

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Volcano People of Vesuvius

January 26, 1988

I wore my grey pinstripe suit with a purple dress shirt to my first day of gifted program classes at Robert Loggia Intermediate School. I strode confidently into a standard public-school classroom decorated with Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Mark Twain portrait-and-aphorism posters. The teacher wasn't there yet, but six of my old ALEC classmates flocked to greet me. Expressions of relief at my being back and outrage at my having been refused entry into the program in the first place felt validating. Grateful to be reunited with Ari Zuckerman and the others, I surprised myself by having to suppress tears. The problem, of course, was that Mitchell was gone. Had I chosen to study Spanish, I would have been placed in this class with Mitchell on day one. We could have stood side-by-side against bullies like Dietrich Krebs, protecting ourselves and Tsvi-Mayer together. Since I was not here to support Mitchell, Dietrich had driven him away. Now, Mitchell was gone, I was here without him, and it was only a matter of time before I had my first encounter with Dietrich.

"What's with the fucking suit?" asked a lazy, nasal voice coming from behind me.

I whipped around to face a square-headed, blonde-haired, blue-eyed jerk in a white sweater and acid washed jeans. "Dietrich Krebs! How are you? How's the wife and kids?"

"Do I know you?" Dietrich glanced about for evidence he was on *Candid Camera*.

"Of course! I'm the Joker!" I produced a number two lead pencil from my pocket and pointed it like a rapier at Dietrich's chest.

Dietrich eyed the pencil point hovering over him. "Watch where you're pointing that."

"I'm the patron saint of nerd rage, misunderstood artists, and failed comedians. I'm smart, funny, and purple!"

"Never heard of you," scoffed Dietrich. "And those clothes aren't in style! What kinda loser wears a suit to school?"

"I wear what I want to wear when I want to wear it. And I do

what I want to do when I want to do it.” I sprang upon Dietrich, snatched him by the throat, and slammed him up against the wall. Adrenaline, fear, and fury consumed me. I felt only the throbbing pulse in my temple. It was someone else speaking when I placed my lips near his ear and hissed, “Don’t fuck with me. If you fuck with me, or any other student in this room, I swear to God, I will end you. You won’t know when, or where, but I will come for you, and I will end you. Do you hear me?”

Dietrich was so shocked he had been attacked that he had offered no resistance. I had expected him to punch, kick, or spit at me. He just stared. That’s when it sank in. Dietrich didn’t know me. He didn’t know I was gentle at heart. He didn’t know I was terrified of him. He didn’t even get my comic-book-villain inside-joke. All he knew was I was an insane stranger attacking him with a pencil. *Appear strong when you are weak and weak when you are strong. Sun Tzu.*

After five seconds of eternity, Dietrich went limp. “I’ll be cool. I promise.”

I let him go and backed away, keeping the pencil up, my eyes fixed on his. I took my seat just in time for the English teacher to walk in holding enough copies of *The Bell Jar* for everyone in the class. Realizing he was the last student left standing, Dietrich sat down. That’s when I caught Tsvi-Mayer giving me two enthusiastic thumbs up from the front of the room. I smiled and mirrored the two thumbs up. It hadn’t even noticed that David Litvinov was sitting behind me until I heard him say, “I have to admit, I’m impressed.”

“That was cool when I committed assault and battery,” I tried and failed to whisper.

“It kinda was, actually,” said David. “That was a rock-solid Richard Widmark, too.”

I grinned. “I’m so pleased you noticed.”

David grabbed my shoulders in approval and admiration. “You really are the G.O.A.T.!”

I arched my right eyebrow in confusion. “I’m a *goat*? How am I a goat?”

Dietrich’s tinny voice rang out. “Miss Katz! The new kid just attacked me with a pencil.”

Miss Katz gave him a “Boy that Cried Wolf” look over the rim of her glasses. “Damien? That doesn’t sound like him.”

How does Miss Katz know me? Why does everyone know me already before I meet them?

“Ask anyone!” Dietrich yelled.

Miss Katz began distributing the copies of *The Bell Jar*. “Ari, did you see anything?”

