

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Gooseberry

November 15, 1993

Cigarette smoke hung in the air over the Grace Coolidge High School cafeteria courtyard. To be social, I kept my Goth, chain-covered buddy Maureen (“Mo”) Willis company as she puffed away. I listened with genuine interest as she described in detail her post-graduation cosmetology school plans. Afterwards, my reward for being a good listener was Mo regaling me with her favorite dirty joke:

“A newlywed couple moves into an old, broken-down house. The wife is more impatient and excited to get it all fixed up than her husband. On weekends, he’s so burnt out by five days at work, he can only collapse in front of the TV. One Saturday, the wife says, ‘Honey, can you fix a leak in the upstairs bathroom?’

“The husband says, ‘Who do I look like, Mr. Plumber?’

“Another weekend, the wife says, ‘Honey, will you please paint the house?’

“He says, ‘Who do I look like, Sherwin Williams?’

“The next Saturday morning, she says, ‘Honey, I know you’re tired. Can you please at least mow the lawn for me?’

“He mutters, ‘Who do I look like, John Deere?’”

“This sounds like every marriage,” I remarked. “The husband complains about the Honeydew Weekend. ‘Honey do this. Honey do that.’”

“No kidding,” Mo said. “Then the husband ditches his wife to go fishing for the weekend. When he gets back from his trip, he’s shocked to find the house painted, lawn cut, and bathroom leak fixed. He asked his wife how all this happened. She said, ‘The teenage boy next door got it done. All he wanted in return was for me to either bake him a cake or give him a blowjob.’ The husband asked, ‘What kinda cake did you bake?’ She said, ‘Who do I look like, Betty Crocker?’”

I laughed loudly. “That’s hilarious!”

“Isn’t it?” Mo chuckled. “I wasn’t sure if a guy would find it as funny as I did.”

"That kid's a lucky bastard, isn't he? I wish I lived next door to her. *I can mow a lawn!*"

"The lawn alone is probably only worth a handjob."

"That's nothin' to sneeze at." We both laughed again.

We laughed a lot, spending lunch hour every weekday giggling and guffawing. Mo and I had been good friends for two years. I was only minimally attracted to her, so I thought that made her an ideal candidate to ask to the prom. We could sort of go as friends, and it would take so much of the pressure off us to have "The Most Romantic Weekend of Our Lives." Leaning against a pillar with my hands in my pockets, I asked Mo casually. "So, what's the story with you and the prom, Mo? You goin' with Luke Perry, or what?"

Mo shook her head of dyed black spiked hair. "I'm going with a group of girlfriends."

I made a circle in the air with my forefinger. "You'll form a circle and dance in it, and not let any guys in? Because once one gets in, he gets all puppyish and grabby and possessive?"

"Pretty much," said Mo, looking especially Goth in black eyeshadow and lipstick.

"Do the straight-girl on straight-girl grind?"

"Yup. Though I don't know why you assume we're all straight. Personally, I think all girls are at least a little bit lesbian. Don't you think?"

"You asking me what turns girls on?" I chuckled. "I'm the *last* person you should ask."

Mo gave me a sly look. "You gonna ask Arwen to the prom?"

"Nah! She's going with Fonzie. Besides, I was thinking about asking you."

"Me?" Mo Willis looked surprised, not threatened. "Oh, you don't want to go with me."

"Why not? You're cool."

"Well, thank you, but I'm pretty committed to dancing in a circle with the girls." There was no pity for me in her eyes, thank God.

I smirked. "Suit yourself."

Mo poked me in the shoulder with a long black fingernail. "Go talk to Arwen."

“No way, José.”

Mo poked me again. “She wants to go to the prom with you, not her boyfriend.”

“Wa’choo talkin’ ‘bout, Mo Willis?”

Mo smirked. “Seriously, what sane girl would rather date a Polish guy than an Italian?”

I laughed. “That’s a little mean, but since you’re trying to pump me up, I’ll take it.”

“You two would make *hot* lovers: C.S. Lewis and Joy Davidman reincarnated! If you two ever fucked, the Earth would crack open.”

“You mistaking *Shadowlands* for *9 ½ Weeks* again?”

