

Prologue

The beauty of a continuing story is that it has the potential to go beyond the original tale and achieve entirely new heights. The *reality* of a continuing story, however, is that it can tend to suck and NOT in the good way. *Highlander 2, Galactica 1980, Star Trek V, Jaws: The Revenge...hello???* And then there's me. I'm Andy, just a typical 19-year-old college student from Detroit, Michigan. What's so special about me? Not a thing. Well, nothing until I went to California six months ago during the summer of 1989 and had that whole clichéd experience-that-changed-my-life thing and blah blah blah. I've heard it as often as you have, so I won't bore you with the whole sordid story down to the smallest detail. I'm not my mother. Well, maybe I'll tell you some of it just so we're on the same page.

Suffice to say that I met someone in California who I was convinced was the anti-Christ, only he obviously wasn't. He's my cousin and, unfortunately for me, attractive. Okay, *hot*. I do want to make the distinction that he's my cousin *by marriage only*. It was California, not one of those other, less progressive states. Anyway, Jordan — that's my cousin — pushed me to come to terms with a major issue in my life. Not only did he finally get me to admit that I'm gay — I am, I double-checked — but he was also my first, which is *how* I double-checked. Oh, come on! It's not like Jordan and I didn't use protection. I'm kidding. No, we did. We used protection. After all, safety comes first...then hopefully you both do, too. Sorry. Gay humor. Couldn't help myself.

Right, so, I'd rarely left Michigan before and, well, who'd want to? I'd miss the daily season changes, our luxurious family-sized potholes and our colorful state tree — the little orange construction cone. In-state jokes, sorry. Anyway, I left home, went to LA, experienced a little of the beach and nightclub life, and finally learned how to be comfortable just being myself. I also learned that a French Tickler isn't a masseuse who studied in Paris and that ribbed isn't always for *her* pleasure — very important information there. So, how exactly does one top an experience like that? If this was one of those early '80s family television shows, I'd be living happily ever after in some little Italian villa with Charo as my crazy neighbor or stepmother. It didn't happen like that, though.

I went through the motions of finishing off my summer vacation back home, moved into a private dorm room at school and completed the first semester of my sophomore year — all

without raising a single suspicion concerning my sexuality. I wanted to tell someone and I tried to, but no one was picking up on the clues. It felt like everybody knew who I was, but that they weren't really paying attention to what I was saying, much like I imagine Andrew Ridgley felt when he released his solo album after WHAM split up. Yeah, exactly. *You* didn't know he had one either.

I needed someone who I could talk to, who could help me learn more about myself and who I could grow with. Most people look for this kind of relationship with a therapist. Me? I wanted a boyfriend. Jordan would have been the perfect candidate had I stayed in California. After all, he turned out to be an excellent role model and what could be better than meeting the kind of man I want to share my future with? Meeting the kind I don't want? No, I can do without *that* little drama entirely. I'm a much nicer person these days, so there's no reason for the proverbial bird to fly over and shit on my head.

Naturally, this happened right after Christmas break.

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I've matured. I mean, how long can somebody be the "bad boy" they've always imagined themselves to be? I'm like Captain Kirk! Okay, more like Mr. Sulu...only I'm not quite sure why he comes to mind. Seriously, I must have matured because I smile quite a bit these days and I find very little to be unhappy about. Why? Because life is good and I feel very alive. Yes, I've officially become one of *those* people, the kind who sincerely annoyed me even six short months ago by the sheer fact I knew they were breathing the same air I was. Well, no more! I have tamed the beast and wrestled my inner bitch back down into that dark, miserable place within my tortured soul where it belongs...right next to that New Kids on the Block tape I once bought — I lied and told the cashier it was a gift. Please, we all know it was because Donnie Wahlberg looked good in tight jeans. Anyway, while I'm making a valiant effort not to be sarcastic, it doesn't mean I can't still make observations. Those are legitimate.

For instance, the only thing worse than a summer in West Michigan is a winter in West Michigan. Students either gag on the lovely aroma of fertilizer or struggle to breathe at all in the sub-zero, lake-effect winds that whip through the campus and nip at the tips of our noses and toeses and... Wait. That's not a word. Forget that last bit. Either I feel like I'm a resident of Hooterville or I'm Nanook of the North. While Kira, my Siberian husky, loves this kind of weather, it makes me long for someplace warm, exotic and that serves some useful purpose, like Florida. You know? God's waiting room where old people go to die.

