

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

STD Night

Purple Sarah led me on foot across campus, from my southside dormitory, past the gymnasium and student center, to the edge of campus. We crossed Court Street and arrived at Ambassador Apartments, a collection of long, two-story buildings. She unlocked the chalky periwinkle front door of the first brick-and-aluminum-siding building, then unlocked a second, interior apartment entrance. We stepped into the living room of a four-bedroom apartment she shared with three other juniors — two English, one Geography — and at least one hanger-on boyfriend of the Geography major who sorta lived there, too. The four were seated on plush paisley furniture around a glass coffee table, engrossed in a game of Trivial Pursuit while eating bowls of freshly made spaghetti. The CD *ABBA Gold* played in the background. The walls, painted seafoam blue-green, were covered in tastefully arranged posters, vinyl album covers, and paintings, including a portrait of Kate Mulgrew as Captain Janeway from *Star Trek: Voyager*, a map of Middle Earth, a framed concert T-shirt for the Indigo Girls' 1993 *Rites of Passage* tour, a *Cranberries: No Need to Argue* (Coming Soon) advertisement, and a painting of Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan on an Olympic ice rink, fencing with giant-ice-skate-blade-swords.

I did a slight bow at the knees, waved my arm hello at the assemblage, and said, in a voice pitched up two octaves to make me sound less threatening, "Heeeey, how's it going?"

"This is Damien," Sarah said. "I want you to be nice to him."

A saucy redhead with wild, curly hair on her third glass of Sutter Home Red Moscato giggled. "What is he, a Make-A-Wish kid?"

"No, but he's only a freshman, so don't scare him, Ashley," Sarah warned.

"Now you've done it," Ashley joked. "Now I'm gonna eat him alive. Howdy, Damien?" This was the first time I was meeting Ashley, but she would loom large in my sophomore year, when we were both on the staff of the school newspaper, *The Lamron*. In October of 1995, Ashley would write an anti-hazing editorial that related how she personally witnessed the ritualized humiliation of a sophomore

outside the Phi Lambda Chi sorority house. Outraged at being singled out as being the worst hazing offenders, and terrified of seeing all their potential recruits for the year driven away, a group of Phi Lambs stole all the copies of *The Lamron* they could find and disposed of them in a dumpster outside of a Wegman's grocery store a few miles away. Ashley was persona non grata on campus that whole academic year, but she had nerves of steel and was happy to take a stand against hazing. To commemorate the incident, my friend James Sheridan, *The Lamron's* editor, printed novelty t-shirts that read "Top 10 Reasons to Steal *The Lamron*," with #2 being "You are a brainless clod," and #1 "Your sister told you to."

Purple Sarah introduced the couple sitting on the couch, a girl with curly brown hair sitting with a possibly Sicilian American boyfriend: "That's Joe Ferrero, who lives here rent-free. He's a townie, likes to sing 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight,' and collects vintage cars. His girlfriend, Hazel, is the Geography major who *actually* lives here. That's her *Hobbit* map on the wall. She reminds me of Ripley from *Aliens*." I nodded hello. Then Purple Sarah pointed at a blonde girl with long, straight hair who wore jeans and a t-shirt dedicated to something called "*A Song of Ice and Fire*" *Book One: A Game of Thrones*. "She's Celeste. She talked way too long about how she thought Anne Brontë is criminally underrated."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "You piqued my interest."

Celeste pointed her chin out, defiantly. "*Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is great, if too long."

Ashley peered at me through a drunken haze. "Did I see you talking with that Missy bitch at the IVCF table?"

"She was a real sweetheart," I joked.

Sarah pointed inside her own mouth and mimed puking. "Sexy as she is mean. What were you doing wasting your time with evangelicals? When I think IVCF, I think the Venables."

I shrugged. "I think I'm too heterodox to join any of the clubs that were recruiting in the student union. There was a surfeit of gatekeepers, to boot. Even the Science Fiction Club guy thought I was a bad person for preferring *Doctor Who* to *At the Mountains of Madness*. I did like Victor at the GLBF table, though. He was the nicest person there."

“Victor is the absolute best person on campus!” Celeste proclaimed. “Bar none!”