“I’m not really thinking of *Shadowlands*. I’m worried if you’re not careful, you’re gonna grow up to be like Jay Gatsby, or Pip from *Great Expectations*.”

“It’s too late. I’m already Pip.”

Mo’s black lips turned down into a frown. “Just ask Arwen to the prom, chicken shit!”

“Okay, okay! I’ll talk to her. But I’m not even sure what to say to her anymore.”

Mo cackled. “Here’s what not to say: ‘I could really use a handjob. Speaking of which, want to go to the prom with me?’ Nice transition before, jackass!”

“Well, wait a minute. I didn’t . . .”

Mo patted me on the shoulder. “I’m only teasing. You’re a riot. You go get her.”

“Okay. Hey, by the way . . . thanks for never treating me like I’m some sorta poor thing.”

Mo smirked. “‘Poor thing?’ You? No way. You have the worst fucking luck of all time, but you ain’t no poor thing.”

I craned my neck and looked for Arwen. She was with Rolf by the water fountain. They were arguing. “I don’t think now is the best moment.”

“Go to the mall this afternoon, when she’s working KFC,” Mo suggested. “Ask her then.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Mo took another puff of her cigarette. “‘Just friends’ for seven years? I swear to God, if you two don’t bump uglies soon, I’m getting a gun and putting you both out of your misery.”

“You’re looking pretty sexy in your KFC outfit,” I said.

Arwen stuck her tongue out at me. All kidding aside, her red polo shirt and red visor with the purple KFC lettering were cute on her. She stood behind the cash register at the KFC outlet in the Staten Island Mall food court, waiting for me to order so she wouldn’t get yelled at by a sixty-year-old manager who had given up on life. “Welcome to KFC. May I take your order?”

I leaned over the counter. “I’ll take two breasts, two legs, a muffin, and some chicken.”

Arwen couldn’t stop herself from laughing. She didn’t notice her manager standing behind her, looking suspicious. When she recovered, she whispered back, “Sure. I’ll let you eat my muffin, if you slip me some juicy Italian sausage when you’re done.”

“I’d like to slip you some sausage right now.”

The manager stepped up beside Arwen. “Are you having trouble deciding your order?”

I stopped smiling. “I’ll take a medium Pepsi. No ice.”

“Will that be all?” Arwen asked.

“For now.”

Taking my leave of Arwen before I got her fired, I meandered over to Blimpie and ordered a Blimpie Best. For the uninitiated, that was a ham, salami, capicola, prosciuttini, and provolone on wheat bread topped with tomatoes, lettuce, onion, vinegar, oil and oregano. I sat a few yards off to the side from the KFC, but not so far I couldn’t watch Arwen work out of the corner of my eye as I ate. She caught sight of me a few minutes later and gave me a surreptitious, waist-level wave. She did seem to like me. And we flirted shamelessly. Don’t ask me what was going on. Every time I feared I was harassing or hounding her, I’d stop flirting with her for a month, or keep her at a distance. She’d invariably track me down. “Where have you been, darling? I’ve

missed you. I only had Rolf to entertain me. It's so boring without you."

"Gettin' me back on your hook?" I'd ask her. She'd nod, grin evilly, and mime hooking me on her fishing line. After three experiences like that, when I tried to leave her alone and she wouldn't let me, I figured I had every right to spy on her while she worked.

Rolf sat down across from me, blocking my view of his girlfriend. "How's my understudy doing?" He made it sound like a joke, but he wasn't being funny, and I wasn't laughing. I have a theory that there is no such thing as humor, in the end. There are only people who shock others into laughing by being surprisingly honest or startlingly insightful.

"Last I checked, we weren't in a play together," I said.

"Yeah, you know exactly what I mean."

I sucked my teeth in irritation. "If I was really gonna try to cut you out of the picture, I'd have told her parents you were a gentile years ago. Give me some credit for that, at least." I was gearing up to do some serious lying to Rolf, and I wasn't comfortable about it. I didn't like telling falsehoods. I would fly as close to the truth as possible, without owning up to my newfound determination to ask Arwen to the prom. I pretended that I hadn't just promised Mo to move in on Arwen and willed myself to recreate the mindset I'd been operating on for most of the past seven years of "unresolved sexual tension" sitcom friendship.