“Nothing at all,” Ari lied.

Miss Katz cast her eyes around the rest of the class. “Anyone see anything?”

All the students shook their heads back and forth.

I’m home, I thought.

January 27, 1988

Sitting on the living room couch, Mom graded remedial writing assignments while keeping the daytime soap opera *One Life to Live* on in the background. Conventional on the surface, the soap improbably embraced science fiction storytelling during my junior high school years and had me hooked. From 1987 to 1990, I was wowed by storylines in which Clint Buchanan traveled back in time to the Old West and had a gunfight at high noon with his own great-grandfather, the evil Patrick had extensive plastic surgery to look just like Bo Buchanan and took over Bo’s life, and Victoria Lord’s high school reunion unearthed repressed memories of teenage years she’d spent living in the subterranean city Eterna — before her villainous father kidnapped and mindwiped her. It helped that the actresses were charismatic and their characters likable. Also, I had a man crush on the funny adventurer Max Holden, played by Italian American actor James DePaiva. On today’s suspenseful episode, Victoria asked her sister Tina, “Who do you really love: Max or Cord?” The camera zoomed in on Tina’s conflicted face. Cue dramatic music. Fade to black.

“Pick Max!” I yelled at the television.

“I prefer Cord,” Mom said.

The first commercial of the set showed an older woman and her

fully grown daughter walking along the beach together. “Mom,” the young woman began, “do you douche?”

“Every day,” the mother replied. “But only with Massengill Vinegar and Water.”

I’ve seen this commercial five hundred times and I’m still not sure what the hell a douche is. Is Massengill used to rise out the inside of a vagina? It must be, right? What else could it be?

“Mom?”

“Yes?” Mom asked absently, not looking up from the paper she was grading.

I wasn’t comfortable asking about the douche, but there was another thing I was also tired of not understanding. “This guy at school named Salty told me a math joke I don’t understand. I was hoping I could tell you it and you could explain it to me.”

“Okay.” Mom used her red pen to correct a misspelling of the word “believe.”

“‘What goes into thirteen twice?’”

“I don’t know. What?”

“‘Roman Polanski.’”

Mom kept her eyes down on the paper. “Oh, that’s *disgusting*.”

“I can’t figure out why the answer isn’t ‘six-point-five.’ Can you figure it out?”

“It isn’t a math joke. Don’t go around repeating it to people.”

“Who’s Roman Polanski?”

“*Never mind* who he is.”

God damn it, Salty.

February 19, 1988

Dad discovered me in the basement, laying on my back on the black-and-tan shag carpet, listening to “Teenager in Love” for the hundredth time on the first vinyl album Mom purchased: 1959’s *Presenting Dion and the Belmonts*. “Put on some different music, will ya?” he asked.

“There is love in me the likes of which you’ve never seen. There is rage in me the likes of which should never escape. If I am not satisfied in one, I shall indulge the other.”

“Good *Frankenstein* quote,” Dad said. “I’m still tired of that album. Change it.” He left.

I rose from the floor like a somnambulist. I put on the 1987 Broadway cast recording of *Les Misérables*. I dropped the needle on Frances Ruffelle’s “On My Own” fifteen times.

Dad reappeared on the sixteenth run-through. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“The world is full of happiness that I have never known.”

“Put on some happier music, will ya? You’re depressing me.” Dad left.

Listlessly, I switched to Dad’s new acquisition, the single “Make Me Lose Control” by Eric Carmen. The song lifted my spirits. I sang along as I lay on the carpet. Then I spun “Obsession” by Animotion. Risking censure, I played both “What Becomes of the Broken Hearted” by Jimmy Ruffin and “Tennessee Waltz” by Patti Page three times.

Dad appeared again as night fell. “I don’t want you eating dinner with this face on. When you’re upset, you make your mother upset. When she’s upset, she disturbs my peace.”

I forced a smile. “How’s this?”

“Ghastly. Your mood is a decision. If you decide you are happy, then you fake it for a moment and then you become happy. Stop indulging in whatever you’re indulging in.”

