

MEETINGS (Chapter one)

Sophia Daniels woke up for school hung over.

This was not an uncommon occurrence lately. Still, on a Monday morning, it certainly was a bitch. Sophia stumbled out of her bed, rubbing her eyes, wishing for a beer. Of course, there wasn't any. She certainly didn't drink at **home**. That would have been just asking for trouble.

Attending school with a hangover was never one of Sophia's favorite things to do. Attending school at all wasn't high on the list, either. "Ah well," she sighed to herself as she gathered her books together, "maybe someone will have some pot or something. Good ol' Oceanview High always looks better when I'm stoned, anyhow."

She ran out of the house with a cheery "See ya!" to her mom and younger brother and sister—careful not to let her mother get **too** close. Bags under the eyes were a warning sign. She had thought she had done a good job with her makeup, but best to be careful. Oceanview High was a fairly short walk from her house, but it didn't seem all that short when the street was spinning. Plus, it was cold, being as this was Massachusetts and it was January eleventh. Sophia managed to make it to school in one piece, and, as she had hoped, found a bunch of friends passing around a joint. "Better," she thought, "that's much better." She'd sleepwalk through her classes, but she did that anyway. School was such a bore. She couldn't wait to be done with it. The problem was, she had a ways to go. She was a freshman. Sophia Daniels was 14 years old.

There were very few things important to Sophia. Beer and pot, sure. Her friends. Her boyfriend Scott, a senior, and an expert in all forms of partying. She'd be content to go through life stoned or drunk, hanging out with her friends, or "riding the ol' hobby horse" with Scott, as Scott put it. That was all that she really cared about.

Except for one thing—her job. Sophia worked the counter at Dunkin' Donuts in downtown Oceanview. She loved her job. She was good at it, she had regular customers that loved her, and she got along well with her co-workers. She even made sure that she didn't drink or do any drugs in the afternoon on days when she had to work. If any of her school friends or teachers had seen her at the donut shop, they would have witnessed quite an anomaly. It even seemed strange to Sophia, but she never dwelled upon it. She genuinely **did** like the job—even if she had no idea why—and she certainly enjoyed the money. And the store manager, Antonio, was a peach of a guy.

Sophia ran into the shop, waved a quick "hi" to Dora, the middle-aged Portuguese lady that worked the counter with her in the afternoon. She went out back to hang up her coat, giving quick greetings to Billy, the afternoon baker, and her boss Antonio. That was the usual crew on the days that she worked, so she was surprised to see another person there, out back by the sink. She only could see his back, as he was evidently washing something.

The place was empty when she went out front to begin her shift. Dora was making some coffee, so Sophia joined in. She really liked Dora. Dora was the only person at the shop who knew what Sophia was **really** like. She listened, and scolded like the mother she was, but she also couldn't help liking Sophia right back. And she worried about her.

"Hey, Dora," Sophia asked. "Who's the guy washing the dishes back there?"

"Oh!" Dora exclaimed. "That the new boy! Tony finally hire maintenance boy! No more wash floor for you and me!"

"Really! Well that is good news. You meet him yet? What's his name?"

"Warren. He about your age I think. Nice boy." Sophia was always amused that Dora had lived here for many years but still spoke broken English. "I think Tony say he go to St Michael's."

"Oh boy, a preppy. All I need." St. Michael's was a private prep school in the area. Sophia generally didn't have much use for preppies. "Ah well, I'd best introduce myself." She went out back and found Warren talking with Billy about what pans were ready to be washed. She walked up to him.

"Hi. I'm Sophia Daniels. I work the counter."

"Hi. Warren Kelleher. I'm the new clean up guy."

Sophia looked at him with a practiced eye. **Definitely** a preppy. Glasses and everything. She almost was surprised he wasn't wearing a slide rule. Still, he wasn't bad looking.

"Dora said you go to St. Michael's?"

"Yeah. I'm a freshman. I live here in Oceanview, though, not too far from here."

"I didn't figure on a St Michael's boy **stooping** to wash floors and scrub dishes. I thought all you guys were too proud for that sort of stuff."

Warren just laughed. "Nope, I am not proud. I needed a job, I saw the sign, and it's convenient. Most St Michael's guys have money, true, but not me. If it weren't for scholarships, I'd be at Oceanside High. I just turned 14, so this was the first job I applied for."

"Just turned 14? I'm going to be fifteen in April. Aren't you kind of young for a freshman?"

"Yeah. Started school a year early."

Sophia snickered to herself. Started school early, going to St. Mike's on a scholarship. We didn't just have a preppy here, we had a **brainy** preppy.

"What about you?" Warren asked.

"Hmmm?"

"You're a freshman too, I take it? You go to Oceanside?"

"Yup. Good ol' Oceanside School for the High, member in good standing. Oops, I've got customers.

Nice meeting you."

"Nice meeting you, too."

A couple hours later, Sophia took a break to go outside and smoke a cigarette. Warren was out there picking up trash and changing the barrels.

"Nasty habit, you know."

Sophia glared at him. "What are you, my mother?"

"Not the last time that I checked, no. Doesn't change the fact that it's a nasty habit."

"Oh, rest assured, Prep Boy, that smoking is the least of my nasty habits."

Warren looked up, bemused. "Do you have a list?"

"OK, are you my mother, or the cops? What is this, twenty questions about Sophia's wild and wooly life?"

"Oh, you know, being Prep Boy and all, I wouldn't know from nasty habits. I figure your list of depravities might be educational."

"Oh really", Sophia said with a raised eyebrow. "And what do **you** do for fun?"

"Oh, the usual. Burn, rape, pillage. Accost little old ladies trying to cross the street. Call my mother nasty names in Russian. Read Shakespeare."

"Read Shakespeare."

"That's right."

"That's the one off your list I **can** believe."

“Well, I call my little **sister** nasty names in Russian.”

Sophia had to laugh at that one. “Oh, you’ve got one of those, too? A little sister, I mean? I’ve got one of each.”

“Yup, me too. Matched set.”

“What’s a good nasty name in Russian?”

“Glupaya suka.”

Sophia waited. “All right, Prep Boy, what’s it **mean**???”

“Stupid bitch.”

“That’s not a very nice thing for a Prep Boy to be calling his little sister, now is it?”

“Yeah, but I **told** her it means darling sweet sister.”

Sophia blinked. And then laughed. “No way. You’re too goody too-shoes for that kind of stuff. I bet you wouldn’t say shit if you had a mouthful. No way you do that to your sister.”

Warren looked up, deadpan. “Obviously, you’ve never met my sister.” And went back to changing the trash bag.

Sophia put out her cig, went back into the shop, and stopped in the doorway, shaking her head. He certainly was.....er....interesting, in a preppy sort of way. For sure, she had just been successfully teased, and skillfully. So skillfully she wasn’t quite sure how.

A couple hours later, Sophia was gathering her stuff up to go home, and ran into Warren doing the same thing.

“Where do you live?” Sophia asked.

“Up off Tremont.”

“You get picked up?”

“Naah, I’m gonna walk it.”

“That’s a pretty long walk. I walk home, too, but I only live halfway up Washington.”

“You mind company from a Prep Boy?”

Sophia grinned. "I guess I can stomach it." They left the shop and headed out up the street.

"I'm surprised you walk," Warren began. "I know it's not far, but still. It's dark."

"You don't think I can take care of myself?"

"No doubt in my mind. But, let's face it—Oceanview isn't Mayberry, and you're a gorgeous girl."

Sophia blinked. Gorgeous? Her? But she kept her face blank. "Anyone who tries anything with me has to contend with my boyfriend. I'm not worried."

"Boyfriend, huh?"

"Yeah. Scott. He's a senior. He's a lot of fun to party with. And he loves the hell out of me. He's insanely jealous. I'm only letting you walk with me because I know he's not around."

"He'd be upset?"

"Sure he would. Wouldn't you, seeing your girlfriend walk around with some other guy?"

"Depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Circumstances. If I saw my girlfriend walking with a guy, and then she told me that the guy was a co-worker that was headed the same way and was just keeping her company—no, I wouldn't be upset."

"But if you love her, wouldn't you be jealous?"

"Jealousy is **not** my idea of love."

Sophia stopped walking. "What **is** your idea of love?"

"Well, I would think trust would figure into it somewhere. I figure if I loved someone, and she loved me, I could trust her to walk down the street with a guy friend and not go on a bender about it."

"You've got some strange ideas about love."

Warren grinned lopsidedly. "That, no doubt, is why I don't have a girlfriend."

Sophia grinned back at him. "Well, that, plus you're an unredeemable Preppy." They both laughed.

“This is my house. Working tomorrow?”

“Yup”

“See you then”.

“See ya.”

SECRETS REVEALED (Chapter Two)

Two weeks later, Sophia made the normal trek from school to Dunkin Donuts. It had been another wild weekend, lots of partying and lots of Scott. Probably too much of Scott. She walked in the back and put her stuff away.

“Hey, Wild Woman.” It was Warren.

“Hi, Prep Boy,” she waved—but instead of their normal teasing session, Sophia quickly rushed out front.

Warren was perplexed. They’d worked together for two weeks, and he was still trying to figure this girl out.

She made a point to take her cig breaks when he was out in the lot. They had walked home from work every day. She obviously enjoyed their teasing repartee, as he did. And now she was rushing past him like he had the plague.

He went about his work, and found his way to the lot. Sure enough, Sophia followed him out and lit a cig.

Warren noticed, however, that she was carefully avoiding looking at him.

“Yo, Sophia, so how was the weekend? One of your traditional chemically-infused bacchanalias, I take it?” He had gotten a good idea of Sophia’s lifestyle on their walks home.

“Yo, Prep Boy, could you speak English, please?”

“That **was** English.”

“Coulda fooled me. My weekend was fine. I think I drank two six-packs Saturday night. Great sex with Scott, too.” Warren blushed. Sophia thought that was cute. “Just my typical Wild Woman weekend.”

“Uh huh. Soph, why are you hiding the left side of your face?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You avoided me in the back room earlier. You came outside, but you’ve been giving me your right profile the whole time. I walked towards you to change this barrel, and you tucked the left side of your face into the building.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I. Then let me see your face, Sophia.”

Sophia turned towards him. The makeup was skillfully applied, but the black eye and the bruise on the cheek was plainly apparent.

