard before, “Swing to Bop” by Charlie Christian, played from speakers mounted in the ceiling corners.

“I’m not sure how I wound up separated from the other ALEC students,” I interjected. “A clerical error, maybe? We were hoping you could correct it.”

Mrs. Hall looked from the package of evidence we had assembled to her internal dossier on me. “Isn’t it a bit late to be dealing with all this? Your GPA is perfect, so you’ll wind up in honors next year, anyway. If you move now, your freshman year will be disrupted.”

“He’d prefer to switch now,” Mitchell said.

“If the classes aren’t all full,” Mrs. Hall said.

“There’ll be an opening,” Mitchell reassured her. “Today is my last day. I’m transferring to a Jesuit school in Manhattan tomorrow.” I couldn’t have been more ambivalent about Mitchell’s decision to leave, since his departure created an opening for me in the gifted class.

Mrs. Hall said, "I'll fix your schedule today, Damien. You will go to your new classes tomorrow." She paused. "Oh, wait a minute! I don't think there's a gifted section of Italian."

Looking "shocked," I placed my hand to my lips. "Really? No honors Italian class?"

Mitchell was even better at feigning surprise. "Wow. That's . . . news to us."

"Such a shame," I sighed. "Still, if it is possible to stay in my current Italian class and chorus elective and change all the other classes into honors sections, then that would be the most elegant and effective possible arrangement for my purposes."

Mitchell gestured deferentially to Mrs. Hall. "If it isn't too much trouble, of course."

Mrs. Hall frowned. "Why would it be too much trouble? I'll have this fixed for you five minutes after you leave this office."

"Magnificent," I said.

"I'm sorry this has happened to you," she said. "Such a strange clerical error."

"Isn't it?" Mitchell asked.

"Very strange," I agreed. "So, so odd."

It took some restraint not celebrating the second Mitchell and I made it out into the corridor. We walked several yards down the windowless, tiled, gray hallway before I felt safe to whisper, "You're such a mensch! I think you just saved me from a total nervous breakdown."

"You're welcome," said Mitchell. "Though there were a few moments there when you were so nervous, we almost snatched defeat from the jaws of victory."

"Are you kidding? I was so suave and polished in there!" I declared, laughing at myself.

"You didn't like lying, so you were 'confessing' by acting guilty. Only, you don't need to feel bad. She knew we were up to something and didn't care because she saw your great grades. And she likes us. Basically, she put you in honors because she's nice, fair, and competent."

"Isn't 'competent administrator' an oxymoron?" I joked.

"Here's the thing about navigating bureaucracy: the right hand doesn't know what the left is doing. If the right hand says, 'no,' ask the

left. The left will probably say ‘yes’ and hand you the right paperwork. I had a feeling Mrs. Hall was the most reasonable administrator.”

“More reasonable than John Thomas Pecker? How is that possible?”

“That guy!” Mitchell laughed. “He blows dead moose!”

“I love the ‘clerical error’ angle you came up with. It makes it all just an easily fixable mistake instead of me asking for special treatment or accusing them of being anti-Italian.”

As we walked, Mitchell fished a massive, hardcover copy of Stephen King’s *It* out of his backpack. “This is really good, by the way. It is pretty much the story of our year here. I think Dietrich Krebs is Pennywise.” Based on the position of his bookmark, he was two-thirds done.

I laughed. “Look at that thing! It’s huge! I can’t take all that in!”

Mitchell laughed, too. “That’s what *she* said!”

I paused. “Mrs. Hall agrees that Stephen King needs a more aggressive editor?”

Mitchell considered explaining his joke to me but decided against it. “Never mind. Seriously, you should get Mrs. Hall a gift to thank her. Something like a Whitman’s Sampler.”

“I’d rather buy myself a Whitman’s Sampler,” I groused.

“Don’t be a cheapskate! She just saved your bacon.”

“I come from a long line of cheapskates!”

“Come on.”

“Okay, I’ll get her a damn Whitman’s Sampler. But I really don’t like buying gifts for other people. It cuts into my comic-book-buying budget.”

“Where’s your gratitude? You’ve heard of karma, right? Get some good karma. Put some good energy out there by buying her a box of chocolates. Then the good energy will come back.”

“Boy, do I love distributing bad energy and buying myself comic books!”