"Yeah, you're only making mealy-mouthed passes at my girl," Rolf said. "That makes you more of an annoyance than a threat, but I don't have to like you or your weasel bullshit."

"Weasel?" For half a second, I considered giving him the Dietrich Krebs treatment and attacking him with a pencil.

"Weasel. Vulture. Whatever."

"We haven't even held hands," I protested. "We haven't done anything."

"I know you love her."

I waved him off. "Everybody loves Arwen. She's a very loveable person."

"Yeah, but you want her more badly than anyone else," Rolf said evenly.

Of course, I knew I didn't have much of a leg to stand on. By all rights, I should respect Rolf's wishes, and their relationship, and make myself scarce. On the other hand, Arwen was one of the only people in my life who made me happy. I knew she and I could never really be a couple, but I didn't want him to take her away from me. *If I promised not to touch Arwen, could I stand close to her flame and warm my cold, dead heart just a teensy-weensy bit?* The good news was, I didn't resent our friendship, like your average, twenty-first century incel, who made sexist complaints like, "She put my ass in the Friend Zone." I liked her as a person and a friend way too much to allow my pent-up lust from congealing into nerd misogyny, thank God. I never wanted to become that sort of person: the fake "nice guy" who's secretly a serial killer in training. As these thoughts raced through my head in a manner of seconds, I concluded Rolf was overreacting, I was at least "not guilty," even if I wasn't "innocent."

I gestured at Rolf's leather jacket. "Dude, you look like Fonzie. You got nothing to worry about! Stop bustin' my chops."

Rolf crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I used to think you weren't a threat."

"So, what's changed?"

"You two talk too loudly in health class. People hear the shit you say to each other and then I gotta hear it from them. And they wanna know why I stand for your behavior."

"That's just health. They put condoms on bananas in that class. There's a lot of blue humor in the air because of shit like that. It don't mean nuthin'." I exaggerated my Brooklyn accent to sound more convincing.

"Oh, Come on, dude! Don't blow smoke. I'm tellin' you, I'm not sure I want you two hanging out anymore — especially not alone."

When the cat's not around, the mice dance. "Look, all I know is I've been a good friend to her for years, and I haven't laid a finger on her. That's all I know."

Rolf didn't want to break the tension he'd worked so hard to build, but he couldn't help but chuckle. "Yeah? Is that *all* you know?"

"That and my name and phone number."

That cracked Rolf up even more. "You are a charmer. I'll give you

that, Damien.” He eyed me again. This was the third time he had confronted me about the nature of my relationship with Arwen. The first time was a sort of a “Who the hell are you?” conversation, after which Rolf determined I represented no threat whatsoever because I wasn’t half as masculine as he was. The second confrontation came during 1992, the year of Sweet Sixteens, when we all went to a catered Sweet Sixteen party a week. These parties were surprisingly opulent — as expensive as wedding receptions and held at similar venues, like restaurants and banquet halls. The dentist fathers and nurse mothers of the girls in our class put on a hell of a party for their little princesses. I got to do a lot of solo dancing, mostly by myself in my best blending of the styles of John Travolta, Michael Jackson, and Ed Norton. I loved the first five of these parties, because I adored music and dancing, but I made a mistake not taking Baby Bianca to some of those parties, so I could have someone to dance with.

At each of these Sweet Sixteen parties, circles of girls would form on the dance floor and they’d get down with their bad selves and refuse to dance with the boys. I’d occasionally try to get into these tightly formed circles, but they always seemed impenetrable. Then I’d give up and dance outside the French doors on the lawn or simply jump up and down on the dance floor and head bang like a Butabi brother. Only once did a straight guy penetrate the circle: Eric Indelicato. At least it was him. I liked him. When the girls got tired of dancing in a giant ring, they’d mix things up either by doing the Electric Slide or breaking up into pairs and grinding into each other. I didn’t know how to do the Electric Slide, but I didn’t mind watching the grinding from the sidelines as I drank a few Shirley Temples. If I thought too long about how I wasn’t the one getting grinded against, I went back outside to dance some more on the lawn. At these Sweet Sixteens, the few times boys and girls danced together were when the long-established couples slow-danced, or the straight girls disco danced with the gay boys. On many evenings that year, I wished I were a gay man or in a committed relationship so I would be allowed to dance with someone other than myself. Since I was neither, I eventually concluded that I would not go to my senior prom unless I brought one date of my own. But I really, really liked dancing. I wanted to dance. My last remaining