An exchange student from Turkey I'd met last semester named Aydin spent the entire Christmas break traveling throughout Europe eating croissants, drinking the local elixirs and having the time of his life. Instead of spending my holiday doing something similar, I had the pleasure of freezing my balls off at home working somewhere I don't want to get sued for mentioning and then freezing said balls further when I returned to school, but at least I'm not alone. Two other friends of mine I met last semester, Ryan and Miss Kim, complain about the same thing.

Ryan is unusual and not just because he has balls that freeze. All balls freeze. It's a fact. While I found him to be unpleasant — sometimes *extremely* unpleasant — he absolutely despised me in the beginning because of several nasty comments I made about Guns N' Roses in my music column in the campus newspaper. Once we started hanging out a bit in an English

class, though, he slowly came around as did my opinion of him. Of course, he doesn't miss an opportunity to tell me how awful he thinks my taste in music is, but he's short. What can you do but vent when you're short?

We both have a passion for writing and also share some pretty strange ideas about the art. For instance, Ryan and I want to write novels, but feel that one isn't worth reading unless it's a minimum of 500 pages in length. We also feel that to break into the business, we'll have to outdo anything ever written by Stephen King because, you know, *that'll happen*. I get the feeling Ryan might be a little bit judgmental, too, and that's based on the fact he has bumper stickers declaring "No Fat Chicks" plastered all over the back of his car. As Kim is fond of saying, mostly when he's not around, "that is one emotionally scarred mutha..." You get the idea.

And speaking of Miss Kim, she is one of the most uninhibited women I have ever had the pleasure of meeting and not just because she claims to have balls that also freeze. You see, she's from Gary, Indiana, a place well-reputed to make anyone shiver in a combination of fright and awe when the name is uttered. Despite this, if the phrase "black is beautiful" has ever been coined for someone in this current day and age, it's her. Well, her and Oprah. It's probably a good thing that Kim's never seen the bumper stickers on Ryan's car, though. The girl is on the buxom side of life, which I feel compliments her, and she has a wicked streak. It just isn't in anybody's best interest to incite her, especially Ryan, who tends to incite everybody.

One of Kim's major strong points — other than being the only one who would watch British films with me for a class I'd taken — is that she knows exactly what her sexual nature is and doesn't feel the need to apologize for it. The girl has presence, but it's her smile and deceptively gentle mannerisms that I see people respond to the most. She attracts quite a bit of attention from the local studs, only she's rarely interested in the ones who give it to her. Putting it kindly, let me just say that she's a bit on the cursed side in that she has a knack for being attracted to men she can't have. I asked her once why she rarely committed to any of the suitors who actually pursued her.

"Oh, honey." She explained as if addressing a young child. "If I wanted a permanently-helpless-overly-hormonal-co-dependent-money-sucking penis-bearer, it wouldn't be much of a challenge. Instead, I want a buck who's going to treat me like the Goddess I am, not expect me to be some here's-your-fried-chicken-would-you-like-a-beer-with-that barefoot-and-begging-to-be-pregnant bitch in the kitchen. That's not in my contract." She held up her hand. "See no evil,

hear no evil, date no evil.” Who could argue with that? And where would you begin if you tried to?

Ryan, on the other hand, once spouted that if he wanted a money-loving, mind-manipulating, life-devouring bloodsucker, he’d just date his ex-girlfriend again...or any other girl on campus. He also stated that on the other hand, you have a whole new set of fingers. Carrying on a conversation with him could be a little difficult at times and I was surprised that he and Kim were even able to be civil to each other during the occasions the three of us had hung out together. Before this past summer, I might have agreed with everything Ryan said just for the sake that it was bound to annoy somebody, but too much had changed. No, I’d changed. I could no longer live solely to piss off the population of the planet Earth, but he could. I’d have to live that part of my life through him now.

Today was the first day of classes and Kim and I were waiting in my room for him to show up. Somehow, and I’m not quite sure how, I talked her into taking a creative writing class with us. I was introducing her to the music of Real Life and Fiona to pass the time until, finally, a muffled pounding at the door signaled Ryan’s arrival.

“Look!” I all but shouted when I saw what he was wearing. “It’s the younger brother from *A Christmas Story*. Can Ralphy come out to play, too?”

“I really hate that movie.” The stifled response was agitated. “And do you have any idea how cold it is out there?” He was sporting a snowmobile suit, heavy winter coat over that, boots which added a bit of height to his 5’6” stature, a ski mask and a large, thick pair of gloves. The only indication that the figure in front of us was human was the set of blue eyes glaring at us from behind the mask.