Warren gaped at her bruises. He looked down and noticed another one, on her arm. He looked at her for a minute and thought. Her mother? He knew she didn’t have a father. He had met Sophia’s mother a couple of times after walking her home. Was her mother doing this to her? Somehow, he just doubted that. So, he took a stab in the dark.

He looked in her eyes, and said, “Great sex, huh?” and saw the moment of startled recognition in her eyes, and knew that he had hit paydirt.

Sophia attempted to cover it: “Oh, look, it’s my **mother** again! For your information, Prep Boy, I got hit in the head by a door.”

“OK.”

“Happened at school. One of those swinging doors, you know? Wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“OK.”

“I’m clumsy that way.”

“OK.”

Sophia glared at him. “Look, that’s what really happened!”

“I’m agreeing with you.”

“But you don’t believe me!”

“Not for a second.”

“This is none of your business, Warren!”

“Probably not.”

“This is **my** problem!”

“Yeah, walking into doors can be a problem,” Warren said with a snort.

“I’m fully capable of taking care of myself!”

“Oh, yes, you’re doing such a **damn** fine job of it, Sophia. You’ve even got the bruises to show for it. If taking care of yourself includes getting beat up by your boyfriend, you’ve certainly got it covered.”

Sophia stopped, and blinked. Damn he was perceptive. Shit, what was she going to do now? She gathered up her fury and shame, and blasted him with it, desperately hoping to just end the conversation. “Dammit, Warren, it’s none of your business! Who the **fuck** are you to make judgements about me?”

Warren gathered up his cleaning supplies, walked towards the door, and looked at this bruised, furious, ashamed girl glaring at him. “I’m your friend, Soph. That’s who I am.” And walked into the shop.

Sophia stood outside the shop for five minutes, desperately trying to blink back the tears.

Warren gathered his stuff together, getting ready to go home. Sophia hadn’t said one word to him for the rest of their shift. It was probably just as well, Warren thought. He was in way over his head. He turned to head out the door when Sophia grabbed him by the arm.

“Walk me home?”

“I wasn’t sure you’d want me to.”

Sophia smiled. It was a genuine smile—she hadn’t had many of those, lately. “What are friends for, right?”

Warren smiled back.

“You want to talk about it, now that you’ve calmed down?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. What’s there to talk about?”

“Was I right?”

Sophia paused. And practically whispered, “Yes.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“What **can** I do?”

“Dump him. Now. Vamoose, scram, do svidanya. Get lost, asshole.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because he loves me. He’s all I have.”

Warren stopped, grabbed Sophia’s arm, and spun her around so that he was looking into her eyes.

“Sophia, someone who **loves** you does **not** give you a black eye! This isn’t love!”

Sophia forced a grin. “Oh, yes, I forgot. You’re the great expert on love, aren’t you, Prep Boy? Come back and talk to me once you find yourself a girlfriend, OK?”

Warren knew she was teasing him to lighten the mood, but he wasn’t buying it this time. He touched her face with his finger and said, “You can rest assured that if I **did** get myself a girlfriend I would **never** do **this** to her.”

“No. No you wouldn’t.” She started walking again. “Then again, any girlfriend you got wouldn’t be anyone like me, either.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means I’m not much of a person. You’d do better than me.”

“I beg to differ. I like to think I choose my friends pretty carefully, you know.”

She laughed at that. “You don’t know me. You look at me and see.....well, I don’t know **what** you see.

But you don’t see me. Warren, I’m a burnout. I’m stupid. I’ll never be anything. The only things I’m good for are parties and sex. And getting beat up, I suppose. You don’t see that.”

“You’re right. I don’t. I know it’s **there**, but that’s not what I see.”

“Well, then you’re not looking close enough.”

“No, you’re wrong. I’m looking **very** closely. In fact, I’m looking past the burnout, past the party girl, past the appalling lack of self-esteem, past the bruises. And you know what I see?”

Sophia was almost afraid to ask. “What?”

“I see a beautiful person. Inside and out. I see one of the most breathtakingly beautiful girls I’ve ever had the good fortune to look at. I see a beautiful spirit. I see a very bright

girl, funny, quick-witted—hell, you can keep up in a battle of wits with **me**, and I’m a genius.” They both laughed—it was true, he was.

“I see all of those things. **That** is the Sophia Daniels I see. And she’s wonderful. The problem is.....that she’s locked up. She’s locked in a cage. And she can’t get out.”

They were in front of Sophia’s house. Sophia leaned against the chain-link fence and stared off into space.

What had he said? Beautiful person, inside and out? **Her**? Why did he think this? What did he see? She couldn’t see it. She just couldn’t. He was nuts. Crazy. Deluded.

But, even if he was nuts, Sophia made a decision. She reached into her bookbag, grabbed a piece of paper and a pen, and scribbled her phone number on it. “Would you call me tonight, please?”

“Scott’s not gonna be around?”

“No. And I don’t care. I just think I need to talk to.....to talk to a friend tonight. Would you do that for me?”

“Of course. Couple of hours OK? I need to study.”

Sophia laughed—it felt good. “Of **course** you need to study, Prep Boy. A couple of hours is fine.”

GOOD FRIENDS? (Chapter Three)

The phone calls started slowly. They quickly built up to where Sophia and Warren were spending a couple hours on the phone almost every weeknight. Even if they had worked together, Warren would get some studying done and give Sophia a call. At one point, Sophia realized that she talked to Warren more than she talked to her own boyfriend. She had never seen Scott much during the week—only on weekends—but she was talking to Warren every night, walking home with him three days a week, even occasionally sitting on her front porch and talking. It was strange. Sophia never thought of herself as much of a talker—except with Jessie, her best friend—but she could talk with Warren for hours. Truth to tell, she listened more than she talked. Warren was a first-class conversationalist.

The problem of her disastrous lifestyle and Warren’s “girl in a cage” observation had been left alone. Sophia would occasionally make a joke, which Warren just let go, but they hadn’t had many serious conversations. Just two friends, chatting. Until one Tuesday night in late February.

“So, did you have another Sophia weekend?” asked Warren.

“Actually, no. I stayed in this weekend. I had a little flu or something. Missed a big party.”

“Awwwwww. Poor baby.”

“This from a man who reads Shakespeare for kicks, right?”

“Actually, I was out all Saturday night. My friends up the street had one of their periodic get-togethers. We have them more often in the summer, because it’s better outside, but we all gathered in the house this time.”

“And you got a keg and everyone got sloppy, right?”

“Surrerre. No, my friends don’t have **quite** the same type of parties that yours do.”

“No doubt.”

“We played some music. Watched a movie. There’s a small group of us that play poker, so we did that. I made my world famous chip dip. Very mellow by your standards.”

Sophia laughed. “Actually, it sounds cozy. Different from my usual, but cozy.”

“Tuck the sarcasm back in, Wild Woman.”

“Actually, I wasn’t being sarcastic. This was at your house?”

“Naah. Up the street. The Kenney’s house, that’s our usual neighborhood hangout. You know Mo Kenney?”

“Mo Kenney. Hmmm. No, I don’t think I know him.”

“Her. Maureen Kenney.”

“Oh! Yeah, I think I know who she is.”

“Her house. That’s the neighborhood hangout. The whole gang was there, friends of the gang, Crash came down from Northwoods—I told you about Crash, he’s my best friend—about 20 of us.”

“Crash Kowalski, right? Lives in Northwoods, goes to school with you?”

“That’s the one. We’ve hung out there for years, I’ve known Mo Kenney since we were four. She’s like my sister. Her sister and brother, Tina and Rick, are, too—and her mother is my second mother.”

“Oh. Well it does sound nice, for a Prep Boy like you, anyhow.” They both laughed. “Me, the one I missed was—what did you call it? Chemically-drenched bacchanalia?”

“You’re catching on.”

“That’s what that one was. Scott was **furious** with me.”

“For getting **sick**?”

Sophia didn’t say anything.

“He didn’t believe you, did he?”

Silence.

“He went into a jealousy fit and accused you of seeing someone else, right? Wouldn’t believe you had the flu? Got all pissed off because he wanted you under his thumb and you weren’t around, right?”

Sophia finally spoke up. “Fuck. Do you know **everything**?”

“No, I don’t. I do know what a contemptible abusive asshole is, however.”

“That **is** my boyfriend you’re talking about.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“What is **that** supposed to mean?”

“Why, Soph?”

“Why **what**?”

“Why him? Why do you stay with him? What is the attraction? He’s abusive. He’s got no respect for you, treats you like dirt. He wants to control you completely. Remember when I talked about the girl in the cage that can’t get out? Well, Scott is the one that locked the fucking door and threw away the key. I don’t get it. Why do you let this happen? Is the sex **that** good?”

“Actually, no. It’s not all that good. It’s pretty shitty. And, you’re right, you don’t get it. You **can’t** get it.”

“Help me out here, then.”

“Look, it all fits together. Shitty sex, shitty boyfriend, shitty home life, shitty school life, shitty habits, shitty friends.....shitty Sophia. It all fits.”

“Shitty friends? I think I’m offended.”

Sophia giggled. “Well, maybe one non-shitty friend.”

“Actually, you’ve spoken highly of Jessie, and some of your other friends. Are all your friends that bad?”

“I dunno. Maybe not.”

“Then what.....”

Sophia snapped, “But if I’ve got such wonderful Goddamn friends, than why doesn’t someone get me the fuck **out** of this? Shit. I’m drowning, here, someone throw me a fucking life jacket!”

Warren listened for a minute to the quiet sobs at the other end of the phone. And then he said, softly, “I am trying. I really am.”

Sophia sat up on her bed—as she realized, he **was** trying. Maybe other people weren’t—and maybe they were and she just wasn’t seeing straight—but Warren without a doubt was trying. And that she **could** see.

“You’re right. You are.”

Warren let out a sigh. “I gotta tell you, Sophia, sometimes it seems like I’m throwing the life jacket out, and you’re throwing the thing right back.”

“It’s not that. It’s that you’re throwing the life jacket, and because of some strange instinct I’m ducking.

Or I’m **not** ducking and it’s hitting me in the head. Or going right through my legs so I look like Jose freakin’ Offerman and his bad knee trying to scoop a grounder at second.”