“Would you like to know why I’m upset?”

“We’ve got spaghetti carbonara tonight. I want to enjoy it in silence.”

Dad and I joined Mom and Leo at the round, walnut-wood kitchen table. Dad poured the Diet Coke, filling each of our glasses up to one inch below the rim. “Thank God you finally got Diet Coke again, after subjecting us to all that Cream Soda.”

“I like Cream Soda,” Mom replied. “If you don’t like it, you can buy the groceries.”

“I’m thanking you for doing shopping smarter.”

“I don’t mind the Cream Soda, Mom,” I said.

"Meathead," Dad muttered.

We ate in silence for several minutes.

"This carbonara is great," Dad said. "Never prepare it this way again."

What? Leo and I exchanged shocked and amused glances.

Mom adjusted her hearing aid to hear him better. It emitted a piercing whistle.

"That damn thing is going off again," Dad barked.

Mom fidgeted with her earpiece again. The electronic shriek ended. "What was that?"

"The carbonara is great," Dad said. "Use a different recipe next time."

"It was noticeably better last time," Leo agreed.

Mom looked crestfallen. "My carbonara isn't good?"

"What did you do to it?" Dad asked.

"Nothing," Mom said. "I used the same recipe."

Dad sighed. "You definitely did something different."

"I like it," I cut in. "I don't taste a big difference."

"I wish there were more girls in this house," Mom shook her head and looked down at her plate. "I work a full-time job. I come home and I have another full-time job cooking and cleaning this house from top-to-bottom. I guess I have the feminist movement to thank for that."

"You have us to thank," I said. "We don't pull our weight around here."

"I do plenty," Dad said. "I take out the garbage. Did you see me? I did it just now."

"What else do you do?" asked Leo.

Dad pretended not to hear the question.

"Dad and I can go shopping for you, Mom," I offered.

"You speak for yourself," Dad said.

"Oh, no," said Mom. "You'd both spend twice what I do on groceries. That time you two went, you didn't use coupons or buy generic brands. And you get strange, expensive things like gourmet salted caramel ice cream and cocktail shrimp. I don't need that kind of help."

Dad pointed at me. "That's mostly his fault."

"Let us try again," I said.

Mom refused.

"We should do the shopping," Dad said. "We wouldn't buy cream soda."

"What was that?" Mom asked.

Dad waved an irritated hand at Mom. "And that's another thing! She used to be Johnny on the spot with the Cheez Doodles, but she hasn't bought me any the last three shopping trips!"

"When did you decide you like Cheez Doodles?" I asked.

"I discovered them last year. I need my Cheez Doodles, and your mother won't buy them for me. How am I supposed to get my Cheez Doodles if she won't get them for me?"

Cheswick wants his cigarettes. "They're not scarce. You don't have to go to a speakeasy near St. Mark's Place in the Village, give them a secret password, and they hand you a bag of Cheez Doodles. Go to any CVS or corner grocery and get your own Cheez Doodles."

"I want her to get them for me!"

"Damn punk music!" I said to Leo. "Ever since Dad started listening to the Clash, gave himself a pink mohawk, and put safety pins on his clothes, it's like I don't know him anymore."

Dad gave Leo a helpless glance. "What's your brother talking about?"

Leo chuckled. "He's talking trash to rile you up."

"Dad, I fear your mohawk and everything it stands for."

"I wouldn't describe my hairstyle as particularly mohawk-like," Dad complained.

Fortunately, Mom's hearing aid had fizzed out three minutes before, so she missed the tail end of the carbonara conversation and the entirety of both the Cheez Doodles and mohawk exchanges. Since she had lost the thread of the conversation, her next remark was a complete non sequitur. "Have you made friends with any Italian kids yet, Damien?"

Leo scoffed. "*Italians?* Who needs *Italians?* Every time I read a letter to the editor in the *New York Post* about global warming being a hoax or there being no such thing as racism any more except Black people being against white people, guess what? As sure as night follows

day, the moron who wrote it was an Italian. 'I hate science and Black people. Love, Tony Simplicio.'"