Mitchell gave me a friendly warning look. “Just remember, Mrs. Hall can always change her mind and put your ass right back where she found it.”

I frowned. “Why are you always tryin’ to cheer me up?”

“I’m just trying to get you all set up here before I leave for my new school.”

"You've done so much for me, Mitchell. You're kind of incredible. It makes me wonder." I lowered my voice to an awed whisper. "Are you Jesus?"

"Nah! I don't know if Jesus would go for all my charcoal drawings of nude women. Not that I was drooling when I did them. They're art, after all. And I'm not like that. But I still can't imagine Jesus drawing as many nude women as I do."

"You'd be surprised," I said. "I've seen Jesus' sketchbook. Our Lord and Savior loves drawing Varga-Girl-style pinups. He specializes in plump, rosy-cheeked innocents getting their skirts blown up by a gust of wind or their panties pulled off by a mischievous cocker spaniel."

"That's a pretty strange comedy monologue, even for you."

I smacked Mitchell across the top of his shoulder. "And what's with this transferring shit? I'm going to be in the gifted class now. You should stick around!"

To his credit, Mitchell mulled this over for a full minute. "I can't stay here. And I can't handle being in the same class as Dietrich Krebs anymore. He's relentless with the bullying."

"I'm surprised you'd allow yourself to be chased off by anyone."

Mitchell stopped walking abruptly, forcing me to come to a stop, too. "Listen," he said, "tomorrow is your first day in the same class with that guy. What you need to do is establish your alpha male status right away. Krebs is going to come right up to you to mess with you. You need to scare the living shit out of him right away, or he will never leave you alone."

I exhaled sharply through my nose. "That's not my style."

"I know that! I don't care! You have to do it!"

"I don't think I have it in me to just up and attack someone at first sight."

"You don't have to have it in you. Just convince him you do. Remember what Sun Tzu wrote: 'Appear strong when you are weak and weak when you are strong.'"

I offered Mitchell my crooked smile. "I have a different motto: 'Appear weak when you are weak and weak when you are strong.'"

Mitchell snickered. "You're impossible. Remind me why I like you again?"

Continuing to act as my guardian angel for the day, Mitchell introduced me to the school's only librarian, Anita Duchamps, a genial, low-key woman too nice to work at this ridiculous school. After completing the introductions, Mitchell turned to say farewell. "We can still hang after school, but this feels like a big goodbye."

To prevent myself from breaking down right there, I extended my index finger towards Mitchell's forehead and said in my best, croaky E.T. voice, "Beeeeeee gooooooooood."

Mitchell hugged me. It was a real hug, not a half hug, or one that came with a painful back slap to seem more masculine. "Keep in touch."

"I will," I said.

I thought I was telling the truth.

Mrs. Duchamps led me into an office behind the check-out desk. Two students sat across from each another, eating bagged lunches and reading books in a small office filled with a square, white table too large for it. Tall, slender, and all in black, the girl was *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show's* Natasha Fatale come to life. Her co-worker, the tiny blonde-boy, perused a dog-eared copy of Frank Herbert's *Dune* while finishing a Capri Sun and egg-salad sandwich.

"We have a refugee," Mrs. Duchamps informed the other library monitors. "He's a bit shell-shocked, but willing to work." She introduced the others to me as David Litvinov and Miriam Pokatny, then left us together. I decided to stay standing until invited to sit. "Greetings."

David took another sip of his Capri Sun. "If you're named after the kid from *The Omen* with the three sixes under his hair, then your parents like horror movies way too much."

"I kinda like being the Antichrist." I gestured towards the *Dune* book. "Is it any good? I had a feeling it would be too serious for me since it's all about Middle Eastern politics."

David melodramatically laughed in Miriam's face. "You see? I told you! If you really want to join the Mossad, you should read this first. Best book ever on the Arab-Israeli conflict."

Miriam waved an angry finger in David's face. "I'm not reading any book recommended to me by a PLO sympathizer! You and your 'two-state solution based on pre-1967 borders.'"

"All the cool Jews are on my side," David said primly. "Harvey Pekar, Leonard Nimoy, Wallace Shawn, and a bunch more! Who's on your side? Jewish Republicans? Barf." David whispered to me, "She'll never forgive the Muslims for the Munich Olympics."