“I’m thinking of checking out the Newman Community soon. Are those folks cool?”

“They’re great,” Hazel declared. “I’ll introduce you to everyone anytime you want.”

“And, if you want to learn sign language, I’m your man,” Joe added. “I’m the president of GOHI: the Geneseo Organization for the Hearing Impaired.”

“Oh, my mother could probably stand to learn sign language,” I mused aloud. “But she doesn’t know it . . .”

Sarah gestured dramatically towards me. “And here we have a fellow English major!”

Celeste said, “Speaking of gatekeeping, should we bestow active STD status upon him?”

I leaned closer to Sarah and whispered. “Can I get a translation on that?”

“STD is Sigma Tau Delta, the English major honor society,” Sarah explained.

“It isn’t really called STD, is it?” I asked.

“Believe it or not, it is,” Sarah said.

Buzzed Ashley adopted a friendly teasing voice. “Boy English majors! Boo! They’re all the same. They like Arthurian Romance, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and Cormac McCarthy. They think *X-Men: Days of Future Past* is the best literary work of the last forty years, and always double-major in Film Studies or Philosophy. What’s your senior project gonna be about: *April Fool’s Day* as the ultimate post-modern slasher movie? And . . . you know . . . Damien, I bet the lion’s share of your cultural literacy centers on movies and comic books. I bet you aren’t even capable of making a joke based on a famous work of literature!”

Annoyed, I crossed my arms in front of my chest. “To hell with you, Lady Ashley.”

Ashley laughed so hard she almost fell over. She lifted her wine high in the air, both to salute me and to prevent it from spilling out all over the beige carpet. “Well played, sir!”

Sarah drew an armchair away from the dinner table and put it beside the coffee table, placing me within the Trivial Pursuit circle. As I sat, she asked me, “You a Hemingway man?”

“Nah,” I said. “I didn’t like that book. Hemingway seemed to poke fun at the Jewish fellow with the stuffed animal and I’m partial to Jews and stuffed animals. I also hate ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro.’ And yet, I’m all about *Old Man and the Sea*, ‘Hills Like White Elephants,’ and ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.’ I find him irksome. I love him. I hate him. I dunno.”

Sarah eyed me suspiciously. “You don’t like Hemingway’s anti-Semitism, but you don’t mention finding fault with his sexism.”

“Why do you think I don’t like ‘Snows of Kilimanjaro’?”

“Ah,” Sarah smiled. “Yes, of course.”

Ashley had trouble getting the next question out without laughing wine out her nose. “Yeah, but what about *X-Men: Days of Future Past*?”

“Pretty much the best literary work of the last forty years!” When the round of giggles I was going for died down, I slyly added, “Along with *if on a winter’s night a traveler . . .* and *Kindred*.”

“Ooooh,” observed Hazel. “See what he did there?”

Celeste raised a hand. “Wait. We’re not done. What’s your favorite poem?”

I paused. “I have no — wait — I suppose ‘Goblin Market.’”

“Why?”

“It’s by an Italian, there’s goblins in it, and there’s a horny part.”

This got me the laugh I was looking for.

“*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*,” Celeste said loudly, silencing the general chuckling.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*,” she repeated.

I was confused. This was some sort of code? “They aren’t. I like them, but I prefer plums, mangoes, and fuji apples. I eat red, seedless grapes every day. Those are my favorites.”

Celeste smirked. “Okay, then. We now know your preference in fruit.”

“I only have red seedless grapes after sex,” Ashley said dreamily. “I love it when my girlfriend feeds them to me! If it were up to me,

everyone would only eat those grapes after sex.”

Fare thee well, red, seedless grapes. We meet again in another life. “That was some sort of test? Did I pass?” I glanced over at Sarah for help.

“If you’re here to find yourself a girlfriend, you’re not gonna get anywhere until you do some more homework.” Celeste reached into the bookbag tucked under the glass coffee table, withdrew a book from it, and tossed it to me. I barely managed to catch it without dropping it. “*Written on the Body* by Jeanette Winterson? I’m not sure I have enough estrogen to . . . wait. This looks awesome! We never find out the gender of the main character? How is that possible?”