“Yeah and don’t go there.” As entertaining as it might be, the last thing I wanted to hear was Kim talking about her balls again. “Let me grab our coats.” It occurred to me that cold was a small thing to deal with in life if that was my only complaint. “You know, things could always be worse.”

“I really hate people like you, too.” Ryan stated without skipping a beat. “And what is this crap you’re listening to?”

“It’s Fiona.” Kim perked up. “And she’s fabu, sweetie. Everything I do, she’s sexing me. Meow, meow, meow.” Okay, that thing she just did — the meow thing — is something I forgot to mention. I think she overdosed on cat food commercials as a child — the ones where

you can hear the cat's thoughts — and has been mimicking them ever since. Ryan has his own theory and it has to do with a certain slang term for female anatomy that also happens to be an alternative name for a cat. See what I mean about him inciting people?

“Yeah, whatever.” Ryan dismissed her, which he knew would push one of her buttons. “Andy?”

“I'm in the closet.” I chuckled and returned with Kim's and my coat. “Now I'm not.” Come on, people! I was running out of subtle hints here.

“I don't get the joke.” Kim looked like she wanted to, mostly because Ryan apparently didn't either and that meant she could one-up him, but she wasn't making the connection.

“It's all that '80s music he listens to.” Ryan turned and headed for the stairs that would take us outside to the weather we were all, quite honestly, dreading. “It'll rot your brain and who the hell is Fiona anyway?”

“She's a singer who got her start playing in a couple of bands like the Dixie Dregs, then cut a 12" dance single in New York City before deciding that wasn't the direction she wanted to go. In the end, she wanted to rock and was signed by Atlantic Records.” Ryan turned slowly back around and stared at me.

“Have you ever heard of a rhetorical question?” He asked, accusingly. “I really didn't want to know. I don't care. It's like that explanation you give about being named after Duran Duran's ex-guitarist. It couldn't have happened. He wasn't old enough and your parents probably never even heard a single song by the group anyway. They probably dragged you to Neil Diamond and Barry Manilow concerts as a child.” Ryan continued on, still mumbling the entire way. “Of all the useless information in the world to know... Who gives a shit?”

“I do.” I countered, but more for my own benefit than anybody else's. And my folks *had* taken me to see Neil Diamond and Barry Manilow before. Was that supposed to mean something?

“Hon?” Kim took her coat from me and put it on. “If the last time you got a piece of ass was when your hand slipped through the toilet paper, you'd be bitchy, too.”

“Andy?” Ryan called back over his shoulder. “Are you coming out or what?”

“I *am* out.” Somebody had to get that one.

“You know, it sounds like English, but nobody understands what you're talking about. Now move it before we're late.”

The semester was officially underway.

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Our only stop before class was the Commons. Ryan lived off campus with his parents, so at least he had the good fortune to have a home-cooked meal more often than we did. I remember driving my mother into fits of lunatic rage by constantly complaining about her cooking back when I was in high school, but I was a bit of a shit back then. It amazes me how much we think we know and how mature we think we are when we're younger. I mean, now that I'm 19, I'm *so* ahead of the game in those areas! *Now* I know everything. Unfortunately, maturity and knowledge — or is that maturity and wisdom — never took college food into consideration.

A university will frequently name their Commons after someone of importance, much like they do many of the buildings and residence halls. In this case, however, no one wanted to be associated with where the supposed and often questioned preparation and consumption of what the lowest-bidding contractor called “food” went on. And let's face it, the image of sweet, elderly women with smiles on their faces, pictures of grandchildren in their pockets and kind words on their tongues as they handed you whatever it was you ordered...oh, no. Not here. We had heavy set women from one of the Baltic countries who would just as soon growl at you than smile.

Ryan, Kim and I sat down and started the normal bit of chitchat that went on in a small group. What did you get for Christmas? What instructors do you have again this semester? How did you spend the last night of 1989 and did you remember the name of the person you woke up next to? Yeah, it was bullshit, but it was bullshit that was expected of you.

“Is that idiot on your floor still trying to get you to work out?” Ryan asked while taking a bite of whatever it was he ordered. It looked like chicken, but who knew? One thing was for certain, even if it looked like chicken, it didn't taste like chicken.

“Unfortunately, yes.” I picked up a limp fry and dipped into some ketchup. Oddly enough, *that* tasted like chicken. “Ever since he became one of their official trainers at the Field House, he makes a point to single me out in front of everybody. ‘Come on, Andy. No pain, no gain. You're looking a little flabby there!’” I waited for the others to respond, but they only stared back at me. “What?”