“Didn’t know you were a baseball fan.”

“Big time. I bleed Red Sox red. Any guy I marry has to agree to name our first son Nomar.”

Warren laughed out loud. “You can marry me, then, Soph. I’ll go right along with that one.”

Sophie couldn’t help but giggle. “You’re on. Paint that life jacket red, would you?”

Warren sat for a minute. “OK, Soph. I’m trying to help. This is the first time I ever remember you **asking** for help. What do I do?”

Sophia thought about that one for a bit. “Warren, that’s a good question. I don’t know. You’re right, I’m not accustomed to asking for help. I really don’t know. Just be there, would you?”

“Already am.”

“I know. It does help. Good friends are hard to come by.”

“Listen, Soph. I’ve said it before and I’m saying it again: you need to dump Scott.”

Sophia giggled. “What, and leave the field free for you, right? Scott doesn’t like Nomar, so I suppose I should.”

“Sophia, I’m being serious.”

“I know, I know. I’m scared. I’m scared to end it, I’m scared **not** to end it.” She paused, and said in a small voice, “I don’t want to be alone.”

“You’re not. You got me, remember?”

“Don’t get me wrong, Warren, because I’ve come to appreciate your friendship more than I can say, but I wasn’t talking about friendship. Scott loves me.”

“Whatever you say.”

“He does. He has trouble expressing it sometimes, and it comes out as anger, but he does.”

“He tells you he loves you?”

“He’s not verbal in that way.”

“He **treats** you like he loves you?”

“When he wants to.”

“Oh.”

“Listen, Warren, the problem is not Scott.”

“You’re right. But he’s part of the problem. And when you figure out the **main** problem, you’ll realize that he’s useless.”

“OK, Doctor Freud, what’s my main problem?”

“You said it yourself, earlier.”

“What did I say?”

“You said—shitty boyfriend, shitty this, shitty that.....shitty Sophia. Except you had it the other way around. Everything else is shitty because Sophia is shitty. The problem is, Sophia is **not** shitty. She just thinks she is.”

Sophia thought about that for a couple of minutes. Then she spoke again: “Warren, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“You ever been in love?”

“Are we including unrequited worship of girls who wouldn’t go out with me if their lives depended on it because I’m Prep Boy, or are we sticking to actual relationships?”

Sophia giggled. “The actual relationships one.”

“No.”

“Does that bother you?”

“To a point. But not a lot.”

“To what point, and why not a lot?”

“Well, to the point that I get lonely too, you know? I also get tired of rejection. The not a lot part is because I figure it’ll happen sooner or later. No sense rushing it.”

Sophia paused for a moment. “If you **were** in love, how would you treat her?”

“Well, Soph, how do I treat you?”

“Pretty much like a princess.”

“Well, there’s your answer, then.”

“But we’re just friends. You’re not in love with me or anything, are you?”

“Soph, if I’m in love with someone, wouldn’t you think I’d treat them at **least** as well as I treat my friends?”

“Not from my experience, no. Most guys I know **always** treat their friends better than their girlfriends.

You’re way too sweet.”

Warren sighed in mock exasperation, “And **I’m** the one who can’t get a date! There’s no justice in this world, I tell ya.”

Sophie laughed softly. “Sooner or later someone will appreciate you.”

“Yeah. Hopefully before I’m **dead**.”

“Trust me. Listen, I have to go. Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Sure. Oh, and your task for tonight is to repeat to yourself ‘Sophia is not shitty’ until you fall asleep, or start believing it, whichever comes first.”

“Aye aye, sir. I’ll give it the ol’ college try.”

“You do that.”

THE FINAL STRAW (chapter 4)

That was the conversation Sophia kept replaying in her mind. They had more, over the next week and a half—their newly discovered mutual adoration of the Red Sox led to lots of free-agent-signing wishes and an entire evening waxing rhapsodic over the majesty that is Pedro Martinez—but that conversation was the one she kept thinking about.

He had held her up as an example of how he would treat someone he was in love with. She asked him point-blank if he was in love with her, and he avoided the question. He jokingly asked her to marry him yeah, it was a joke, but with the rest of the conversation.....and he told her that she wasn’t alone, because she had him.

It was inescapable. Coupled with the attention he showered on her, how he treated her, some of the things he said to her—it was inescapable. Warren Kelleher was in love with her, she realized one day.

The first question she asked herself was why? Why **her**? This was Warren, the Prep Boy scholarship genius, why the **hell** would he want to have any kind of **anything** with a lost cause like her?

Because **he** doesn’t think you’re a lost cause, she said to herself.

And as **that** one hung in her brain, the next question popped up—OK, Sophia, what do you **do** about it?

It almost didn’t seem fair. It didn’t seem fair that they had become such close friends—if Warren **had** fallen for her, he must be in a “so near but yet so far” loop all the time.

But he didn’t seem to mind.

Sophia sighed. This all could wait. It was the weekend, and there were parties to go to, and Scott.

And why did she not feel like going this weekend?

Monday arrived, and with it another afternoon shift at Dunkin' Donuts. Warren had come to look forward to Mondays, because he got to see Sophia.

He walked into the back room, saw her standing there with her back to him, and walked up to her and touched her on the shoulder. And felt her flinch, hard.

“OH! Warren.”

“What was **that** all about?”

“I’ll tell you later”, and she turned around. And Warren looked into her face and saw someone who looked like they had just emerged from hell.

“Soph, you do **not** look good.”

“Later, Warren. I promise. This is not the time or place.”

“Whatever you say.”

The shift passed with barely a word between them. At quitting time, Sophia walked up to Warren, and said, “Walk me home, please?”

They started walking. Warren was uncomfortable, because they were walking in silence, which **never** happened.

“What’s up, Sophia?”

“When we get to my house.”

“Oh-kaaaay.”

They got to her house. “Come on in. Nobody’s home. Mom is at work, and the kids are with their father.”

Sophia had explained that her brother and sister had a different father—her Mom’s second husband—and that they often spent time with him. Sophia’s father had disappeared when she was three.

Warren had never actually been in Sophia’s house. She showed him in and led him to the living room, shedding her coat as she walked. She looked like she wanted to scream, and was holding it in. Something was seriously wrong, and Warren had no idea what.

“I need to show you something,” Sophia said. And proceeded to take off her shirt. Warren was completely dumbstruck—until he saw the bandages. She peeled those off, and stood in front of him naked from the waist up.

If he hadn’t been in shock, Warren might have thought that he was seeing something he had dreamed about for two months. But this was no dream, this was a nightmare. Sophia’s entire left side was one big bruise. Her shoulder got the least of it—the side of her ribs and the left part of her back and her left breast were purple. It was horrific.

“Oh my God.”

“Three of my ribs are broken. My shoulder and back are badly bruised. And there might be some kind of permanent damage to my left breast, they’re not sure yet.”

“How did this happen?”

Sophia snorted. “I fell down the stairs, didn’t you know? Or, at least, that’s what we told the hospital. Scott said if I told them the truth, I’d get it worse. The last time he was upset because he had messed up my face, you see. This time he wanted to keep it less visible, but still make sure I could feel it. He did a wonderful fucking job, wouldn’t you say?”

“Soph, I don’t know what to say.”

“I was kind of expecting ‘I told you so’”.

“I’d never do that. What set him off?”

“I don’t know. It was a jealous rage from somewhere.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure. But you are right. This has to end. I do **not** deserve this. It took me a long time to realize that, but I don’t. The problem is, I’m scared shitless.”

Warren left Sophia’s house to head home. He was shaken. He was right, he was **way** over his head. This had gotten worse, and he was at a loss how to help her. He was lost in thought as he trudged along and didn’t notice the car pulling up inside him. He didn’t see the three older teenagers get out, until one of them was blocking his path.

“Are you the faggot that’s been messing around with my girlfriend?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, faggot. I’m Scott Patterson. Sophia is **mine**, and I’m telling you to stay away from her.”

“You don’t tell me what to do.”

“I’m telling you now. I don’t want you as much as **looking** at my girlfriend.”

“Sophia is my friend. If she doesn’t want to talk to me, **she** will tell me, not you.”

Scott snorted, “What the fuck you think this is, pussy-boy? Sophia does what I tell her. And so will you.”

“Yeah, Sophia does what you tell her, all right. Because you beat it into her.”

“Now you’re getting it, pussy. You do what I tell you or you’re next.”

Warren thought for a second. The asshole had two of his buddies standing behind Warren, and he was in front. Warren figured there was absolutely no way he was getting out of this one without getting whacked around. Even so, he had absolutely **no** intention of knuckling under to this maggot. He looked Scott right in the eye and said, “Go. Fuck. Yourself.”

The rest was predictable. The two goons grabbed Warren’s arms, and Scott took his couple shots. Warren ended up on the ground, gasping for breath, with the beginnings of what surely would be one hell of a black eye. The ribs were bruised, as was his knee where the maggot had kicked him on the way to the car, with the added threat that he’d “better quit that fucking job at the donut shop, too, as I don’t want you seeing her, ever.” That Warren had **no** intention of doing, but he didn’t really want to get beat up too many more times either. He dragged his bruised body home, managed to avoid his parents, and attempted to get some studying done. He didn’t call Sophia.

Warren made it through Tuesday at school, dealing with the stares and fending off the inquisitive questions. He told the truth to the vice-principal, Mr. Gordon, because he trusted Mr. Gordon, and he didn’t want anyone suspecting his parents of abusing him or anything like that.

He walked into Dunkin’ Donuts, knowing Sophia was going to be there. And wondering what he was going to say. He knew—he **knew**—that there was no way that Sophia had spilled the beans to Scott about their friendship. He just wouldn’t believe that. Anyway, he’d find out soon enough.

“Hi, Warren. Why didn’t you call last night?” He turned toward her. “Oh my God. What happened to you?”

“The same thing that happened to you.”

Sophia gasped. “Scott?” Warren nodded. Sophia stared at him. “Scott....did this to you?” she said in a strangled voice.

Warren nodded. "Him and two of his buddies. Grabbed me on the way home last night. The two goons held my arms while Scott took his shots at me. I'm forbidden to talk with you, don't you know. I'm ordered to quit my job, too." Warren snickered. "I told him to go fuck himself."