Mom heard none of that, so I just responded to her question. "I *finally* met someone nice. Marina Dazzo, the flute player in the band. She's one of the few kids who has been kind to me."

"Do you think she'd be a good friend?" Mom asked.

"She would, if I were in band. She's with that crowd. Life is full of cliques. I haven't found mine. And I keep looking for a kindred spirit on the order of Mitchell, but I haven't found anyone else who walks alone along the boulevard of broken dreams who isn't a sociopath."

Dad sighed. It was his warning for me not to wander into maudlin territory, or I'd risk spoiling his already compromised spaghetti carbonara dinner. "This talk is getting pretty heavy."

"And you haven't had to sit through his thoughts on the problem of evil," Leo joked.

Mom didn't hear Dad and kept talking to me. "I don't see why you can't just hang out with her when she's not in band."

"It isn't done," I said. "You hang with people in your hallway. Nobody further afield."

"What if you were dating?" Dad asked. "Could she find the time to see you then?"

"I left her a rose. Marina was touched on some level, but she was more frightened by how much I cared for her. She looked worried that she had my Chinese rice paper heart in her hand and she was accidentally going to crumple it. I've steered clear of her ever since."

Dad poked me in the shoulder. "Snap her bra! Classic way to show a girl you like her."

"No, Dad."

Dad grinned evilly. "If you want to know if a girl likes you, grab her tit. If she likes you, she'll kiss you. If she doesn't, she'll slap you. Ninety-nine out of a hundred women will slap you but keep trying until you find the one that won't. If you have to go through all ninety-nine women, and get ninety-nine slaps before you find the one who will let you grab her tit, it is worth all the slaps you had to take to get that welcomed tit squeeze in there."

“Dad, that seems like extraordinarily bad advice. If I don’t wind up traumatizing ninety-nine women at a clip, I’ll wind up in a straight jacket after getting slapped ninety-nine times in one evening. That kind of machine-gun rejection is not for me. No, thank you.” I glanced over at my brother. “See? Dad’s gotten so punk rock! Sid Vicious in da house!”

Trying to regain entry into the discussion after failing to lip-read the last several sentences, Mom said, “I’m glad you found a nice Italian girl. There will be more coming.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” I said.

“Excellent!” Mom smiled.

Dad fell mute as he recalled the hundred-tit-grabs-a-night of his glory days.

Leo gave me a sympathetic look. “One can’t hear and the other won’t hear.”

“Yeah.”

“If you’d have played things differently, would Marina have gone out with you?”

“I can’t imagine any scenario in which we wind up together, even as friends. I don’t think snapping her bra would have garnered me a better result.”

“And doing that wouldn’t have been very ‘on-brand’ for you.” Leo stared at me through his Buddy Holly glasses. “I hate to see you suffer like this. Dad does, too, but he expresses concern by grumping about you listening to music on repeat. His way of asking you if you are okay is telling you to change the record.”

“That sounds right.” I glanced at Dad, who was probably dreaming of Lucy the vampire.

Leo brightened. “I know what we should do. Fun brother stuff to take your mind off school crap! I say we get all our stuffed animals together and play with them for a while.”

It was an excellent idea. Growing up watching Jim Henson Muppet films and television programs had left an indelible mark on our imaginations. Over the years, we had worked together to grant the stuffed animals in our joint collection complete personalities, personal histories, and comedy voices precisely because they were

blank slates and not based on licensed properties. These were the plush, imaginatively designed Soft Classics, Cuddle Wit, and Beanie Baby brand stuffed animals that we had purchased in Toys R Us or won playing Skee-Ball on the boardwalk of Wildwood, NJ. In addition to playing casual stuffed animal games, we would get more ambitious by using Dad's film equipment to make stop-motion shorts featuring our stuffed animals. We would also use our tape decks to make fake radio shows using our character voices. One was a rockumentary about the band *Wee Claude and Mooch* and their life-changing 1978 single, "Eat My Poo Pellets." Another was a 1991 memorial to the 1,400-pound Walter Hudson, the World's Fattest Man, who had to be lowered by forklift into his grave when he died at 46.