option was to dance as a friend with some other dude's girlfriend. It was a shitty option, but I could find no other alternative to dancing alone on a wet lawn at ten p.m. outside of a Chinese restaurant. What would you rather do: dance with someone else's girlfriend inside, or jump around on a lawn outside in total solitude?

The time of Arwen's stepsister's Sweet Sixteen came around. (I often forgot her name on purpose as a passive-aggressive form of revenge. She helped block me from dating Arwen, so I chose to block her name from my memory.) What's-her-name's party was especially great because Rolf had mono during it and I was able to dance with Arwen all evening without him cutting in. We danced for ninety minutes to a playlist that included L.A. Style's "James Brown is Dead," 2 Unlimited's "Twilight Zone," Kris Kross' "Jump," C+C Music Factory's "Gonna Make You Sweat," Roxette's "Spending My Time," and Young MC's "Bust A Move." It was a gloriously fun evening for us teenagers. The extended family members who were also invited to the shindig had less fun. The aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins were alarmed when the single straight guys got tired of dancing with each other and started moshing to Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit." The silver hairs also failed to see the humor when the boys and girls screamed the dialogue from Meatloaf's "Paradise by the Dashboard Light" to each other.

You know who else wasn't happy? Rolf. In the days that followed the party, Rolf heard reports that Arwen and I had slow danced to not one but four songs: Leonard Cohen's "A Thousand Kisses Deep," Chris de Burgh's "Lady in Red," The Cars' "Drive," and "Take My Breath Away" by Berlin. After he'd heard this, he kept Arwen away from me for a full eight months. Frequently, as they walked past me, he'd make a point of leading her around me by placing his hand on the small of her back or be sure to nuzzle her hair while I was watching. There must have been something in my expression that rewarded him for doing this, because he'd usually smile or wink at me right afterwards. Here we were again, sitting across from one another in the mall food court, having the same face-off again.

"Listen," I said, "I know why you're mad and I get it. I'll cool it with the on-the-line badinage if you agree to let me and Arwen stay friends."

“*On-the-line?* More like *over-the-line*.”

“I’ll cool it with the *over-the-line* badinage.”

Rolf considered my word-choice carefully and decided I’d lost our little fencing match by surrendering too much power to him. “So, you admit it’s my call?”

I shook my head. “No. It’s Arwen’s call. If she wants me to fuck off, I’ll fuck off. But I’d feel better if I knew that you knew that I’m not here to make trouble for you. I mean, this may be hard to believe, but being a weasel has never been my lifelong ambition. It’s not a good look for me. Neither is being a vulture.”

“It isn’t a good look, is it?”

“Being a decent guy has always been very important to me. I always try to be honest and above-board and a straight arrow in all my dealings.”

Rolf looked skeptical. “I don’t know. I have a really bad feeling I’m talking to the biggest bullshit artist of all time.”

“What I’ve just said is the truth.” *Unless I actually ask her to the prom. Then I’m lying.*

Rolf stared at me, looking completely unsatisfied. “I can’t tell if you’re telling the truth, lying to me, or lying to yourself, but how’d you like me to blow your case to smithereens?”

My fight or flight response had been on overdrive since he sat down but kicked up another notch still. “I don’t think I would like that.”

“If she asks you to go to bed with her, would you say ‘no’ on my account?”

I couldn’t believe he asked me that. My jaw didn’t drop literally, but metaphorically.

“Well?” he asked.

“I refuse to answer that question on the grounds that I don’t know the answer.” I left the Douglas Adams attribution off because I didn’t want Rolf to know I was quoting someone else.