"I see." I didn't. *Did they use steroids to beat the Israelis at figure skating, or something?*

David jerked a thumb in my direction. "He doesn't seem too bad for an Italian."

"There's a low bar, right there," Miriam said. "Anti-Semites and homophobes to a man."

"You're so *militant!*" David looked at me and mouthed: "She's *so militant!*"

Miriam stared David down. "You'd be militant, too, if your grandfather had a concentration camp identification number tattoo on his arm."

"You think mine didn't?" David gestured to the seat next to him. "Please sit, Mr. Antichrist. You're making me nervous standing there like one of the Queen's Guard."

I took a seat at the third side of the square table, between the others, but didn't uncoil.

"You're a book-reader, then?" David asked me. "I have this question I ask all readers: 'If you had to live inside one work of literature forever, what would it be?'"

I relaxed. *I love that question.* "I've thought about this a lot. I have three answers to that. My first instinct is to say *The Hobbit*, because I relate strongly to Bilbo and love reading the story, but I think living in the book wouldn't be much fun, because I'd be terrified of giant spiders and the dragon all the time. My serious answer is Christine De Pizan's *City of Ladies*, because it'd mean living out my life in a utopia populated by kind, wise, and brilliant women. Unfortunately, they'd never actually let me live there, so there goes that choice, on a practical level. My wise-ass answer, in total poor taste, is *The Decameron*: Ninth Day, Sixth Story, 'Pinuccio and Adriano,' but only if I get to be Pinuccio."

"I don't know it," said David. "Is there a lot of sex in that story?"

"Maybe," I said.

David laughed and glanced at Miriam. "He's funny, right?"

Miriam blew a raspberry. "A man making a sex joke? How unheard of."

"For a dick joke, it was pretty literary," David remarked.

"Okay, just kidding," I said. "I want to be in *A Cold Wind in August* by Burton Wohl."

"Is that another dick joke?" asked Miriam.

"I refuse to answer on the ground that I may incriminate myself," I said.

Miriam feigned some interest in me. "Okay. Let's have it. What's your story?"

I slipped my raincoat off and draped it over the back of my chair. It was long enough that the bottom splayed out on the floor behind me. "I'm on the lookout for new friends. Been going through resumes and cover letters but haven't seen many promising candidates."

"It is so hard to hire good friends these days," David joked.

"Any way you can send me a one-page CV? Nobody ever reads page two. If the hiring committee isn't gripped by the end of the first paragraph, it gets placed in the circular file."

David adopted an expression of mock terror. "Ah! File 13! Don't want to end up there. I'll polish my resume and cover letter and print them both up on the ol' dot matrix."

Miriam propped her chin up on her fist and looked from one of us to the other. "I see you two will be getting along like a house on fire."

"Booyah!" I yelled.

Miriam slid back in her chair and was silent for a full minute. When she spoke next, the ambient temperature plummeted, and David looked intimidated. "David, I *still* want that name."

I perked up. "Whose name?"

David looked suspiciously apologetic. "We were talking about something before you arrived. She wants to know who her stepsister likes. 'Like' as in '*like* like,' not just 'like.'"

"You have a stepsister?" I asked.

"Arwen. We have the same last name: Pokatny." Miriam looked me up and down, reluctant to tell me more. "Do you know her?"

"I'm terrible with names," I said. "I might know her by sight. When I get introduced to people, I get so nervous, I instantly forget their names."

Miriam nodded. "I'm Miriam and he's David."

David waved. "Howdy."

"Hi," I said.

David looked at me sideways. "Seriously? You don't know Arwen? At all?"

"No. Who is she?"

"You'll get to meet her soon," Miriam said. "She's the fourth library monitor. That reminds me, we better wrap this up before she gets back. I want that name, David."

"Why does it matter who she likes?" I asked.

"Her parents don't want her dating anyone who isn't Jewish," David explained.

"Intermarriage is killing the Jewish faith," Miriam pronounced.

"And yet Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara seem so happy," David replied sarcastically. "Why do you all care so much who Arwen fucks? What business is it of yours?"

"It is all about business," Miriam replied. "If she wants to inherit her share of Pokatny Confections, she better not let any gentiles in her pants, or she's out of the will."

I perked up. "Pokatny Confections! Wild! Y'all make the best cupcakes!"