"Then," Leo continued, "we make ourselves some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and watch lots of *Doctor Who*. I say 'Aztecs,' 'Mind Robber,' 'Time Warrior,' and 'Sunmakers.'"

"I love this plan!" I yelled, directly quoting Bill Murray from *Ghostbusters*. "I'm excited to be a part of it! Let's do it!"

Our mother smiled, not quite knowing what was happening. Dad scowled and said into his plate, "Can you keep it down? I'm trying to eat this terrible carbonara!"

March 9, 1988

Salty and I sat in the dugout by our school baseball diamond, waiting for our next turn at bat. I kicked at the dirt floor with the front of my high-top sneakers. "I'm hitting foul balls like they're going out of style."

The Greek American was pleasantly surprised I had blasted ball after ball an amazing height into the air and forgave them for landing on the wrong side of the foul line each time. "I'm impressed you connected with the ball at all."

I slipped a baseball out of the pocket of my blue New York Mets windbreaker and rolled it around in my hands. Four years ago, at Shea Stadium, second baseman Wally Backman hit a popup that slammed into my right shoulder, bounced off it, and rolled down a flight of

stairs. The fan who recovered it saw me wailing, felt sorry for me, and surrendered the ball to me as a gift. There were scuff marks on the ball, blurring the words printed on it where it had bounced off a railing just before slamming into me.

Salty punched me in the same shoulder Wally Backman had struck. “You’re a Mets fan?”

“Dad took me to see a couple of games. I got really attached to Tom Seaver as pitcher. Then we go see another game, and Herm Winningham is pitching. Herm seemed cool and all, but . . . they traded Tom Seaver! Bastards. So, I decided I didn’t like sports.”

“You were not the only Met fan heartbroken by the team losing Tom Terrific. Twice.”

“These baseball trades suck! You get to like someone, and he vanishes!”

Salty nodded. “That’s the human condition. You love someone and they leave you.”

“I get enough of that from real life! I don’t need that shit from sports, too. I’m out.”

“Well, while we’re discussing terrible news and people disappearing in a puff of smoke, I’ve got some bad news I have to tell you about Marina Dazzo.”

“Oh, no! What?” I put the baseball back in my pocket and gave him my full attention.

Salty eyed me warily. “Promise me you won’t freak out. And you won’t tell anybody it was me who told you.”

“*What happened?*”

“There’s a rumor she went down on Bobby during a movie and swallowed.”

My stomach churned. “Charming story. Should I nominate her for a Purple Heart?”

Salty nodded. “I’ve known her forever. We were in band together in our last school, too. I feel like she’s my sister, or something. And I *never* feel that way about girls. Usually I just wanna fuck all of them. Anyway, she just started dating this guy. He’s her first boyfriend. I can’t imagine anyone getting any action out of her before they dated at least three years. Heck, she’s more Catholic than you are! This is

just too soon. So, I'm sure that Bobby is . . . ”

“ . . . spreading calumny?” I asked.

“*Exactly*. Spreading calumny.”

I started digging a hole in the dirt with the tip of my shoe. “Even if it's true, it was a romantic moment he spoiled by telling everybody in the world. Turning her into a spectacle.”

“Personally, I think he tried something on her at the movies, she balked and dumped him, and he's getting even with her with this rumor. She's been absent for a few days.”

“What are you gonna do now?” I asked.

Salty shrugged. “She won't take my calls. Wait until she comes back and talk to her.”

“That's no good! What if, in the meantime, dude keeps talking smack about her?”

“The damage may be done. People believe it because she hit puberty before most of the rest of us, and her boobs are so big.”

I stood up. “I'm gonna do something.”

“What . . . *now*? I think it's better if you bide your time. Haven't you ever heard the Klingon proverb, ‘Revenge is a dish best served cold?’ I learned that from Ricardo Montalbán.”

“It's actually an Italian proverb, but I prefer ‘Strike while the iron is hot.’”

“Don't tell me you're gonna coldcock him! Are you even capable of violence?”