Rolf slapped his palms down on his knees and made a loud smacking noise. “Well, I don’t know if that resolved anything. All I know is that I’ve had enough of this fucking conversation.” He stood to go.

“Is that really all you know?” I asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“Oh, go fuck yourself, Damien.”

Three minutes after Rolf had gone, Arwen emerged from a door set into the food court wall I had never noticed before. She navigated her way through the lunch crowd, crept over to my table, and sat at the chair beside me, noticeably out of breath. “Rolf giving you grief?”

I smirked. “You noticed that?”

“No duh! I’ve only got five minutes, but I wanted to check on you. You okay?”

I took a sip of my soda to buy myself time to think of an answer. “I wish I had a girlfriend, so Rolf would chill out when we were together. I’m getting tired of his suspicion.”

Arwen’s expression changed into something I couldn’t read anymore. “You think your having a girlfriend would put him at ease?”

“Wouldn’t it? Maybe we could even go on double-dates together.”

Arwen struggled not to smile. “It sounds idyllic. I’m not sure if you are operating in reality, my friend.”

“Why?”

“For one thing, even if Rolf relaxed a bit, I’m not sure your girlfriend would be comfortable with me hovering around you.”

I got a sinking feeling in my stomach. “Shit. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“No girlfriend of yours would ever be dumb enough to let you have female friends of any sort. Certainly not my sort!”

“What a terrible thought. That might make it difficult for me to have any friends at all. I don’t usually click with dudes, after all. I’ll have to stay home and watch *Doctor Who* 24/7.”

Arwen tilted her head to the side and looked at me with genuine sympathy. “Sorry.”

I felt hopeful. “But you’ve made it clear that Rolf has no control over who you pick to be friends with. Maybe I could make a similar demand of my girlfriend?”

Arwen snickered. “You are so adorable. You have no idea how women operate.”

I was back to looking crestfallen. “No, I don’t suppose I do.”

Arwen patted my hand. “Cheer up, you. I have a present for you.”

Once again, I was having trouble keeping up with the twists and

turns of a conversation with Arwen. “Wait. You do? What? Why?”

She reached into her pants pocket and produced a folded piece of paper. “I remember you aren’t big on math. Still, I know you’ve learned about the concept of the empty set.”

The words “empty set” triggered instant anxiety. “I told you that story?”

“I was there when it happened,” she said quietly.

“Oh, wonderful! I’m so glad you were there to witness my finest hour.”

“Here.” Arwen slid the paper across the table to me. “Read that.”

Still disturbed, I picked up the paper and unfolded it. She had written “{Arwen}” on it in purple ink. I couldn’t stop looking at it. “What’s this?”

Arwen reached under my chin, tilted my head up, and forced me to look in her eyes. “That’s the set of girls sitting at this table with you who find you sexually attractive.”

Something odd was happening to the bustling food court. Everyone else was disappearing. It was just us at this table. “Oh,” I said.

“Yeah,” Arwen chuckled. ““Oh.””

For the first time, I was able to keep my eyes fixed on Arwen’s, and not feel that I needed to look away. Her eyes were silver. So, so silver.

“Still think Rolf will feel better if you dig up a girlfriend?” she asked.

“Um . . . no. Heh.”

“Right?!”

“Yeah, I take all that back.” I held up the piece of paper. “How do you know me so well? You knew exactly the right thing to say to me.”

Arwen beamed.

I leaned forward. Our lips brushed together. My first kiss. I felt electricity coursing through my body. I lunged forward to embrace her.

Arwen placed both her hands on my chest and pushed me away. Her eyes showed desire. Her frown was an apology. “Down, boy,” she whispered. “Down.”

I’ll bet I couldn’t have looked more confused and disappointed. The exciting follow-up to my first kiss was a dog command. “I don’t understand.”

Arwen reached down and took my right hand in both of hers.
“Not yet.”

I made an unattractive bull sound with my nose and throat.

“Don’t be angry with me,” Arwen pleaded. I leaned forward again.
She pulled her head back. “No. I told you. Be patient.”

I found her silver eyes again. “When? I need to know when.”

Arwen lifted my hand and placed it against her cheek. “I know.
I’m working on it.”