“Well,” Kim looked me over, “your cheeks are getting a bit puffy.”

“They are not.” I involuntarily reached up to feel them.

“Not those cheeks, baby.” She chuckled.

“Oh, be quiet. I’m not getting fat. I don’t think I’ve put any weight on since 11th grade...*baby.*”

“Baby got back?” Ryan chimed in.

“I do *not* have back.” I was starting to sound defensive. “I’m *not* heavy and I’m not going to get a complex just because the two of you enjoy playing with somebody’s mind.” I hoped that was convincing because... I didn’t think I’d gained any weight. My pants still fit, my shirts weren’t shrinking. *For crying out loud!* They were just screwing with me.

“She tried to frisk me again.” Ryan complained, picking up a new tangent in the conversation.

“She did not.” I rolled my eyes.

“Who tried to frisk you, hon?” Kim was suddenly interested now that the topic of uninvited physical contact had been brought up.

“Ryan thinks that the woman at the door who checks student IDs is constantly trying to feel him up.”

“I’m telling you,” he insisted, “she made a play for my ass!”

“You mean Miss Bluehair-I’ve-got-cobwebs-between-my-legs at the front there?” Kim certainly did have a way with words. She opened her mouth to say something else and that’s when it happened for the second time in my life. *Eerie silence.* I stared at her, saw her mouth moving, but heard absolutely nothing. What was going on here? It almost felt like a myocardial reflection...or whatever that thing is with the heart. While chemistry hadn’t exactly been my best class, I didn’t fare much better in health either.

All the light and noise in the room suddenly just...dimmed. There was a disturbance here much like I’d felt around certain cousins at the anniversary party in California. No, it was different this time. This was singular and *very* focused, yet I didn’t quite know how I knew it, only that I *did* know it. A little radar blip pinged back and forth between my ears, but was I detecting someone or was someone detecting me? And to what end? And was I talking to myself?

I nonchalantly looked around the room and attempted to identify the source. The usual number of premed students were around us as were a few overly-impressed-with-themselves athletic types looking to score with anything that ovulated, some fraternity brothers admiring

their reflections in the silverware, sorority sisters discussing the advantages of spritzing over mousse, a few couples thinking about where they'd rather be, who they'd rather be with and what position they'd be in if they were there...and one lone guy sitting three tables away.

There was a small group between us, but he had strategically positioned himself in order to get a clear view of our table. I guessed he was around my age, maybe a year older, and he was pretty easy to spot because his hair was so blond that it was almost white, much like my own...before it turned darker after puberty. He also had very smooth, attractive facial features that gave him an air of innocence. I imagined that I must have looked exactly the same way in California, only different. What was he looking at? More important, *who* was he looking at? Ryan had his back to him, but Kim and I could see him just fine. That explained it.

"You aren't going to believe this." I whispered. "Don't look now, Miss Kim, but there's a guy sitting over there staring at you. I believe you have an admirer." I nudged her, playfully rubbing in the implications. "He's really being obvious about it, too."

"Where?" Ryan turned around and proceeded to stare at everyone.

"The blonde one." I sighed and tried to be less obvious about it than he was.

"Oh, him?" Kim rolled her eyes. "Actually, I think he's looking at you."

"What the hell is he looking at me for?" Ryan demanded.

"Maybe he saw your bumper stickers." I couldn't help it and it was a valid observation.

"No, not you. You can barely see over the table." Kim pointed to me. "You." Something occurred to her. "What bumper stickers?"

"*Me?*" My pulse quickened and I felt myself blush. Why would he be staring at me? "Why me?" I should be so lucky?

"Maybe he read your last music review." Ryan responded just loud enough for me to hear, payment in full for my crack about his bumper stickers.

"Hey, I like Corey Hart." Besides, I gave the album a decent review.

"Yeah, you're the only one left in the world who does. Big news flash! Corey Hart's newest album goes gold after selling three copies to his one and only fan, Andy Stevenson. Media goes wild! Fan stamps his feet in celebration while friends tell him to get a life!" If dealing with his snide remarks was my only complaint in life... *Stop that!*

"And moving right along," I turned back to Kim, "why do you think he's looking at me?"