Miriam talked over me. "You'd think being warned a thousand times to date inside the faith would be enough, but noooooooo! Now I'm hearing she's sniffing around some shegetz."

"A boy who isn't Jewish, or a Jewish boy who isn't Jewish enough," David explained.

"Ah," I said. "Gotcha."

"Thankfully," Miriam continued, "I hear he may not like her back."

"Do tell," said David.

"I heard she's been watching him from afar, and he doesn't even know who she is. That she wants to introduce herself to him any day now, but she's afraid to. Why? He isn't into tomboys and may have the hots for someone else. I've heard *a lot*. I have not heard his name."

“Gee, I wonder why,” David muttered.

“Miriam, you can’t control who you fall for,” I said. “I’ve fallen head-over-heels for someone in band who isn’t *remotely* interested in me. And I was kinda smitten with my dad’s cousin a while back. I’ve got a crush on my martial arts instructor at the moment. That’s not going anywhere. I even like my religion teacher. In fact, I’m getting scared that I’m only ever gonna be hot for unattainable women. Anyway, I’m glad I’m not going to risk losing my inheritance over who I fantasize about, especially if I can’t have them anyway. Imagine getting in trouble for having feelings and not acting on them! You shouldn’t be so hard on her, Miriam.”

The office door opened, and Arwen walked in. She had a round face but a strong, dimpled chin, wore half-moon eyeglasses and black hair in a pull-through ponytail. She wore a black MA-1 flight jacket covered in left-wing political badges, a black Alien Sex Fiend T-shirt, and black stretch twill pants. She saw me and stopped short. Recovering an instant later, she slid her backpack under the table as she sat across from me. “Welcome to the eye of the storm. We have all our classes together, but I keep to myself, so you may not recognize me. I am Arwen.”

“Obviously, her parents like *Lord of the Rings*,” David joked. “Ironically, they didn’t think her name through. They really should have picked Éowyn instead.”

“Oh, of course! It took me a second, but I know you.” I wondered why I didn’t already know the name of the person who vouched for me becoming the phantom of the opera and who joked around with me about Conan while Orlov tried to cut me down to size. “I’m not good with faces and names. I look at my shoes a lot to avoid making eye contact with people.”

A look of pain flitted across Arwen’s face. “I have seen the pressure others have placed upon you and I am not surprised.”

Miriam cut in. “I was just asking David if he had any idea who your secret crush is.”

Arwen spun in her seat and stared back into her stepsister’s eyes. “I think, perhaps, you relish your role as father’s spy a little too much?”

Miriam smiled sweetly. "If it isn't a gentile, you have nothing to worry about."

Arwen glanced at David. "Catch me up. Have any suspects' names been bandied about?"

David shook his head. "Nope."

"What is he, Catholic?" Miriam asked. "Lutheran? Episcopalian?"

Arwen feigned innocence. "I haven't admitted to being attracted to anyone."

"I overheard you tell David he's a bit like an American John Lennon," said Miriam.

"John Lennon!" I tutted. "That arrogant son of a bitch?"

Arwen could not have looked more confused. "You of all people dislike John Lennon?"

I placed my hand over my heart. "Personally, I'm not into all this Beatles worship crap. And I don't just automatically like something because I'm told I'm supposed to. I'm sorry, *Gone with the Wind* and *Macbeth*, you both bore and annoy me. Besides, John Lennon doesn't need me to like him. He's more popular than Jesus."

Arwen was still astonished. "What about 'Imagine'? That song speaks to most people."

"I hate that song most of all. Lennon wants to achieve world peace by obliterating all cultural differences and making us into hive-minded drones. I don't want my religion or ethnicity bleached out of me. Besides, the song is emotionally dishonest. It is obviously filled with rage but is presented as a syrupy sweet ballad. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a phony."

Arwen's expression went from surprised to amused and relieved. "Ironically, I think Lennon would respect you for having this opinion."

I was intrigued, despite my obstinacy. "Oh?"

Arwen explained: "In 1971, Paul McCartney made the mistake of telling *Melody Maker* magazine he preferred the idealistic, apolitical Lennon who wrote 'Imagine' to the enraged and preachy Lennon who wrote 'Working-Class Hero.' When Lennon read this, he mocked McCartney in an open letter response that said, 'So you think "Imagine" ain't political? It's "Working Class Hero" with sugar on it for conservatives like yourself!'"