"You WHAT?" Sophia looked like she was close to tears. "Oh, Warren.....I never meant to get you involved in this. Look at you!" She took a breath. "I swear to God, Warren, I **never** said one word about you to Scott. Never."

"Sophia, I believe you. In fact, I never thought for a minute that you did. He must have found out some other way."

"I'll bet Alexandra, my neighbor, saw us. She lives down the street. She used to be my friend, but she's a real bitch, and she wants Scott."

"God knows **why**."

Sophia snorted. "Too true. But she must have seen you and done some snooping. Warren, I'm so sorry."

"You didn't do this to me, Soph."

Sophia started to sob. "Yes I did."

"Sophia, look at me. Listen to me. NO YOU DID NOT. You didn't hit me. You have no control over what Scott does."

"Yeah, but if I hadn't pulled you into my life....."

"You mean if we hadn't become friends."

"Yeah"

"That was our choice. Scott didn't have anything to do with it. Soph, do you value my friendship?"

"You know I do. But what about you?"

"You know I value your friendship, too."

"But how can you, if it gets you beat up by my boyfriend!"

"Some things are more important than other things. And what **you** want, Sophia, is **infinitely** more important to me than what that asshole boyfriend of yours wants. Even if it gets me beat up."

Warren walked out of the store to pick up the lot. Sophia didn't know what to say to that.

It was close to the end of their shift. Sophia wanted Warren to walk her home, but was terrified to ask him to. What if Scott showed up? What a mess. She stepped into the back room to sip a cup of coffee. Warren was mopping the floor, chatting with Dora. Sophia heard someone come in, but figured Dora could handle it. Then she heard a voice—Scott's voice.

“Hey, pussy. I thought I told you to quit this job. I thought I told you to stay the fuck away from Sophia.”

“And I thought I told you to go fuck yourself.”

Sophia stayed in the back room, out of sight. She couldn't believe her ears. Was Warren trying to get himself KILLED?

“Listen, pussy, you want more like you got yesterday? I'm telling you to stay away from Sophia.”

“Sophia's my friend.”

“Sophia doesn't have any friends if I say she doesn't have any friends.”

Sophia blinked. Warren was right. Scott just wanted to control everything about her.

“Well, nobody chooses my friends for me. Sophia's my friend. If Sophia doesn't want that, **she** can tell me. Since she just told me the opposite, then friends we stay.”

Scott moved closer to Warren and growled in a low voice, “You don't seem to understand, faggot. Yesterday was just a preview. If you don't stay the fuck away from Sophia, I'll give you a beating that will make the one yesterday feel like a tickle.”

Sophia tried to blink back the tears. What the hell should she do? How could she get Warren out of this?

“You are pathetic,” Warren said. Sophia couldn't believe her ears. And Warren continued, “You just have to keep control over her. You have to keep her pinned under your thumb. You refuse to let her think for herself. And you keep doing this because you are **terrified** that if you let her think for herself, if you let her get out from under your thumb, she's going to wake up and realize that she is WAY too fucking GOOD for the likes of YOU!”

Warren, of course, ended up on his back, bleeding from his mouth. He expected that. Scott was just laughing at him, while Sophia stood in the back room, sobbing, terrified.

Warren pulled himself up, in horrific pain, but determined not to give in. Not to this scumbag. Not concerning Sophia. “And you know what, asshole? You can hit me over and over again and it **still** won’t change the fact that Sophia is too good for you.”

The next shot went to Warren’s already bruised ribs. Dora went running back to tell Antonio to call the cops. Warren tried to catch his breath, kneeling on the floor, gasping. And Scott taunted him: “Want another one, pussy?”

“Better me than Sophia.”

And Sophia, who had been hunched over, crying, stood up, with a start. She had always thought of Warren as a bit of a wimp—but here he was, standing there, taking a beating. For **her**. She was ashamed of herself for ever thinking that he was wimpy. If she ever had any doubts about whether or not he loved her, they were gone. And she knew something else as well.

She knew she had to end this.

She walked out onto the floor. “Scott, that’s enough.”

“Oh, Sophia! Come to watch me beat the shit out of your little friend here?”

“No, I’ve come to tell you to get out. Get out of the store, get out of my life. Now.”

“Yeah, right, Sophia. What have I told you? You are **mine**. Get used to it.”

Scott had turned his back to Warren to face Sophia, and Warren made a little cheering motion with his hands. Sophia caught it, drew strength from it, and marched right up to Scott.

“I am not your anything. We are through. I am done being a punching bag. Antonio is back there calling the cops. They are on their way. Warren is underage, you are **not**. Assault and battery of a minor will get you a little stint behind bars. And it will be **two**, because I’ve got some bruises I can show them, too. And, for a kicker, I can tell them you’ve slept with me, a fourteen year old, and you’ll get statutory rape on top of it. I am taking out a restraining order against you as soon as I can do it. I want you gone, I want you out of my life, forever. Do you understand me?”

Warren had managed to stand up, and was smiling and giving Sophia the thumbs-up. Scott walked towards Sophia, an angry grimace on his face, and swung at her. Warren was about to jump him, to do **anything** to help Sophia, but he didn’t have to.

Just as Scott’s hand connected with Sophia’s mouth, the cops walked in.

A TURNING POINT (Chapter 5)

They ended up in the hospital. That punch to Sophia's mouth was accompanied by another to Sophia's already broken ribs, before the cops got in and grabbed Scott. Sophia and Warren had gone down to the police station to give their statements, but the cops did it quickly because it was clear that Sophia was in agony, and Warren wanted to make sure his jaw wasn't broken. The cops took them to the hospital.

They could come in later in the week and finish up their statements—the cops had gotten the basics.

Scott was behind bars, at least for now. They went to the emergency room, where the nurses called their parents. Sophia was badly hurt and extremely shook up, but felt strangely liberated. Even so, she refused to leave Warren's side. She even made the nurses put them in the same examining room. The nurses told her that she would have to take her shirt off in front of him, and she said, "I don't care. He stays." So he stayed. It would make it easier on the doctors, anyhow—they could check them both out at once.

Sophia's mother was the first to show up. She was alternately hysterical and scolding. Warren was dumbfounded. Yeah, she was shook up at seeing her oldest daughter in the condition she was in, but a little **support** might have been nice. She screamed, and then cried, and then screamed, completely ignored Warren, and had Sophia on the verge of tears herself. They closed the curtain so the doctors could check Sophia out, and she shot Warren a look of utter despair. She would have insisted the curtain stay open if her mother hadn't been there, but she didn't need to give her mother another excuse to go off.

Warren was **very** glad to see his own parents. They were, of course, concerned—his mother Peg was, after all, a mother, and his father Jim was concerned in his own way—but they didn't get hysterical.

"Oh God, Warren. That doesn't look too good," Peg said.

"Mom, I'm fine. They don't even think it's broken. I'm just going to be talking a little softer for a few days.

That should be a welcome relief. You can just make me coffee milkshakes." They all laughed.

"What did the police say?" Jim asked.

"Oh, they think the asshole's going to be out of commission for a while."

"How do you get yourself involved in these messes?" Peg asked.

“Come on, Mom. **How** many messes, exactly, do I get myself involved in?”

“OK. Not many”, Peg smiled. “But this one appears to be a doozy.”

“No argument there.”

Jim looked at his son and said, “I hope this girl is worth it.”

Warren put his finger over his lips and pointed towards the curtain.

“Yes she is. You’ll see,” he whispered.

“She’s in here?” Peg whispered.

“Yeah.”

“Why’d they do **that**”?

“Soph insisted. She didn’t want to leave me.”

“What’s all that yelling”? Jim whispered.

“Her mother. Wonderful, isn’t it? Thank you guys for **not** doing that.”

Sophia’s mother emerged from behind the curtain and walked out of the room, not saying a word to anyone. Then the curtain opened.

“How you doing, Soph?”

“She’ll be fine,” the Doctor interjected. “Now, let’s check you out.”

Sophia elaborated while the Doctor checked out Warren’s jaw. “My ribs are definitely broken.

I have to stay out of school and work for the rest of the week and pretty much stay in bed, and I’m going to be taped up for a while—but they think that’s the extent of it. My shoulder is slightly separated, but will be OK, and my back is bruised—and they think that my left breast is just bruised and not permanently damaged, like they thought before.”

“Oh, good, that’s a relief. That’s an important part of the body not to be damaged.”

“Pig.” Sophia said, grinning.

“You know it.”

“Will you shut up so I can finish this?” the Doctor interjected.

“Sorry.”

“Besides, Warren,” Jim said dryly, “You shouldn’t talk that way in front of your mother.”

Even Peg laughed at that. She wasn’t a prude by any means.

“These are your parents, War?” Sophia asked. Warren gave her a thumbs-up. “Hi. I’m Sophia.”

She shook hands with both of them.

Jim looked at the girl sitting in front of him—the young lady that had completely complicated his oldest son’s well-ordered life—and said, “You’re right, Warren. She’s definitely worth it.” And winked at her.

Warren burst out laughing—much to the consternation of the doctor—and Peg rolled her eyes at her husband. Sophia just stared, dumbfounded.

“That’s my Dad.” Warren said, dryly. “Translated, Soph, he thinks you’re a babe. Of course, I already knew that.” Sophia just sputtered. Warren’s parents certainly were.... different.

“Honey, you’ve embarrassed her,” Peg said.

“I was just pleased that Warren has inherited his old man’s good taste in women, that’s all.”

“Nice save, Dad.”

“Thanks, Warren.”

“Yeah, thanks Warren,” Peg said sarcastically. “C’mon, Jim. Let’s let the doctor finish up. We’ll see you in the waiting room.”

“OK.” They left, with Sophia staring blankly at the door. “Those were your **parents?**”

“Uh-huh. Never a dull moment with those two.”

Warren did not have a broken jaw. Sophia got some painkillers and a week of bedrest, and got to go home with her mother still carping in her ear. Warren went home and did some studying.

Sophia spent the rest of the week in bed; half the time hopped up on painkillers, and the other half of the time thinking. She had quite a bit to think about.

Friday afternoon, her phone rang. “Soph, it’s Warren. You up to some company tonight?”

“I’d love it.”

“Well, then, you have a choice. It can just be lil’ ol’ me, or, my buddy Crash was supposed to come down tonight with his girlfriend Alison, so we could make it a party. We’ll even teach you how to play poker.”