“So he can get to me.” She started nibbling on her hamburger again while Ryan and I looked at each other, wondering what it was we’d missed. “He asked me about you several times last semester. It was a coy way of getting close to me, but I’m on to him. I know this game.” She smiled and looked over his way. “I don’t know why he’d need an excuse because I think he’s adorable.” I didn’t know what to say to that. “Oh, Andy, don’t worry. I’m sure he’s not as sweet as you are.”

“Great, he’s adorable and I’m sweet. There is *so* much inequality in this friendship.” She threw a fry at me. “Still, that’s weird. He must be coming on to you because I don’t have a clue who he is.” Not that I wouldn’t mind getting to know him. The boy certainly had it going on for him in the looks department and... *Am I really this shallow now?*

“You mean you don’t actually know him?” Kim asked.

“Maybe you were thinner back then and the new weight is putting pressure on your brain.” Ryan smirked.

“No,” I struggled to stay pleasant, “I wasn’t any thinner and I really don’t know him.” Maybe she wanted me to tell her that he had visited my dorm room every night last semester for a quickie...not an entirely unpleasant thought, but unlikely. And why was Ryan still going on about the weight thing? Was I bigger now? *Stop!*

“It’s not like I can blame him for using you to get to me,” she was totally letting this go to her head, “because this mama knows how to barbeque herself some beef. The way he talked about you, though, I thought maybe you were old friends.”

“Maybe he’s the one leaving you all those hang up calls on your answering machine.” Ryan suggested.

“I just figured it was someone calling the wrong number or, you know, it could be my grandmother...drunk...again.”

“Your new message is very creative too!” Kim gave me a playful slug on my shoulder. “Mama likes, meow meow meow.”

“I think it’s juvenile.” Ryan acted disinterested.

“That’s because you fell for it twice before you realized it was the machine.” I broke out into a spontaneous smile. “Sometimes I’m so good it hurts.”

“Well, I see the misconception fairy visited you again.”

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The journey to class was as fast as we could possibly walk it. The wind whipped around us and then, as if Mother Nature wasn't happy torturing us with that, it started snowing. If that's all I have to worry about in life, though... *Oh, shut it!* We finally made it to the building our class was located in and started peeling off the layers of extra clothing so we didn't now overheat.

"There better not be any of those artistic freaks in this class." Ryan started down the crowded hallway in search of the classroom and we followed. "They talk weird, they don't make any sense and the last thing I need to hear is one of them whine 'I don't get it...this isn't real...it's not an aesthetically pleasing and stimulating read.' If it drives them to a deviant lifestyle or if they go home and jerk off afterwards, great. That's a real reaction and not some stupid, backwards way of saying they liked or hated it."

"Hey!" Another student alongside us waved to someone passing by. "Hail and well met!"

"Shut up!" Ryan glared at him and then turned back to us. "That's exactly the kind of shit I'm talking about. If one of them says anything even remotely close to what that idiot just did, I'm going to roll up whatever they hated and shove it right up their pompous ass! See if *that* suits their aesthetic pleasure."

"Hey," Kim pulled me closer to her and slowed down so Ryan couldn't hear. "That boy is one emotionally scarred mutha..."

"Last I heard, he hadn't dated you." I cut her off, raised my eyebrows and pulled away.

"Ya'll don't want to be like that," Kim called after me, "because they *won't* find the body."

We caught up to Ryan a few moments later and joined him in the room. No sooner had we chosen seats and started to get comfortable when the place started filling up with additional puffy bodies — puffier than mine, thank you very much. As quickly as these bodies chose a seat, off came their coats, gloves, hats, scarves, earmuffs and, in some cases, leggings, to reveal much thinner, more human looking inhabitants underneath. Now, whether or not they acted human or like prima donnas remained to be seen. Since it was only a basic creative writing class, it was unlikely that the professor would tolerate any high and mighty behavior.

"Oh, wow!" We all looked up. "You guys look like the survivors from *Silent Night*, *Deadly Night*. Wonder how many of you are going to make it because I hear it's a weeder

course.” Aaaaand we all looked away. Freaky guy definitely stood out from the rest of the crowd and not in the best of ways. He wore a jacket with stitching resembling the blade marks from *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, a cap with a “*Texas Chainsaw Rules!*” patch on it and carried a backpack with “Everyday should be *Friday The 13th*” scribbled on it in bright red marker. I could actually respect that.

“Your white ass didn’t tell me this was a weeder course.” Kim was less than thrilled. “I don’t need this, it ain’t in my contract and I ain’t puttin’ up with it because my name is Kim.” That right there...that’s what she says in moments of frustration. No matter how bad something might become, if she can avoid it or it doesn’t have anything to do with her, Kim would inform us that it wasn’t in her contract, wouldn’t put up with it and then her reason for it, which was usually her name. It was another highlight of her personality.