I chuckled. “Man, he hated McCartney by the end! I didn’t know it got that bad.”

Arwen looked thoughtful. “He never liked the imposter McCartney much. I think he had genuine affection for the original before he died.”

“Wait. What?” I scratched my head. “Isn’t John the only dead Beatle?”

“A story for another time,” Arwen said.

“The walrus was Paul,” Miriam said sadly. “Paul is dead.”

“Good lord,” David muttered. “You two girls and that ridiculous conspiracy theory!”

“I have another question,” I said. “What’s ‘Working-Class Hero?’”

Arwen said, “I’ll wager it will become your new favorite song when you finally hear it.”

“What makes you so sure?” I asked.

“Would you happen to know your Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality category?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what that is.”

“I’m certain that you are an INFP: Introversion, Intuition, Feeling, Perception. The mediator and idealist. If you are an INFP, that places you in the same category as Mr. Rogers, J.R.R. Tolkien, A. A. Milne, George Orwell, and John Lennon. That would make you the opposite of the ESTJ: the supervisor: Andrew Jackson, Eliot Ness, and Jerry Falwell.”

“‘Supervisor?’ I don’t gel with businessmen or soldiers, so that makes sense,” I admitted. “As to INFP, I’m proud to be lumped in with Tolkien and Mr. Rogers. Shame about John Lennon.”

Arwen smirked. “You dope! You *are* John Lennon.”

“Bah!” I snorted. “Bah, I say! I just got here and already I’m being insulted.”

Miriam cleared her throat loudly. Arwen, David, and I turned as one to look at her. She pointed an angry finger in my direction while glaring at her stepsister. “I don’t know what you think you’re playing at, Arwen, but there’s no way in hell you’ll be allowed to date this guy.”

“Um . . . what?” I asked.

Arwen did yeoman work looking innocent. “Whatever do you mean, Miriam?”

Miriam turned her furious eyes on me. “What are your intentions with my sister?”

I assumed a defensive posture, holding up both hands. “Whoa! What are you talking about? I don’t want any trouble here. I just want to work as a library monitor in peace.”

“If you’re the one she’s been mooning over, you’ll get no peace,” Miriam warned.

Poised, polished, and angry, Arwen gave her stepsister her most withering Lauren Bacall look. “I have not been mooning over Damien.”

Miriam glared at me. “What about you? Have you been mooning over Arwen?”

I lowered my hands onto my lap and tried to look calm. “You don’t have to worry about the fate of Pokatny Confections. I’m not a threat. I’m in . . . deep *‘like like’* with Marina Dazzo.”

Arwen nodded vigorously. “That’s true. He is madly in love with her. Everyone knows.”

I winced. *Madly in love? Everyone knows? Gadzooks!* “Arwen is not one-hundred-percent my type, anyway, but I’d like us to be friends, if she’ll stop comparing me to Lennon.”

Miriam looked back and forth between Arwen and me. “You two better behave yourselves, or I’m telling Father.” She rose, shook her head in disgust, and walked out.

David exhaled the breath he had been holding in for three minutes. “I saw my whole life flash before my eyes when you walked in, Damien. You’ve strolled right into a minefield here.”

I looked at Arwen pleadingly. “Did I? Look, I just want a safe place to go where I can eat lunch and not get into a fistfight. I don’t want to cause a calamity.”

Arwen’s tone and facial expressions were startlingly devoid of obvious emotion. “My father’s parents disowned him when he married an Irish Catholic girl. She died of leukemia not long after giving birth to me. Dad felt like he’d lost everything. Then he married again: A Jewish widow with one daughter. She was healthy and wouldn’t die on him. Dad’s parents took him back. These days, he thinks marrying my mom was the biggest mistake of his life. He’s trying to protect me from experiencing the agony he went through, so he’s barring me

from even associating with a boy who isn't Jewish, let alone dating or marrying them." Arwen took a John Lennon CD from her bag and gave it to me. "Do me a favor. Listen to 'Working-Class Hero.'"

I glanced at the CD, dubiously. "Okay, fine, but what's with your Willy Wonka empire? You're not in danger of losing it because of me? That's a hell of a burden to put on me."

Arwen's voice caught for the first time. "If I were you, I would not worry about it. After all, I am not one-hundred-percent your type and you are in love with Marina Dazzo."