Soph giggled. “Actually that sounds like fun.”

“Great. Let me call the Crashmeister, and we’ll be there.”

They got dropped off by Warren’s mother at about 7:00, and greeted Sophia laden with sodas, Warren’s “world famous chip dip” and other goodies, and a couple decks of cards. “We even brought some videos, if we get tired of poker.” Warren said.

“Yeah,” said Alison, bemused, “but Crash picked them out, so we got Caddyshack, or Animal House.”

“Classic American filmmaking, I tell you,” replied Crash.

It got to be about 10:00, and Sophia realized something amazing. She was at home, not drinking, not on drugs—she hadn’t even taken a painkiller—not having sex, with two preppies and one of the preppy’s equally preppy girlfriend—and she was having a blast. Alison was sweet, and Crash was an experience.

She had always seen Warren’s keen wit and humor, but Crash magnified it tenfold. Between Warren’s superbly timed sarcasm and Crash’s constant stream of one-liners, she laughed so much it made her ribs hurt more. She didn’t mind. After Alison whipped them all at poker—“Cause she cheats”, kidded Crash—they moved to the TV room and popped in Caddyshack. Sophia had never seen the film, and had to admit that it **was** funny—the humor being enhanced by Warren and Crash, who apparently knew every word and recited such right along with the movie.

Halfway through, the guys declared an emergency—“We’re out of soda!”—and headed off to the nearby store to restock. They paused the movie, and Alison stayed to keep Sophia company. They were still goofing as they walked out the door, and Sophia was still laughing as the door closed behind them.

“Whew”, Sophia caught her breath, “are they **always** like that?”

“Mostly.” Alison smiled.

“Oh boy. The next time I have them both in my house at the same time, remind me **not** to have broken ribs. I’ve laughed so much it hurts.”

“I keep telling them they should take their act on the road.”

“I take it you’re exposed to the act frequently.”

“Yeah. I’ve been going out with Jay for almost a year, so I’ve gotten to know Warren pretty well. Of course, Jay and I **are** going out so Warren’s not with us **all** the time”—they both giggled—“but he is Jay’s best friend.”

“I take it Jay is Crash’s real name. I never knew that.”

Alison giggled. “Actually it’s Jason, but only his mother calls him that. Most people call him Jay. Only Warren calls him Crash. He drove his bicycle into the side of his house a while ago. Made a big joke about it, as usual—said Just call me Crash—so Warren does. That’s the way they are.”

Sophia giggled. Alison went on, “So, yeah, if we don’t want to be alone, we hang out with Warren. We’ve been known to show up at his neighborhood parties, because they are always a blast. I have to say, though, that I used to get worried about Warren feeling like a fifth wheel. He worries about that. It’s nice to see him have a girlfriend, finally—he deserves it.”

Sophia blinked at that one. “Actually, I’m not his girlfriend. We’re just friends. Did he say I was his girlfriend?”

Alison thought. “Actually, come to think of it, he never did. I just assumed.”

“No, we’re just very good friends. You know what happened to us, with my ex?” Alison nodded. “OK. Well, we have a strong bond, as friends, because we’ve been through a lot together. But we’re not going out.”

Alison thought for a minute. She was a smart girl, and was usually very good at seeing things, figuring things out. She had learned to trust her instincts. And her instincts right now said that somebody needed a push. So, she said, with a raised eyebrow, “Just friends, huh? Well you could have fooled me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What it means is this—I assumed you were going out. Warren didn’t tell me that, I just assumed. Why? Because I’ve been watching you two all night. I have to tell you that anyone who didn’t know you two and walked into this room and watched you would immediately conclude that they were watching two people who were madly in love with each other.”

“Huh?”

“You heard what I said. Look, I figured out a while ago that Warren was in love with you, just by the way he talks about you. What I didn’t know is if **you** were in love with **him**. Now I know.” Alison smiled. “You are, in a big way. You got it **bad** for my little buddy, girl,” she smirked.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Sophia snorted.

“Don’t I. You think about it. I’ll bet my right arm on this one.”

“I’m not—I **can’t**—be in love with Warren Kelleher!”

“Why not?”

“We’re too different.”

“Not really, you’re not.”

“Come **on**! He’s a preppy! He doesn’t party. He actually **likes** to study! He’s a virgin. He doesn’t drink, doesn’t smoke, doesn’t do drugs. We have **nothing** in common!”

“That’s all surface junk. And you **do** have some surface stuff in common—he’s told me that. You’re both baseball nuts. You both like figure skating. You’re both card-carrying Beatlemaniacs. You both like to read.”

“True.”

“And like I said, that’s all surface stuff. Crash and I have less surface stuff in common than you do, except we both like poker. What counts is what’s inside, Sophia. Look, none of that other stuff matters. Are drinking and drugs **that** important to who you are? Is preppy a dirty word?”

“No, I suppose not, on both counts.”

“And as for him being a virgin, all that means is that **you** get to teach him!”

Sophia laughed.

“All I’m saying is, look into your heart. What’s your heart telling you? I’m willing to bet that, if you listen, you’ll discover that I’m right. And, I wish I had a camera, because if I took a picture of you **looking** at him, and you saw the **way** you look at him, you’d **know** I’m right.”

Sophia sat for a minute, and then said, “How do I look at him?”

“Like he’s the center of the universe.”

The guys walked in. They started the movie, and Crash and Warren went back into their routine, but Sophia was barely paying attention. She looked at Warren—looked **hard** at him—and let her heart speak. And she realized, right then, without a doubt, that Alison was right.

She was in love with Warren.

As the guys were cleaning up to get ready to go, Sophia called Alison over. "Would you mind if I got your phone number? I'd like to call you tomorrow sometime."

"Sure. What's up?"

"I need to talk. I need help with something."

"OK." She wrote down the number. "I should be home all day."

Back at Warren's house, waiting for Jay's father to pick them up, Alison had a brief talk with Warren.

"She's some girl, Warren."

"Yup"

"You guys going out?"

Warren snorted. "Be real, Ally. She's completely out of my league."

"I beg to differ."

"Yeah, right."

"Warren. She's in love with you."

"Naah. That's friendship, and gratitude. Why would she be in love with **me**, for goodness' sake?"

"Oh, I dunno. Some of us think you're all right, you know." Alison smirked at him.

"Yeah. For **friendship**. Not for dating."

"In my case, you're right. Of course, **I am** taken." They both chuckled. "But any girl that gets you is getting one hell of a catch, and even a friend like me can figure that out. Trust me. She's just about to figure it out, too. Because she's in love with you."

"Alison, you are nuts."

"Let me ask you a question, War. Are you in love with her?"

"Yeah. I have been for some time."

"Well, TELL HER, you goof!!!"

Warren sighed. “Ally, I know you mean well, but rejection gets real old, real fast.”

“You will **not** get rejected.”

“Easy for **you** to say.”

THE MAN OF MY DREAMS (Chapter 6)

“Alison, it’s Sophia Daniels.”

“Oh, boy, am I glad you called. I had an interesting conversation with Warren while Jay and I were waiting for our ride last night.”

“Really?”

“The boy has got it **bad** for you. And doesn’t think you’ll go out with him in a million years.”

Sophia stopped. And said, firmly, “He’s wrong about that.”

“He is?”

“Yup. No need to surrender your right arm in a bet, Alison- -you were right. I realized it last night. That’s why I want to talk to you. I’m in love with him. Great. **Now** what do I do?”

“I told him you were. And I told him to tell you **he** was. And he didn’t believe me.”

Sophia sighed. “Oh boy. So, I fall in love with the most unlikely guy I could have ever picked. And now I can’t get him to do anything about it.”

“You know Warren. He’s got about as much experience with girls as I do with nuclear physics.” They both laughed. “If I know Warren-and I **do**-he’s keeping himself up nights trying to figure out a way to tell you how he feels. And, if I still know Warren-he’s not going to be able to do it. Sophia, he is **terrified**.”

“Oy veh. So, where does this leave me?”

“With the ball in your court.”

“Um.....meaning.....”

“Meaning you are going to have to take the first step, here.”

“Me? Ask **him** out?”

“You got it.”

“Oh boy. I’ve never done that before.”

“That’s fitting, because I’m sure he’s never been asked out before, either.”

Sophia chuckled, and then got serious: “I don’t know if I can do it. I know I’ve had more experience than he has, but I’ve never been aggressive. I was never allowed to. I’ve always been passive.”

“Didn’t Warren tell me that was one of the things that you were working on-making your own decisions, going after things, being more aggressive?”

“Yeah.”

“So, show the boy what you’ve learned!”

Sophia laughed.

“Look,” Alison continued. “I know he’s shown some serious courage on your behalf recently.”

“Standing up for me with Scott.”

“Exactly. And, not to be blunt, but it is **your** turn. You know how he feels. He hasn’t said it, but he’s shown you. But he does **not** know how **you** feel. And **somebody’s** got to say it, dammit!!”

Sophia laughed. Alison was right. Sophia said so.

“I always am,” Alison replied cheerfully.

It took until Tuesday. Sophia spent the whole day at work with Warren on Monday paralyzed with fright, and spent the whole day-including their customary walk home-without saying a word about it.

And then spent Monday night kicking herself for not saying anything.

They walked home Tuesday. Warren insisted on carrying Sophia’s bookbag-like he did Monday-to save her injured torso. He prattled on the whole way home, while Sophia muttered “hmmm” and “yeah”.

They got to her house, and she grabbed his hand and led him to the seat on the porch.

“Sophia. Hello, Earth to Sophia! Are you in there?”

“Hmmm? Oh!.....Warren, I’m sorry.”

“You haven’t heard a word I’ve said, have you?”

“Not really. I’m sorry. I’ve got something on my mind.”

“AAA. I thought I saw the smoke coming out of your ears.” Sophia giggled. “Anything I can help you out with?”

“Nah, War, I’m alright. Just something I have to work out in my mind. I made a decision about something, and now I have to figure out how to put it into action.”

“Hmm. Sounds weighty. Maybe Warren the Magnificent can lend a hand?”

“I don’t think so, Warren. This is something I **have** to do. And I have to do it myself.”

“Another self-improvement mission?”

Sophia giggled. “You might say that.”

“Well, then, Sophia. Just do it. You gonna let me in on it, at least?”