“I’m sure it’s not.” I was pretty certain freaky guy heard wrong. Basically, most introductory courses, like Chemistry, were designed to be a bit more difficult than usual to weed out anyone not suited for that area of study, like *me* with Chemistry. Why anyone would plan a course like Creative Writing in that same vein was beyond me, though. Writing a complete sentence was a whole lot easier than learning Pavlov’s Law of Relativity.

“You and freaky guy have the same taste in movies.” Kim poked me in the side. “Are you sure the two of you aren’t related? This is farm country, you know?”

“I will not be baited by the evil things you say about our progressive state.” I leaned over to Ryan. “Well?” Freaky guy, whatever his name really was, took his hat off and rearranged a mop of black hair so that it wasn’t hanging down in front of his face. Dark eyes probed the room for an empty seat and his goofy, awkward smile met every face he saw along the way. I thanked God I was already sitting between two people. “What do you think?”

“I’ll bet he reads your column every week and is one of your biggest fans.”

“I hope he sits next to you.” No sooner had my words been uttered when the subject of our conversation pulled up right next to Ryan and sat down. Kim squeezed my arm and purred in delight.

“I’m Rueben.” He extended his hand to Ryan. “Aren’t you the guy with the ‘No Fat Chicks’ bumper stickers on your car?” *Uh, oh.* That was going to come back to haunt him and everyone’s attention was suddenly on their conversation. “Yeah, I saw you driving in when I was on my way to class today. You were swerving all over the road.”

“I was reloading.” Ryan responded through clenched teeth and Rueben quickly retracted his hand.

“Scuse me, honey?” Kim leaned forward, sweet sounding as can be. Yep, he was in deep sushi. “Ya’ll got what on the back of your car?” She wasn’t really looking for an answer to that question. No, there was a deeper one in store for him here. “You have a problem with happy, fluffy women?” And there it was.

“No.” Ryan peered at her. “It’s not a problem. It’s called a standard.”

“A standard?” She faked delight with his answer. “Ohhhh, I see. Well, did I ever tell you that a standard fluffy women like me have is to not date bitter, skinny bitches like you?”

“Did anybody ever tell you that the reason we’re bitter skinny bitches is because fluffy women like you block us from getting to the food?”

“Mutha fucka!” Kim stood up. “I’m gonna rip your ears off and shove ’em up your ass just so you can hear me kick it!” Oh, good. Now we had people from outside the hallway poking their heads in to see what was going on.

“Sweetie?” I put my hand on her arm and spoke as soothingly as I could. “He’s just trying to get the better of you and you’re letting him do it. Don’t let him win. Don’t be that girl.” It wasn’t doing the trick. “Too many witnesses.” That did and she sat down, *very* reluctantly though.

“So.” Reuben picked up the conversation again as Kim settled down. It wasn’t over, not by a long shot, but it would wait until later...probably when Ryan least expected it. “I was thinking that a bunch of us could get together once a week or something and bounce our ideas off each other. What do you think?” Ryan didn’t answer him. “When would you be available to meet?” He pushed.

“Never. Is never good for you?”

“Very funny.” Reuben pulled a pen out of his backpack. “I’ll call you and we can set something up. What’s your number?”

“It’s listed in the phone book.” Ryan looked away.

“Okay.” Rueben seemed momentarily at a loss. “Um, what’s your name?”

“That’s listed in the phone book, too.”

“Oh, hootchie mama!” Ryan and I turned to see Kim gripping the sides of her chair and looking towards the door. We followed her gaze and saw the same blonde kid who’d been in the

commons earlier walking in with a woman who must have been the instructor. The sight of him was like a refreshing warm breeze.

“Hootchie mama?” I whispered to her. Actually, it did feel like it was getting warmer in here. I certainly felt flushed.

“It’s a sista’ thing. You wouldn’t understand.” Kim looked at the cute guy again, then back at me. “Go. I don’t want you sitting by me anymore. You annoy me.”

“You just want him to sit here so you can tell him how you’ll fulfill his every sexual fantasy,” I leaned in closer, “only I don’t think you own a Chihuahua.”

“Honey, you need help.” She laughed despite herself and then added a “meow meow meow” to let me know things were good between us. If only she knew how much I wished *she* had moved so that he could sit next to me. Of course, he probably wasn’t even interested in either of us, which made this the strangest bit of non-existent competition I’d ever not been involved in.