Celeste nodded. “Technically, Damien, I’m not sure a man is capable of the range of emotions that character exhibits during the course of the book, but it is a pretty successful narrative experiment. To be brutally honest, I’m not sure if a man is capable of having the range of emotions required for him to enjoy *reading* that book.”

“Celeste, he’s only a freshman,” Sarah pleaded. “This is you being nice to him?”

Celeste shushed Sarah.

“Challenge accepted,” I said. “I am going to start reading this right away. But how does reading this help make me morally acceptable to Sigma Tau Delta?”

“It doesn’t. You have to read it *and* like it.”

I raised both my eyebrows, hopefully. “And if I like it?”

Celeste considered this. “I’ll give you another book: *A Gathering of Old Men*. Know it?”

“I don’t. Funny title.”

“And the book is a real knee-slapper,” Celeste said.

“Hmmm . . . I bet it isn’t, though.”

“Are you always this funny and agreeable, or only when you’re being cross-examined?” Celeste asked.

“I’ll admit I’m putting on a show for you. I want you all to like me. Usually, I’m moodier and as much fun to be around as Louis de Pointe du Lac.”

Celeste looked over to Sarah. “I don’t mind if he hangs around a little.”

Hazel jumped back into the conversation. “Don’t let them mislead

you by accident. I've been doing a survey in my head and I don't think there *are* any single, straight girls left in STD."

"What about Bree?" Celeste asked.

Ashley yawned. "She's married to her 4.0 average. She'll never date. Boy or girl. Ever."

"Didn't she go on a date with that Déaglán person last night?" asked Celeste.

"*He* wasn't worth shaving my legs for.' Direct quote from this morning," said Ashley. "I knew that wasn't going anywhere."

I couldn't conceal my disappointment. "There are *zero* single English majors right now?"

Everyone there shook their heads in unison.

I put on an operatically indignant expression to make the next remark into an obvious joke. "Then what good are you?"

"Yeah, we're all in committed relationships just to piss you off," Ashley said icily.

Oops. Maybe not that obvious a joke.

Celeste glanced at Sarah and jerked a finger at me. "This is the same guy who didn't notice he was among a whole class of girls? I thought he was deep."

I looked wounded because I felt wounded. "I *am* deep. I'm also a tad *lonely*, if that's okay with you all. But . . . you know . . . if nobody is looking, then nobody is looking."

"I'm pretty sure they're not," Hazel said apologetically.

I nodded and looked sideways at Ashley. "Sorry if that last joke was out of line."

Ashley stared at me over her wine glass. "Just so you know, I have a big pet peeve about dudes who say things like, 'Chicks won't date me cuz I'm too nice a guy for them, and they only date jerks!' Bitter, phony guy 'friends' will be first against the wall when the revolution comes."

The room fell silent. Everyone was staring at me. Again. *What the hell?* I nodded at Ashley, "I hear what you're saying."

"Climb out of his nose, Ashley," Hazel warned.

I smiled at Hazel but returned my attention to Ashley to do more damage control. "You're right. A wise woman once explained it takes a hundred days and a hundred nights to know a man's heart."

“Yes,” said Ashley.

“I’m not looking for a girlfriend. I want to make good friends with good people.”

Celeste jumped in. “You want to focus on your studies and get used to being away from home for the first time?”

“Yes.”

“Are you telling us you’re *not* on the prowl?” Ashley asked, incredulously. “Please. Tell me another one.” She laughed at her own sarcastic remark.

I flashed my new braces and pointed at them. “I got saddled with these over the summer, and I’m not excited to ask anyone out while I’m wearing them. After all, I couldn’t find anyone to go to the prom with me, and that was before I got these braces. So, heck with it.” *And I’m still carrying a torch for someone I’ve loved since junior high when I shouldn’t be, because there’s no hope we’ll ever get together in the future. So, I’m being a first-class idiot. Arwen kissed me at graduation and I’ve heard Robert Palmer’s “Addicted to Love” and Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” in my head on repeat ever since. That kiss was meant to be a ‘goodbye,’ but I can’t stop thinking about it. I keep pretending it was her signal to me that she will find her way back to me someday. All I need to do it wait. I’m transforming into Anne Elliot. “All the privilege I claim for’ myself, ‘is that of loving longest, when . . . hope is gone.”*

Purple Sarah cleared her throat. “Before this conversation goes any further, there is something you should all know about Damien. He’s the coolest guy on campus.”