Sophia thought about that for a moment. Just do it. What the fuck, right? He was right. Just do it. She laughed to herself—little did he know what he was talking about.

“Yeah, Warren, I think I will let you in on it. I’ve made up my mind. I have to do something. And what I have to do, is this.....” and she put her arms around him, reached in, and gave him a long, slow, beautiful kiss.

And Warren couldn’t have been more shocked if Paul McCartney had strolled down the street strumming a guitar and singing “Hey Jude”.

Sophia broke the kiss—and wished for a camera, because the look on Warren’s face was **priceless**. And then she said it: “Warren Kelleher, will you go out with me?”

Warren blinked. Then he shook his head, because Paul McCartney was still walking down the street, but now Ringo was playing tambourine along side. He looked at Sophia, and said the only thing that came to mind: “Are you SERIOUS?”

Sophia laughed. “Let’s see.....I just gave you the greatest kiss of your entire life...”

“True. Not that there was much competition, mind you.”

“.....forget that part. Like I said, greatest kiss of your life, then I ask you to be my boyfriend, and you have to ask if I’m **serious**??”

“Well, it was unexpected.”

“Only because you’re horrible at picking up subtle hints. And because I’m perpetually confused. I should’ve done this a while ago.”

“You should’ve?”

“Yes, I should have. Is it so inconceivable? Me asking you out?”

“YES!”

“Why?”

“It just is. We have completely different lifestyles. We have different friends. Shit, Soph, your friends are going to hound you mercilessly for going out with someone like me. Plus, you’re beautiful—and I’m just plain ol’ Warren.”

“I happen to think plain ol’ Warren is pretty hot. You might be Prep Boy, but you’re still good looking. Besides which, **inside**, you are the most beautiful person I know. We can integrate our lifestyles, because mine is changing with or without you anyway. As for my friends—the ones I really care about will get over it, and as for the rest, fuck ‘em. Warren.....I love you. More than I **ever** thought I could love another person.”

Warren looked down at her. She had the most incredible smile, and was looking at him with complete adoration. He realized he had seen that look before, but didn’t know it for what it was. Maybe **she** hadn’t known it for what it was, either, but she had figured it out. She’d figured it out, and taken an **enormous** leap of faith. He knew being aggressive wasn’t one of her strengths—but she had taken the initiative. And he was **so** thankful that she had.

“Sophia, I love you, too. Yes, I will go out with you.”

FULL METAL JESSICA (Chapter 7)

They spent a few minutes sitting on Sophia’s porch, cuddling and kissing a bit, not saying much of anything. Sophia couldn’t believe how happy and relieved she felt, and Warren was plainly looking like the cat who had eaten the canary. She was reclining on the seat, the back of her head against his chest, his arms around her waist, both of their legs spread out on the bench. She could hear his heart beating. It was a very comfortable place to be.

Then Sophia saw movement coming up the street. “Uh Oh.”

“Uh oh, what?”

“Remember how you were talking about my friends, and how I said they’d just have to get used to it? Well, here comes the first test. That’s Jessie walking up the street.”

“Your best friend, Jessie?”

“The same.”

“You wanna get up and sit next to me, so she doesn’t see us all cozy like this?”

“Not on your life.”

“Wow. Did somebody give you a chutzpah infusion today?” They both laughed, as Jessie walked up the stairs to the porch, a very quizzical look on her face.

“Yo, Soph,” she said.

“Hiya, Jessie. Jess, this is Warren.”

“So this is the famous Prep Boy, eh? Right. So **what** the **fuck** is going on here??”

Warren and Sophia both laughed. “OK, Jess,” Sophia said, “I fucked up that introduction. Jess, this is my **boyfriend** Warren.”

“BOYFRIEND????”

“That’s right.”

“When did **this** happen?”

Warren laughed, as Sophia replied, “Oh, about five or so minutes ago!”

Jessie moved to the chair across from the bench where Warren and Sophia were. She looked completely dumbfounded. Then she looked at Warren and said, “You mean to tell me that the Preppie actually had the balls to ask you out?”

Sophia laughed out loud, as Warren looked embarrassed. “Actually, I asked him out.”

“Where did **you** get the balls to ask **him** out?”

“Dunno. I just did.”

Jessie was completely amazed. Then, she got a wry little smile on her face, and said to Warren, "Very nice. Can't even ask the girl out yourself, haveta wait until **she** does it. Typical Preppie."

"I am never going to live **that** one down, I can see it now."

"Got that right." She looked back at Sophia. "So, the Party Woman Extraordinaire is going out with the Ultimate Preppie, have I got this right?"

"Right."

Jessica snorted. "You know, this is gonna go over **real** well with the gang at the next beer and bong bash."

"I don't care, Jess."

"No, I don't suppose that you do. Probably a good thing. You've spent too much time worrying about what other people think, Soph, I've told you that before. Not caring what anyone else thinks is a big step."

"I know."

Jessica thought for a minute. Then she looked at Warren with a practiced eye. "He's not bad-looking, is he? For a preppy, I mean."

"I feel like a piece of meat," Warren mock-complained.

"You just learn your place, honey, and we'll get along just fine," Jess spat out. Sophia cracked up laughing.

"Course, I can't see his **ass** in that position, so I can't give him a number grade, but he seems to look presentable and all."

"Is she always like this?" Warren asked.

Sophia giggled. "Oh, this is **mild**, man-of-mine. You haven't gotten even a hint of Full Metal Jessica just yet."

Jessica snorted, "Damn straight. Hey, I'm trying to be open and welcoming, here."

Warren laughed at that. "And the effort has not gone unappreciated. Unnoticed until you mentioned it, maybe, but not unappreciated."

Jessie looked at Sophia, in amazement. "Prep Boy actually gives as good as he gets?"

"Frequently."

“Wow. The mind boggles. You’ll have to excuse me, but I **have** seen my entire worldview turned upside down in an instant, here.”

Sophia said, “Your worldview? Imagine the flips **mine** has taken in the past couple of months! Actually, Jess, you’re taking this quite well. I expected a whole ‘Are you crazy, what the hell do you think you’re doing???’ rant by now.”

Jessie looked serious. “And, a month ago you might have gotten one. Sophia, you love him?”

“Yes”

“Preppy, you love her?”

“Completely.”

“Good. Considering what’s gone on in Sophia’s life recently, I only have one rant to make.” She stood up. “Preppy, listen to me and listen good. You had better make **damn** sure you are very fucking good to my one and only best friend. Do you read me?”

“Loud and clear, ma’am.”

“Good. You hurt her like those other assholes and I will rip your balls off and feed them to my hamster.”

Jess softened, and sat back down. “But you’re not the type to hurt his girlfriend, are you? No, not at all, I’d wager,” she said almost to herself. Then she recovered herself:

“Besides, look at the two of you, cuddling up all cozy-like. It’s enough to make a body sick.” They all laughed.

“Jess,” Sophia said, “thanks for making this easy. I really appreciate it.”

Jessie snorted, “What? Me stand in the course of true love? Heaven forbid.”

Warren chuckled. “Honey, I have to get going. I have a pile of studying, plus I’m hungry.”

“Can you call me later?”

“Sure.” They got up, and shared a good-bye kiss, as Jessica made mock-gagging noises. They just looked at her and grinned, and Warren headed off down the street.

From behind him, he heard Jessica yell, so he could hear. “Alright, Sophia, I give the ass an eight!”

JUST LIKE ROMEO AND JULIET (Chapter 8)

Sophia sat at her kitchen table, doling out the happy meals to Eric and Tara, her younger brother and sister. Eric was 8, Tara 6, and they really were cute kids. She had to baby-sit tonight after work, because her mother had gotten an extra shift at the hotel where she worked the front desk. Luckily, she had company-Warren had come home with her. He had gone with her to McDonalds to get some food, and was now making googoo eyes at Tara while he ate his Big Mac. Sophia smiled to herself, as Warren engaged Eric on the finer points of the Boston Bruins' power play. Then he made more funny faces at Tara. Tara was utterly charmed, Eric thought Warren was "neat", and Sophia couldn't stop smiling. She'd never had another boyfriend who even acknowledged Eric and Tara's existence. What a guy, she thought for about the millionth time in the two weeks that they had been going out.

"You're really good with little kids."

"I like 'em. Always have. And Eric and Tara are cool."

"You've got these at home, didn't you say?"

"Yeah, but a little bit older. Ryan is eleven, and Kristin is nine."

"Well, you've got Eric and Tara eating out of the palm of your hand."

Warren laughed. "It's practice."

"Practice?"

"I told you I want to be a doctor, right? Well, what I want to be is a pediatrician."

"Judging from my siblings here, you've certainly got the bedside manner thing down already."

"It was easy with them. They're good kids."

"I gotta get 'em ready for bed. Wanna help?"

"Actually, if you don't mind, I'm gonna crack these books. I did tell you if I came over with you, you'd have to put up with me studying for a bit."

"Right. OK, come on guys, let's get those PJ's on!"

Sophia got her brother and sister ready for bed, and Tara insisted on coming down to "kiss Warren goodnight." Eric settled for a high five. Sophia shooed them up to bed, then came back down to find Warren with his nose buried in a book.

“Watcha readin’?”

“Hamlet.”

“Isn’t that Shakespeare?”

“Uh-huh. I wasn’t lying when I told you I read him for fun, but this is an assignment. I’ve read it before, but it’s been a while, so I’m refreshing my memory. I got my biology done so I figured I’d delve into Hamlet for a while.”

“Why do you do this?”

“Do what?”

“Study so hard.”

“So I can get good grades, which will allow me to get into a good college, which if I continue to get good grades will allow me to get into medical school.”

“Got it all figured out, eh?”

“Well, I am only fourteen. Things could change. But you still need the grades to get into college, that part **doesn’t** change.”

“I’m just in awe that you even have a **clue** of what to do with your life. I don’t.”

“What do you like?”

“Academically? Nothing.”

“Soph, if you paid attention in class every once in a while, you might find something.”

“Thanks, Prep Boy,”

“Don’t mention it. Besides which, I do know something you like. I doubt you could take it yet, but you could build towards it.”

“What?”

“When we’re watching TV, what channel do you keep flipping to?”

“Well, the Weather Channel. I like weather.”