I pounded my chest. “I'm Neapolitan! One of the Volcano People of Vesuvius!”

“Don't get me wrong, I want you to beat up the douchebag.”

I was about to run back to the locker room but stopped. “Lemme ask you a question.”

“What?”

I sat down next to him. “Is *Massengill Vinegar and Water* used to rise out the interior of a vagina? And is the soiled water collected into a bag that is called a ‘douchebag?’ So, calling Bobby a douchebag suggests he is as worthless as the contents of a plastic receptacle that holds wastewater left over from a vaginal sanitary rinse? I suppose it is possible that the water in the douchebag is clean, but that would

be a less effective insult than if the water were dirty, right?”

Salty grinned. “I’ve always wondered what it would be like to be friends with Lieutenant Commander Data, and now I know. It is every bit as hilarious as I expected.”

Smoking a cigarette and standing in the schoolyard at lunchtime, Bobby Mammolito was in a lather about Marina dumping him. All he did was reach under her shirt in the movie theater! She dropped him like a hot potato. He wasn’t going to let that treatment go unanswered. He told half the people he knew what “really” went down on that date and would soon tell the other half.

Bobby didn’t hear or see anyone racing towards him. All he knew was that one moment he was standing, smoking and scowling, and the next he had the wind knocked out of him from behind. He was dragged down to the asphalt, his left arm pinned behind his back at the wrist.

“Ciao, Bobby. Come stai?” I growled into his ear.

“Egon? What the hell, man?”

I planted my knee in his back to keep him down. “How could you say those things about Marina, you *Massengill Vinegar and Water douchebag*?”

Bobby coughed out a surprised laugh. “What are you, Zorro? What’s it to you?”

I wrenched at Bobby’s arm. It felt on the point of breaking. Bobby bit back a squeal of pain. I placed my lips against Bobby’s ear and hissed. “Take it all back and shut the fuck up about Marina or I’ll break your arm. *Capisci?*”

“*Capisco.*”

Bobby felt his wrist released. My weight disappeared from his back. He clambered to his feet and whirled around to confront me. I stood there with my hands in my trench coat pockets, staring at Bobby indifferently. He raised his fists and pranced around me.

I regarded him like an ant not worth stepping on. “Man, am I disappointed in you. I thought you were cooler than this. You can dish out sneak attacks but you can’t take ‘em?”

Bobby lowered his fists. “She rejected me.”

“Join the club. You don’t see me making up stupid rumors about her.”

“I bet you were mad at her, too, when she thought everyone else in the world left her the anonymous rose except you. It didn’t even occur to her it was you ‘til I figured it out for her.”

I pointed a commanding finger at Bobby and punctuated each sentence by poking the air with it. “Put out this fire you started. This time next week, I don’t even wanna see embers of this rumor glowing. And I *do not* want us to have to have another conversation.”

Bobby smiled, despite himself.

“Now what?!”

“You’re a funny guy, Egon. You never cease to amaze me.”

March 11, 1988

I soon discovered what it was like to be ambushed from behind. Every day, I took an unjustifiable detour down the band hallway “on the way to” the library, in the hopes of catching a glimpse of Marina to find out if she was okay. As I walked past the lime green door, the muscular Eric Indelicato opened it and sprinted out. He wrapped his massive arms around me in a reverse bear hug, clutching his hands together by the wrists and lifting me bodily from the floor. He carried me like a rag doll into the band room, where Salty, Tuesday, Alisha Clark, and Julia Puglia stood in a circle around a weeping Marina Dazzo. Keeping me trapped in his arms, Eric walked me up to Marina and held me aloft mere inches from her face. “This guy will make you feel loved, Marina. His heart beats for you alone. Right, Damien?”

Marina avoided my eyes and looked downcast, making me struggle against Eric with renewed ferocity. “Let me go!”

“Oh, no!” Eric yelled. “Now’s your chance to tell her to her face how you really feel.”

Alisha stood and rushed to my defense. “You crazy, Eric? Leave him be! Put him down!”