“What about Victor?” asked Celeste.

“Okay, fine. After Victor.” Sarah then related the incident with Sergio that had happened less than an hour before. The story provoked many oaths and expressions of disgust when Sergio’s actions were described, and some surprised and approving expressions when Sarah related my role in the encounter. When Sarah was finished, she concluded, “So, I already consider Damien a good friend of *mine*. I wouldn’t have brought him here if I didn’t think he was cool. I think he could be a good friend of *ours*.”

“Are you intentionally using Mafia terminology?” I asked.

Sarah looked confused. “Mafia terminology? What Mafia terminology?”

“Never mind.”

Celeste glanced at Ashley. “I know you’re worried he’s going to wind up being like Littlefinger or Tyrion Lannister, but — after hearing that story — he’s exactly like Jon Snow.”

Ashley looked at me through narrowed eyes for several seconds before she came to a decision. “Diogenes, put down your lantern! An honest man has arrived!” Ashley stood, placing her half-finished glass of wine on the table. “You’re all jerks. Leaving it to the inebriated one to feed this man.” Ashley gestured towards me. “You want spaghetti and some wine, or what?”

I beamed. I was hungry, and Italian food sounded particularly comforting and familiar. Also, the conversation had turned back in my favor, thank Christ. “Yes, please.”

Ashley paused. “Did he really say, ‘This woman is under my protection?’”

“He did, indeed,” confirmed Sarah.

Ashley formed a Robert DeNiro inverted mouth and nodded in quiet approval. “I like it. Okay. I gotta get him his fucking food.” Ashley stumbled off to the kitchen to fix me a plate of dinner, and Celeste followed to make sure she didn’t drop anything.

Joe, Hazel’s silent boyfriend, spoke for the first time. “You’re doing way better than I did, first time they met me. I got all the interview questions wrong.”

“I dunno,” I said. “I think I missed a big one. Something about produce. I haven’t the first clue why we were talking about oranges and grapes.”

“You like theater, Damien?” Hazel asked. “STD organizes an annual trip to the Stratford Festival in Ontario every year. We went last year and got to see some great actors. I don’t know if you know Brian Bedford, Geordie Johnson, or Megan Follows? Brian was the voice of Disney’s *Robin Hood*, Geordie was Dracula in *Dracula: The Series*, and Megan Follows played *Anne of Green Gables*. We’ll be going again to see *Amadeus* and *King Lear*.”

“Dude! I get to see Megan Follows live on stage?”

Hazel's eyes glinted sympathetically. We were copacetic. "Speaking as a big fan of the people of Avonlea, I was pretty pumped to see her myself."

"Sign me up!" I proclaimed.

"It's what college is all about," Hazel said. "Those kinds of trips."

Hazel's boyfriend, Joe, spoke up. "Are you Italian, Damien? What kind?"

"I have ancestors in Naples, Salerno, and Armento."

"Awesome. My people are from Palermo, Corleone, Cherda, and Naples. And County Cork Ireland." Joe proceeded to explain to me that he was a fourth-generation Italian, raised to speak only English. His great-grandparents had been processed through Ellis Island, were relocated to Rochester, and eventually settled in Geneseo on Court Street. Court Street was Geneseo's Little Italy, where grapes and vegetable gardens were grown on long, narrow properties. Over the years, his relatives worked as locksmiths, farmers in Livonia, and railroad workers on the Erie Railroad in Avon.

"And you collect vintage cars?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah!" Joe enthused.

"They're gorgeous," Hazel said. "He's still restoring a couple, but it is wonderful to watch them all coming together."

"What models?" I asked.

"A red, 1947 Oldsmobile Model 76 two-door fastback; a two-tone green 1948 Oldsmobile 4-door sedan; a baby-poop-green 1970 Chevy Nova, and a yellow 1976 Buick Electra Limited. The '48 was my first car. I got it when I was sixteen after saving up all summer working as a projectionist at the Riviera."