“Okay, everyone,” the instructor addressed the class and the blonde kid took a seat close to the front, “let’s get things moving along.” She set a stack of papers and a pair of headphones down on the desk. I always wondered what professors listened to and what it might reveal about their personalities. Was she a Motley Crue or Liberace kinda gal? “I’m Cathleen Gevaultski, but you may call me Cathleen. I’m your docent and mahatma through the realm of Promethean writing this semester and, despite what you may or may not have heard, this is a weeder course.” *Definitely Liberace*. The woman, probably in her early fifties, ran her hands through an almost disturbing amount of red hair, which I suppose kept her ears warm in the winter months. “At the end of the term, some of you will find that English isn’t your best fidus Achates and it will behoove you to seek your professional goals elsewhere.”

“Mahatma?” Kim whispered in wonder.

“Behoove?” Ryan quietly added.

“English?” I mumbled.

“Does the tall kid with the bad hair have a comment he wishes to share with the rest of the group?”

Oh, joy! She heard me. It was just like what happened with Professor Staff last year. The only thing more disturbing than her hearing me was her saying that I had bad hair. It’s

obvious she never took chemistry, otherwise she'd have heard of static psychotherapy. My hair looked messy because of the ski mask, not picture perfect like...well, the blonde kid.

"I was just saying what you said didn't make any sense to us..." Kim and Ryan both elbowed me...*hard*. "I mean me." Traitors! "Exactly what are we supposed to do if we suddenly discover that English isn't our...fidgeting agitator? Learn another language and emigrate to that country?" Cathleen appeared completely unimpressed with my observation. "I was making an observation." No reaction from her whatsoever. "Okay, maybe it was just a tad sarcastic. You know, sarcasm? It's a satirical remark meant to be both witty and biting."

"Thank you for that insightful definition," she sighed, "but I'm quite familiar with sardonicism and I didn't find your comment to be either whimsical or rapier-like. Let's just hope you can write better than you speak. Now, if there are no more interruptions," no one else spoke up, "let me go through the roll. Just tell me if you're here when I call out your name. Posha," a girl in the front responded and Cathleen frowned ever so slightly, "Tristan," the blonde kid looked at her and smiled, "Tayvin, Leonardo, Rueben, Aterri, Devon, Savath, Keegan, Orion, Très, Darcy, Venise, Tyce, Conor, Abby, Winfield...Jesus H. Christ!"

"He's in this class?" Ryan looked irritable.

"At least we know what his middle initial is." I added.

"But what does the 'H' stand for?" Kim wondered.

"Harold." Cathleen looked up at the group. "Where the hell did your parents pick out these names?" She stared back down at her sheet. In the old country, she'd have burst into flames for that kind of sacrilege. It certainly explained the color of her hair. "Andrew..." She looked around when no one answered. "Andrew? Drew, perhaps?"

"Andy?" I offered.

"Andy..." It sounded so plain flowing from her lips and I think she emphasized it on purpose. "I thought it was a misprint. Is there anyone I missed?" Ryan and Kim raised their hands and said their names out loud. "Yes, you're both here. After the other names, I just figured the secretary was having a bit of a laugh with me. Well," she wrote something down, "people with plain names are people too."

"What a..." I started, completely forgetting that she had super hearing.

“Something else you’d like to share with the class, Andy?” *Expletive!* “You don’t have to whisper, you know, but it would show some manners on your part if you raised your hand.” She had to call me on it – it was a teacher thing.

“I’ll try to remember that.” I really wanted the last word — it was a gay thing.

“You do that.” She didn’t miss a beat.

“I will.”

“We could do this all day, but I think the other students who paid for the class might be disappointed.” Cathleen did have a point and I wasn’t known to be a troublemaker in class. This wasn’t going well.

“I was just agreeing with you that there are some unusual names in here.”

“*Like?*” Aterri challenged me, which almost made me laugh. *Hello?* Aterri? Kinda proves my point.

“Uh...let’s see.” I looked down the length of the room and saw Tristan smirking. Was it still getting hotter in here or was it me? Apart from Rueben, Aterri and Abby, his was the only name I could still associate with a face. “Tristan, for instance.”

“What’s unusual about it?” Someone asked accusingly.

“Tristan’s a pinball game.” I offered. Yes, with bumpers, balls and a grand ol’ bonus if you landed said ball in the right hole. I was definitely starting to sweat.

“And Rueben is a sandwich.” Kim added, bless her soul.