I looked helplessly at Salty, who mouthed “Not I, Lord” while pointing at Eric. Reading a science textbook, Tuesday pretended to be oblivious to the proceedings. The normally disinterested Julia

Puglia watched me with open fascination. I stopped flailing and dared to look directly at Marina. Our eyes met.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Marina was confused about exactly what I was apologizing for, but said, "That's okay."

"We got your main squeeze right here, Damien," Eric joked. "Enjoying the proximity?"

I harrumphed. "Um . . . not really, no."

"Tell her it was you who got her the rose!" Julia burst out.

"I already know it was him," Marina said.

"He never told you to your face that he loves you," Eric said. "I want to hear him say it."

"I ain't saying nothin' in front of Salty and Tuesday," I hissed.

"Hey!" both Salty and Tuesday called out, affronted.

"This is your chance, man," Eric urged. "This is my present to you, cuz I like you."

Should I tell Marina I love her? The arguments for and against swirled in my head. I remembered Dad's condemning his father for being too timid to call in the answer to the radio contest riddle: "Always try to win, even when defeat seems certain." Then I heard Aurora and Viola in my head, so insincere: "You're the boy we've been waiting for all our lives. *We love you.*" Finally, I remembered Mr. Preponte pointing at the empty set. No. I would not be revealing my feelings to Marina, either in private or in front of all these strangers in the band room. "I already told her face-to-face how I felt about her."

"When?" asked Eric. "I didn't hear it!"

Jesus! How was I still stuck in Eric's reverse bear-hug? Didn't he get tired? "Sure, you did! I gave her the cool *Captain Kronos* compliment. That said it all."

"You chicken! Tell her in your own words! Don't quote vampire movies."

"Am I being expelled?" I asked Eric. "Dying? Moving to Paraguay? If not, it can wait."

Eric laughed. "It would be too late to tell her you love her if you're dying! Tell her now."

"If a meteor were about to hit," Marina said, "he needn't worry

about my reaction.”

“Is that it?” Eric asked me. “Has she figured you out?”

“I hate how my life is basically a Neil Simon play,” I groused.

I had been hanging limp for several minutes. Suddenly, I bucked wildly and broke free of Eric’s grasp. “Okay,” I said. “I’m gonna bust outta here.”

Eric seemed strangely sad. Why was he so invested in my coming clean? What was at stake for him? “There’s nothing harder than saying ‘I love you’ to someone.”

“I’ll admit it. I’m in love. I’m in a satisfying, one-sided relationship with the lady in the red foxhunting jacket and black pencil skirt in last month’s *Frederick’s of Hollywood* catalogue.”

Salty raised his hand as if he were in class. “Hey, Damien. You should know, I told her you’re the reason Bobby stopped with the rumor-mongering.”

I sighed. “Why would you tell—”

Marina talked over me. “Thank you. That meant a lot.”

“She dumped Bobby,” Eric interjected.

“I deserve better.” Marina stared at me, her eyes glinting with . . . what? Curiosity? Empathy? Fear? Embarrassment? Was it possible for eyes to show so many emotions all at once? Yes. Hers did. She made no motion to come closer. Nothing in her body language invited me to approach her. There was *no way in hell* Marina wanted me to confess my love to her. It would put her on the spot and humiliate me. In fact, I doubted I would ever tell *any woman* I loved her, *ever*. I never wanted to see that look of fear and pity in a woman’s eyes again. I headed to the door. Eric blocked my way like Dante’s leopard. “Tell Marina how you feel.”

“Okay, okay, okay.” I put my hands in my pockets, spun on my heels, and looked at Marina. “Marina, I think you’re the cat’s pajamas.”

“Yeah?” Marina blushed. I hadn’t the first fucking clue what the blush meant. “Well, I think you’re the bee’s knees.”

I gave her a small bow of thanks. “Now, I really am gonna jet.” I gave Marina one final wave and said, “Peace out, home skillet.” I walked out the door with as steady a step as I could muster, though I probably still looked like I was fleeing a crime scene.

“Don’t trip, money grip!” Marina called after me.