Distracted by his use of the phrase "baby-poop green color," I realized I was still getting a sense of Joe's easy charm and off-kilter sense of humor. "Where do you store them all? I have a hard-enough time housing my comic books and movies!"

"No kidding! My parents said, if I stay at home and saved on dorm fees at college, that I could build a four-car garage there for the hobby. And it happened! They just finished it!"

Celeste whispered behind her hand into my ear. "This is why he *unofficially* lives with us and won't go home."

"I heard that," Joe laughed, amiably.

What do you know? A nice Italian guy! I like him. "And you sing 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight' a lot? That was a very specific detail."

Joe beamed. "I sing lots of songs a lot. I like to cheer people up with jokes and songs. I know a lot of depressed people, so it is my way of bringing sunshine to the world. I most like to sing 'Lydia the Tattooed Lady,' by Groucho Marx." Unprompted, he began serenading the room, until Hazel patiently asked him to trail off before the end. As I suspected, if I sometimes blew people over with the force of my personality the way Winnie the Pooh did Rabbit, then Joe could easily have that effect on me, playing Tigger to my Pooh. This was not a bad thing, in any way. I liked it, in fact. I was also genuinely surprised by how much we appeared to have in common. "A Groucho Marx fan, too? I feel like we're the same guy, only you like cars more than I do."

"I think we may have been separated at birth," Joe agreed. He glanced at Hazel. "I like him because he reminds me of me. Does that mean you like him? It would stand to reason."

"Don't hog him," Hazel warned. "I want to show him my maps. You've already got all your car collector buddies!"

"Okay, fine. I'll let you hang with him. Sometimes."

"I was just going to ask you if you liked Tolkien," Hazel said to me.

"I'm all about Bilbo Baggins," I declared.

Purple Sarah moaned. "No! If you two are gonna start talking ad nauseum about Vala Yavanna, Beren and Lúthien, and the War of the Wrath, you can count my ass out."

I was mystified by everything Sarah said, because I hadn't read *The Silmarillion*. "I don't know about any of that. I just think Smaug and Gollum and the giant spiders are really cool."

"Tolkien helped me get into maps," Hazel said.

"That's cool. Makes total sense."

Ashley appeared with my plate of spaghetti and an enormous goblet of red wine.

"Whoa, that's a glass of wine!" I exclaimed.

"We're all hammered, and you have catching up to do," said Ashley.

I reached for the goblet and stopped. "I'm supposed to warn you I'm underage."

“Underage, schmunderage. Where I come from, this is called hospitality. And don’t go getting any ideas. I’m not trying to get you drunk.” Ashley displayed her Claddagh Ring after she handed me the glass. “You’ve met my girlfriend.” She inclined her head towards Celeste.

Celeste stood, did a slight bow at the knees, waved her arm hello at me, and said, in a voice pitched up an octave to make her sound especially friendly, “Heeeey, how’s it going?”

I looked at Sarah. “Is that really what I’m like? She made me look really cheesy.”

Sarah chuckled. “Celeste is the queen of mimics. She has you cold already.”

I threw my arm over my eyes, a stricken Greta Garbo. “Oh, no! I’m cheesy!”

Purple Sarah placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry about it! Some of my best friends are cheesy.”

I tipped the entire glass of wine down my throat. “Please, may I have some more?”

“Already?” Ashley chuckled. “Wow.”

“Keep it coming. It’s to help me grow a sense of humor about myself.”

“That’s the spirit,” Ashley declared.

“I’m sorry you didn’t like my impression,” Celeste sulked.

“It was wonderful. That’s why I need to grow a sense of humor. I blame sixth grade for making me boring.”

Celeste sighed. “Whatever they did to you in sixth grade, I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t you, but thank you all the same,” I said.

Before heading back to the kitchen to bring out more wine, Ashley glanced at her roommates sitting about the coffee table. “Should I come back with my ceremonial knife?”

Purple Sarah raised a Black Power fist in the air. “I was going to suggest it.”

“Bring it!” called out Celeste.