“Right. Meteorology **is** a career, you know.” Warren teased.

“Hmmm. I never thought about it. Ah, it doesn’t matter. I’ll never get into college, not with my grades.”

“Sophia, you’re a **freshman**. You have plenty of time to change.”

“Yeah, but I’ve got a horrible hole to dig myself out of.”

“That’s the easy part. Colleges will ignore your freshman year, if the other years are good. In fact, they **love** that stuff. Big improvement in high school grades? That overshadows the crummy beginning.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“Hmmm. Of course, I’d have to start to **care** about school. That’s the real tough part. It’s so boring.”

“It can’t be all boring. You have to keep your mind open. I **have** discovered interesting things in school that I wouldn’t have otherwise.”

“You go to a better school than I do.”

“True. But you’ll find something. And, sometimes, you just have to fake it for the sake of the grade.” They both laughed. “I **hate** math, with a passion. But I’ve got an A in geometry so far.”

“I’ll have to give this some thought. Now, tell me about this Shakespeare guy.”

“I’ll do better than tell you.” He dug around in his bookbag. “I like Hamlet, but you don’t want to start with that one.” He withdrew a book and looked at it. “Comedy is good to start, and Taming of the Shrew is one of his best, but I think I’ve got something that your tortured romantic soul will like even better.” Sophia giggled. Warren withdrew another book. “Aha! Here we go. Romeo and Juliet. Here, read this.”

“I don’t know if I can actually **read** Shakespeare.”

“Sure you can. Listen, the language can be a bit daunting, but most of it you can get from context. This is also my study copy, so you’ll see some notes on words in the margins. Any you don’t get, you can ask me. The most important thing in reading Shakespeare is to **not** let the language hold you up. Go with the flow. Don’t get frustrated. A word here or there escapes, fine, as long as you get the gist of it. It’s the ideas, and the **poetry** of the language, that you want to get. As the man himself said, ‘The play’s the thing.’”

“You really think I can get through this?”

“I know you can, Sophia. And, if you get it, you will love that one. Make sure you have a box of tissues handy. Weep, cry, sob.” Sophia laughed.

“OK, Warren, if you think I can do this. I’ll give it a try.”

Sophia fell asleep reading. She called Warren after school the next day, asking about a passage. He clarified it for her, and she surprised herself at how quick she got off the phone to continue reading.

He was right, if you didn’t let the language bog you down, it was not really difficult reading. And, **wow** what a story. Now she knew why Warren was hooked.

She finished Romeo and Juliet before she went to sleep that night. And she used half a box of tissues.

They worked after school the next day. Sophia walked in, and Warren was already there, starting in on the dishes.

“Hi, Prep Boy.” She held out the copy of Romeo and Juliet. “What a great, great book.”

“You liked it?”

“Loved it. Couldn’t put it down. Amazing, isn’t it?” They both laughed. “Now I know why you picked that one to give me first, though. It’s kind of.....well, it’s kind of **us**, isn’t it?”

“In a way. Hopefully, without that whole messy double-suicide thing, however.” They both laughed.

“True,” Sophia agreed. “But the whole lovers-from-different-worlds thing, that’s what reminded me of us.”

“I had noticed that, yes.”

“More?”

“What, more Shakespeare?” Sophia nodded sheepishly. “ Dammit, Soph, we’ll make an intellectual out of you yet!!”

“Not very damn likely, Prep Boy.”

“I’ve got Taming of the Shrew in my bookbag. I’ll get that for you before we leave. This one is different. It’s a comedy.”

“After Romeo and Juliet, I think a comedy will be a **good** thing!”

They walked home, and Sophia took her bookbag up to her room, intending to dive into Taming of the Shrew. When she went to get it out, she saw her history textbook. She had a history quiz tomorrow. She knew what chapters it was on. She could read ‘em, at least.

What the hell, she thought.

She withdrew the history text and opened it.

LET’S (ICE) DANCE (Chapter 9)

It was Friday night. Sophia always had the house to herself on Friday nights. That’s usually when she brought her boyfriends home to have sex. Well, she sighed to herself, **that** hasn’t happened yet with Warren. But he was here, with her, watching a movie.

“Had a history quiz today,” Sophia said.

“Yeah?”

“I actually studied for it last night.”

“Wow.”

“And I think I did pretty good.”

“Double wow.”

“Warren Kelleher, what the fuck have you done to me? Studying. No parties. Sitting in an empty house on a Friday night watching a movie. I’m becoming **boring!**”

“Not even a little bit are you boring. Don’t ever worry about that. You pack more living into one day than most people do in a year. Besides which, I didn’t do this to you. You did it to yourself.”

“I know, I know. It’s just **weird**. I like Shakespeare, for chrissakes! I’m not supposed to like Shakespeare, I’m supposed to like **beer!**”

“Which do you truly like better?”

“Shakespeare.” Sophia sighed. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Before I turned into Wild Woman, I loved to read. I still do, but I never do it as much as I used to. Reading Romeo and Juliet-and I started Taming of the Shrew after I studied last night-reminded me how much I used to like reading. It all came back to me. It was actually pretty cool.”

“I want you to know something, Sophia. I think I need to say this. I love you, whatever you do. If you didn’t like Shakespeare, I’d still love you. If you told me you didn’t want

to be together tonight because you were going to a beer and bong bash, I'd still love you. I'd **worry** more, but I'd still love you."

Sophia laughed. "I think I knew that. But it was nice to hear, anyway. I really **do** like reading more than partying. I suppose I always did; I just forgot. But I worry about my image, more than I should. Reading Shakespeare and getting good grades just is **not** done in my crowd."

"Actually, Soph, you do other things that I'd bet aren't done much in your crowd. And that's not even including having a preppie boyfriend."

"OK, what else?" Sophia chuckled.

"I'd bet not many of your friends are Beatlemaniacs. And then there's that whole thing where you know more about baseball than most guys I know."

"True. Those things are, however, easier to hide than good grades."

Warren thought for a minute. "What else did you like to do before you became Party Woman Extraordinaire?"

"This, actually. I loved movies. I like that we watch movies, I've missed it. I actually-you're not going to believe this-played chess. "

"We'll have to play sometime, if you remember. I'm pretty good."

"A preppie? Good at chess? I'm sooooooooo surprised."

"You just keep quiet, you."

"I'll have to brush up, so I can kick your butt. What else? I spent more time on the computer than I do now. Oh, and figure skating, of course."

"Figure skating?"

"I never mentioned that? Oh, yeah. Made it to Sectionals as a novice, what, three years ago? Yeah, three years ago."

"What happened?"

"My partner quit, and I never found another one, and then I started the downward slide into the depraved Wild Woman you see before you today." Warren stuck his tongue out at her. "If you're gonna stick that thing out, come over here and put it to good use. Anyway, I was a pretty good skater."

"You said partner. Pairs?"

“Dance.”

“Ah. I competed in singles as a novice two years ago. Didn’t make it out of regionals, though.”

“You did? Wow. Another thing we have in common. I didn’t know you skated.”

“Still do. I’m at the rink every Saturday morning. I stopped trying to compete, but I still take lessons and skate for fun.”

“Why’d you quit competing?”

“I wasn’t much good.” They both laughed. “Actually, I’m a superb basic skater. Great edges, good footwork, fast, the whole bit. However, I wasn’t much of a jumper.”

“You should’ve switched to dance.”

“Hmmm. Never thought of that.”

Sophia thought for a minute. “You going to the rink tomorrow?” Warren nodded. “Think I could tag along?”

“Sure. It’d be fun.”

They showed up at the rink the next morning. Carol, the lady Warren took lessons from, let Sophia join in for the morning, as a guest. Sophia thought she’d start with the beginners, but she realized she really hadn’t forgotten all that much. Quickly, she was flying across the ice like she had never left it. She had to admit, it felt really, really good.

She looked over at Warren, trying some jumps. He had a double salchow that was solid, and a double loop that was respectable, but couldn’t get past a single of any other jump. And the axel, even the single was an adventure. Sophia realized why he had stopped competing, at least as a singles skater.

But, boy, could he move on the ice. His edges were solid as a rock; he had quick feet, good carriage, everything you could want in a young skater-except jumps.

Sophia skated up to him as he took a slight break next to the coach. “Warren, I’ve been watching you.”

“What did you think?”

“Warren, we should dance together.”

“Ah, I don’t know.”

“Warren, you’ve got strong, strong basic skating skills. Your edges, your turns, everything. Screw the jumps. You need to dance, and you need to dance with me.”

“You’re pretty vehement about this.”

Sophia smiled a little. “Yeah, I suppose I am. I watched you do that piece of footwork a minute ago, and I said to myself, damn, I want him to do that with **me**. With me in your arms.”

Carol, the coach, overheard. “Do you have a dance background, Sophia?”

“Sixth in novice sectionals three years ago.”

“Great! You didn’t skate out of here?”

“No, down in Wennington.”

“Ah. Well, if you want to dance again, I’m sure we could find you a partner.”

“I’m trying to convince my partner,” Sophia said with a smile.

“Actually, Warren, she’s got a point. You’ve certainly got the basics to do ice dance. The jumps are not coming. And, I don’t know if you guys can learn to dance together, but you are certainly physically well-matched.”

Warren thought for a minute, and then said, “Hmmm. What the heck? I can try it, right? And I get to skate with the love of my life, that’s a cool bonus.”

Sophia laughed. Carol said, “Listen. After the free session, the next lesson is run by June Riegert. She’s a dance coach. You guys were going to stick around for the free session, right? Afterwards, I’ll introduce you.”

They tried skating together a bit during the free session, and found that they had a decent natural rhythm. They met June, and she agreed to let them join her dance class. They danced for a while, mostly just trying to teach Warren the most basic of steps, but Sophia loved it. By the end of the class, Warren realized that he liked it better than singles, already.

--end of chapter--

PLANS AND SCHEMES (Chapter 10)

“So, we’re going to take ice dance lessons and see how it goes.”

Sophia was sitting at a party that Saturday night, talking to Jessie. Warren had had plans with Crash, so Sophia had decided to go to the party. She had wondered whether or not to tell Warren, finally decided to, and was happily surprised that he told her to go. She knew he’d worry, but he was good enough to understand that she couldn’t drop out of the party scene altogether. That’s where her friends were. She really was lucky to have him. She made a mental vow to take it easy on the nasty stuff at the party.