“Rueben’s a fruit.” Ryan put his own two cents worth in.

“These are all wonderful observations.” Cathleen addressed us. Ha! She agreed. There was hope yet. “You demonstrate perfectly just how much it is you have to learn.” Okay, maybe not. “I’d like to ask all your peers here to please make an effort to culture you in any way they feel appropriate when they see you around campus.” I felt Ryan tense up next to me and Kim’s mouth dropped. “And speaking of culture,” Cathleen’s attention strayed from us, “I’ve been informed that we are extremely fortunate to have a very talented young poet with us this semester. I’ll be paying close attention to him, as should you, and helping him out in any way I can to see that he succeeds in his goals. As for the rest of you, I’m in a good position to help you reach your own goals provided you write in the exact way I dictate to you.” Ryan raised his hand. “Yes?”

“I’d like to make a witty and extremely biting comment.”

“No,” she dismissed him, “but thank you for raising your hand. My last comment about you writing the way I dictate was a joke.” There was silence at first, then all the asskissers filled the void with equally hollow laughter. “No, actually it wasn’t.” They stopped. “Yes, it was. Now, I’d like to introduce you to our poet and I’m told he has a piece to read that was just written this morning.” She motioned to her side. “Tristan?”

“Thank you.” Tristan stood up and walked to the center of the room while Cathleen retreated to the side and sat down next to another student, Aterri or Atari or Anasazi. “Open lips,” he began, “an intruding tongue tasting virgin territory, the smell of innocence to be had, to be turned.” Okay...a sex poem. Was Cathleen expecting this? One look over at her face, which appeared as if she was half shocked/surprised and half sweating herself suggested she wasn’t.

“A sound whispers through the body and becomes a moan, but my ears are muffled between a thigh and a sheet.” Oh, really? “Soft wet kisses glide towards home as my finger explores, loosens.” Loosens? “I stop and linger on the apple, working my way in, slick and ready.” Apple? Wasn’t that the wrong fruit analogy? “We meet again, for the first time, tongue to tongue, outer to inner.” Tristan paused, looked up from his paper and stared directly at me. “A shudder of pleasure, the stamina of youth, and two streams of white-hot fire are born for an instant, for the moment. All fades, like the dream unrealized and child no more, but living for the next.”

“Wasn’t that just descriptive?” Cathleen stood up, fanning herself with a copy of her syllabus. “I must be having another goddamn hot flash.”

“I call it Orgasm 14.” Tristan took a small bow and the class, well...most of the class, applauded.

“He’s inspired!” Someone, I give up trying to remember their names, boasted.

“He’s a master of description!” Another offered.

“He’s an artist!” This was getting out of hand.

“He’s a pervert.” Ryan mumbled. *Finally!*

“Yeah,” Kim purred, “he is and did you notice how he was looking at me when he read it? He was practically eye-fucking me.”

Something was going on here that bothered me more than what Kim just said. And, believe me, *that* bothered me a whole lot. There was something about the poem that people were missing. There was definitely something unusual about his descriptions. That bit with the

apple... Women didn't have apples, but men did; an Adam's apple. Then there was the bit with two streams of white-hot fire. That could only happen if there were two... *Hello!* Was it possible Tristan was gay? Was it possible that it could be anymore obvious? That would explain why he had been looking at me, but then it wouldn't because no one knew about me.

Obviously relieved to be taking over the class again, Cathleen began outlining her expectations for the semester, only I wasn't paying the least bit of attention. Tristan kept sneaking glances my way and Kim kept purring in response, obviously still under the assumption he was...retinal-copulating her. What was he really up to, though? Maybe he was trying to identify himself to me as a friend or simply as someone else who also happened to be gay. I could always ask him out. Maybe I should play hard to get and let him come to me. Oh, this was just stupid. Tristan wasn't interested in me that way. I have one terrific experience in California and look at me now, someone in serious need of getting over himself! Oh, who was I kidding? I'm cute as a button! *Baby got button. Shaddup!*

Cathleen decided to spring an in-class writing assignment on everybody twenty minutes before we were supposed to leave, then began calling some of the students up to her desk one at a time for a private consultation. After the student spoke with her, they packed up their gear and left. Unfortunately, Tristan was one of the first people out the door, which meant I wouldn't be able to talk to him, but that didn't mean I couldn't look for him while I was on my way to another class. Then too, who's to say he wasn't going to be looking for me? Uh, huh, and things like this happen to me all the time. Okay, I'd just look for him. Not that I was interested...