“I’m not Wiccan, but I’d like to participate,” Hazel said. “I think Joe will, too.”

“Are we doing sexy witch stuff?” Joe asked, wiggling his eyebrows like Groucho Marx.

Ashley left to get me my wine, plus this terrifying ceremonial knife thing. I looked again at Hazel. “You’re participating in—?” I was really asking her what was about to happen, but Hazel answered a different implied question by saying, “I live to support my wonderful and eccentric friends.” Hazel was soft-spoken, but when she said things, they carried a lot of weight.

“A rare, wise trait,” I said. “You’re like my friend Mitchell: A real mensch.”

“She is also supportive of her wonderful and eccentric boyfriend!” Joe exclaimed.

“Yes,” Hazel agreed.

“These Sigma Tau Deltans seem cool. How do the Newman folks compare?” I asked.

Hazel considered this. “You’ll like them. Not *all* heterodox, but big-hearted people.”

“Phat,” I pronounced. “Who needs TKE with Hazel and her peeps around?”

Celeste punched the table in mock rage. “Down with TKE! Up with STD!”

Ashley arrived with my new glass of wine and an athame, a black-handled ceremonial blade. “I’m being a bit blasé about this, since I’m three sheets to the wind, but I’m thinking we should invite you into our STD circle with some cool pagan shit. If that isn’t too weird for you.”

I raised both my eyebrows. “But you just met me! I could be the new Son of Sam, for all you know.” I slipped into an imitation of Dana Carvey imitating President George H.W. Bush. “Inviting me into your coven just wouldn’t be prudent! Not gonna do it! Wouldn’t be prudent!”

“Didn’t you hear me call the question just now?” Ashley asked. “We all voted unanimously to initiate you. You did too well being super impressive just now.”

“Wow,” I breathed. I was not used to being treated this well.

Ashley dropped back into her old chair. “In all seriousness, Damien, I want to thank you for being a stand-up guy to my chum Sarah here. And I want to make a nice new freshman feel welcome in Geneseo and the English major. Besides, I am very against hazing freshmen

and all other abusive, patriarchal bullshit, so, we're not going to make you jump through hoops for a whole year just to prove to us you're worth our time. That's not how we roll."

Joe wiggled his eyebrows again. "She's so hot when she talks feminazi, right, Damien?"

Ashley ignored Joe. "And aren't you far from home? You need a new family here, don't you? What's your accent? Brooklyn? That's six hours drive from here. You're alone out here."

"I'm from Staten Island."

Ashley nodded. "Long Island. Of course. I knew you were from New York City."

"Staten Island is the fifth borough," I corrected gently. "It's what Woody Guthrie meant by 'the New York Island.' He shouldn't have tweaked the lyric. 'Staten Island' is easier to sing."

Celeste looked confused. "Staten Island? Never heard of it. I know Long Island."

Hazel shook her head, smiling. "I'm from Long Island, knuckleheads. He's from Staten Island. They're two different places."

"Whatever. Welcome to the rest of New York. Are you willing to enter our circle?"

"I would love to join your cult," I beamed. "It has been my lifelong ambition to join a circle of cool people. I will finally get to see what's on the other side of the Green Door!"

"And here you are. I'm now going to call the quarters." Ashley pointed the knife to the four points of the compass, evoking the four elements and the guardian spirits, before returning her attention to me. "To quote Adriana Porter's 'Rede of the Wicca,' 'Bide the Wiccan laws you must, in perfect love and perfect trust. Live and let live. Fairly take and fairly give.' If you are to join our circle, you must do so with an attitude of 'perfect love and perfect trust.'" Ashley raised the point of the blade to my chest. I drew back as if a cobra had leaped towards me. Ashley admonished me with her finger. "Ah! Ah! Come closer." I smiled nervously and allowed the blade to touch my shirt. Not for the first time that evening, I was glad that I had taken the time to change out of my George the Animal Steele shirt into a salmon-colored, button-down dress shirt over black slacks.

"I'm now going to quote the First-Degree Initiation passage from *The Gardnerian Book of Shadows*." A burp got caught in Ashley's throat. She punched herself in her chest and it popped out. "Excuse me."

"You *are* drunk!" Celeste barked a laugh. "That was gross."

"Shush! Don't spoil the mood. Okay, okay. Here we go. 'O thou, who standeth on the threshold between the world of men and the domains of the Vagina Americans' — I'm sure you can tell I made that part up because I like the sound of 'Vagina Americans' — 'hast thou the courage to make the assay? For I tell thee verily, it were better to rush on my weapon and perish miserably than to make the attempt with fear in thy heart.' So, now I'm going to ask you how you approach. You know what you have to say, right?"

Wow. She could do all that from memory? Drunk, to boot? I had no idea but ventured a guess. "'I am proud to pass through the threshold into the domain of the Vagina Americans?'"

"No, you idiot! 'I come to you with a heart filled with perfect love and perfect trust.'"

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "Of course. Excuse me. Well, that's a very nice sentiment, isn't it? I'd have no problem saying that. Jives quite well with good old Saint Francis of Assisi. You can all be my Sister Moons." Ashley nodded in agreement and gestured at me to stop jawing and get it over with. I adopted a more serious tone and said, "I come to you with a heart that was once made only of cigarette-ash but is now filled with perfect love and perfect trust."

Celeste pretended to be scandalized. "He ad-libbed ceremonial language!"

Ashley pursed her lips, thoughtfully. "I like it. I'll take it."

Joe chose that moment to whisper to Hazel. "We're not going to go to hell for participating in this, right?"

"Nah." Hazel shook her head confidently. "Don't worry about it."

"You may well ask," continued Ashley, "what our rules and regulations are."

"Uh-oh," I said.

"We have only one rule here, and that is that there are no rules. After all, we are all good people here, and good people are not inclined to be cruel to one another. We need no rules to keep us honest. As

Rabelias wrote, ‘Do as thou wilt because we that are free, of gentle birth, well bred, and at home in civilized company possess a natural instinct that inclines us to virtue and saves us from vice. This instinct we name our honor.’”

“That is also why we are not into gatekeeping in quite the same way as other groups,” Purple Sarah said. “All we want is nice people around us. The rest takes care of itself.”

Ashley put the dagger down on the coffee table, next to the Trivial Pursuit board. “Welcome, Damien! Welcome!” she screamed, throwing her arms around me and giving me a wet, drunken, lipstick kiss on the cheek. “We are proud to have you among us.”

“Thank you so much.” I went from being startled at getting tackled without warning, to aroused by the hug and kiss, to deeply moved by the sentiments of sisterly affection, friendship, and bibliophile solidarity. I felt all these things in the span of a second. My eyes filled with tears.

“Listen, don’t turn out to be a dick,” Celeste joked. “Remember, we have that dagger, and we know where you sleep.”

“Ha!” I laughed, wiping the tears from my eyes. “Nothing like a Lorena Bobbitt joke.”

Celeste jumped on me next, giving me a lipstick-free kiss on my clean cheek after seeing the wet mess Ashley had left behind on my other cheek. Joe and Hazel took turns hugging me next. Then we all sat down again, and I realized I hadn’t eaten my dinner yet.

“That was intensely cool,” I said.

“I like watching them do that ceremony,” Hazel said.

Ashley smiled. “I love Calling the Quarters. It makes me feel all witchy.”

“Yeah, that was dope,” I agreed.

Suddenly, no one knew what to say.

Purple Sarah cleared her throat. “I have a question. What do we do next? Once me and Damien finish our pasta, that is? Do we crash your Trivial Pursuit game . . .”

“You’re welcome to join,” Celeste said.

Sarah gave a thumbs up, adding, “. . . or do we move the furniture against the walls, and throw a mini rave in this apartment?”

"Dance to Technotronic, Erasure, Pet Shop Boys, and Depeche Mode?" asked Celeste.

"You can be the DJ," said Sarah. "I know you want to be."

All eyes turned to look at me.

"Do I get to dance in the circle with you?" *Will this be me, finally going to the prom?*

"Of course, silly," Ashley said. "And you can dance with us individually, too!"

"Yeah? Okay, then!" I downed my second full goblet of wine. "Let's have a rave!"