“So, the Famous Couple is now a couple on the ice, too,” Jesse snorted. “Jesus, do you guys do **everything** together?”

Sophia sighed. “Well, Jess, aside from the fact that he’s not **here**-no, we don’t do **everything** together. I wish.”

“Hmmm. Methinks my friend sounds just a touch frustrated.”

“Just a touch.”

“What, that he’s not here?”

“Oh, no. I’m fine with that. I’ll get him to come to one, when we’re ready for that. It’s fine that he’s not here, he had plans anyhow.”

“Oh. OK. But there **is** a problem.”

“Jess, it’s such a minor one, I don’t want to make a big deal about it. I’m so in love with him, I can’t stand it. It’s everything I could have ever dreamed about in a relationship. He’s damn near the perfect boyfriend.”

“Except.....”

“Except we’ve been going out for three weeks and he hasn’t made even something resembling the slightest **hint** of a move on me!”

“Aaah. Sophie’s horny.”

“And how. And he hasn’t done anything more than kiss me. Oh, and just to ratchet up my hormones a few degrees, he’s an exceptionally good kisser.”

“Really? Prep Boy?”

“Yeah. Surprised me how good he is.”

“Hmmm. Well, as for your little problem, you’ve gotta understand; three weeks for you might be an eternity, but for Mister Inexperienced? If you guys are making out, that’s fast for him.”

“I know, I know” Sophia groaned. “I just wish I could somehow let him know that I’m not going to bite.”

“You don’t bite? That’s a pity.”

“JESS!”

“Aaron used to like it when I bit.”

“JESSIE! You’re horrible! Besides which, I thought you and Aaron never did it?”

“We didn’t, but we did everything **but**. No, unlike you, I kept my virginity. Unfortunately. If I hadn’t, I might have kept Aaron.”

“You did the right thing, Jess, you know that.”

“You’re probably right. I wasn’t ready.”

“Jess, I wish **I** had held out. I might not be driving myself crazy right now. Damn, I am just not **used** to this-I’m used to guys that want to jump my bones on the first date.”

“Hey, **I** didn’t tell you to go out with a preppy, now, did I?”

Sophia giggled. “Ah, I wouldn’t trade him for the world.”

“So jump **his** bones.”

“Huh?”

“Make the first move, Soph. Grab his crotch or something. Answer the door wearing a baby-doll. Write a lascivious note and put it in his bookbag. Be creative.”

“That’s a **damn** good idea.”

“Of course it is. I thought of it.”

“Jess, you’re a genius. Hmmm. This beer is almost empty.”

“How many?”

“First.”

Jessie gaped. “Soph, you’ve been here two hours. One beer?”

“I’m taking it easy.”

“You’re turning into me, is what you’re doing.”

“Huh?”

“Soph, haven’t you noticed? I hardly ever get drunk. I take a beer and nurse it forever. I take one toké off a joint and pass it around. All the parties I go to, and the times I’ve been truly wasted or stoned I can count on about two fingers. Everybody thinks I’m cool, but I keep in control. And I even manage to get decent grades without everyone thinking I’m a wimp. I’m serious-you’re turning into me. Keep your rep but take care of business.”

“Yeah, except you don’t have to worry about venturing into this den of jackals with a preppy on your arm.”

Jessie laughed. “True. Of course, if I could get me a preppy that treats me like Warren treats you, I might consider it. But, what you said reminds me.....”

“Of what?”

“Three weeks from now, the ‘rents are out of town. Which coincides with your fifteenth birthday. Which means.....”

“Jessie’s Annual Sophia’s Birthday Bash?”

“You got it. And this is a **perfect** opportunity to parade the preppy into the den.”

“You think?”

“Sure. First, you know my parties tend to be tame by comparison.”

“That’s because if anyone gets out of hand, you kick their ass.”

“Exactly. Second, it’s **my** party. My party, my guest list, my best friend’s boyfriend is firmly on the guest list, and if anyone has a problem with that.....”

“You kick their ass.”

“Exactly.”

“We’ll be there. Might as well get it over with.”

“Cool. It’s going to go better than you think, you know. Just make sure Prep Boy brings that rapier-sharp sarcastic wit that I’ve seen with him.”

“I’ll do that. But first, I need to launch The Plan to Get Sophia Laid.”

Jessie just laughed.

Sophia wrote the note on Wednesday. They had made plans to get together on Friday night, as usual, and her mother was working late, and the kids would be with their father. She planned to drop the note in his bookbag at work on Thursday. So she thought for a while on Wednesday night, and ended up writing this:

My dearest Romeo,

I don't have a balcony for you to sing up to, so my bedroom will have to do. Up the stairs, to the right, first door on the left. I will be waiting for you there Friday night. Just let yourself in and come right up. I will be ready for you, and I will be wearing something **very** special for the occasion.

I want you, Romeo, so bad I can taste it.

See you Friday,

Your devoted Juliet.

Thursday Sophia walked in to work. Warren was already there, squeezing some studying in before his shift started.

"Whatcha studying, Preppy?"

"Biology. Respiratory system. Got a quiz tomorrow. I figured I'd get a bit in, but I'll have to do more tonight."

Sophia looked over his shoulder. "So this is what you'll be having fun with tonight?"

Warren laughed. "Yup. I do like bio, but I don't know if studying is **fun**."

This is perfect, thought Sophia, as she made note of the page number. 226. "Oh, you love studying, and you know it."

"Ah, it's alright." He closed the book. "Ready to go to work?"

"Yes sir, sir."

Sophia went to work, and waited until Warren went out to clean the lot. She planned to follow him out-she had almost completely quit smoking, but she still had one or two a day, usually at work-but, before she followed him, she went to his bookbag, withdrew the biology text, and slipped the note in right before page 226.

It was close to 11 PM, and Warren was still grinding out his studying. He had already told Sophia he probably wouldn't be able to call her tonight-she was fine with that, they were

getting together tomorrow night. He had already ground through some Geometry and had conjugated a bunch of Russian verbs—now to nail down that respiratory system stuff for his biology quiz.

He opened up the text to the page he had left off at-and found an envelope. A pink envelope, with “ROMEO” in big letters on the front and a bunch of little hearts scattered about. He smiled, and opened up the envelope and read the letter.

And read it again.

And turned a lovely shade of purple. “Oh my goodness,” he said to himself. This was an unexpected development so early in their relationship. He read the note again. “I think I’m hooked,” he said to himself.
“As if I wasn’t, already.”

He didn’t get much studying done after that.

FEELS LIKE THE FIRST TIME (Chapter 11)

Warren approached Sophia’s house and took a deep breath. He had spent a completely unsettled day at school. He couldn’t stop thinking about that note. His only saving grace was that Biology was last period, and he had calmed down a bit, knowing that the day was almost over, and aced the quiz. Then he went home, and ate. Now he was here.

He opened the door. Except for one light in the entranceway, the downstairs was dark. The steps, which led up from the entrance, were lit. Ah well, he thought, here goes nothing.

“Soph?” he called, just to make sure.

“Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?” he heard from the top of the stairs. He couldn’t help but smile at that, and bounced up the stairs. To the right, first door on the left. There it was. He went in.

.....and stopped dead in his tracks.

Sophia was sitting on her bed, propped up on a pillow. Her hair was down, loose around her shoulders—she didn’t often wear it that way, but knew Warren liked it. She was wearing a pink babydoll teddie that was just about see-through, and barely reached her hips—and nothing else except for a pair of pink panties.

Her breasts were clearly visible through the slight fabric. She was slightly flushed, had an endearing twinkle in her eye, and a slight smile on her face. He could see her nearly porcelain skin on her legs and arms, framed on her arms by her jet-black hair. She wasn’t

wearing any makeup, which to Warren enhanced the whole effect. Warren felt a little out of breath.

“WOW,” was all he could get out.

“You like?”

“That’s an understatement.”

Well come on over here and show me how much you like!”

“Waitaminnit. I’m in shock. Let me catch my breath.” He took a deep breath and looked around. “I’ve never been in your room before.” He looked at the posters on her walls.

“Hmm. Paul McCartney, Nomar Garciaparra, and Bourne and Kraatz. Good taste.”

Sophia smiled at him. “Who’s on yours?”

He smiled back. “John Lennon, Pedro Martinez, and Nicole Bobek.” They both laughed.

“Well,” Sophia said, “We’ve firmly established we both like Beatles, baseball, and figure skating. So. Got your breath back, yet?”

“I think so.”

“Then GET OVER HERE!” He did, and sat next to her on the bed.

“Sophia Daniels, you have got to be the most beautiful creature I have ever seen.”

“So, Warren Kelleher, tell me. Do I turn you on?”

“Most of me is **very** turned on.”

“Only most? What about the rest?”

“The rest.....is terrified.”

“Terrified?” Sophia laughed softly. “Why?”

“Because I’m completely inexperienced at this. I knew this day was coming, and part of me has been dreading it. I don’t have a clue what I’m doing. I.....I’m worried that I won’t know what to do, how to do it, that I won’t be able to make you happy. And saying this is **very** embarrassing.”

Sophia laughed again. “Silly boy. Just the fact that you are even **worried** about making me happy proves to me that I have nothing to worry about. Most guys couldn’t give a shit. Warren, with or without this, I love you. I love you soooo much. That’s why I knew I wanted to do this.”

Warren smirked at her. “That, plus you’re horny.”

Sophia laughed. “There is that. Don’t for a minute tell me you’re **not**.”

“Well, if I wasn’t before-which I was-I most certainly am now.”

“Look, Warren, you want to be a doctor, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sure you have a firm grasp on the anatomy.”

“Well, yeah, but.....”

“And, knowing you, you probably have a good idea on which specific parts of the anatomy that I might like you to explore a little bit, right?”

“Yeah. But that’s all abstract.”

“Time to practice in real life, then. Warren, I’m all yours. That’s the bottom line. I’m yours, to do what you want with. And I know it’ll be wonderful.” She grabbed his head and pulled him in close, and kissed him. Then he whispered in his ear, “Romeo, my dear heart.....just go on instinct.” And kissed him again.

They held the kiss, and Warren made a decision. He snaked his hand underneath the teddie, and let his fingers run all along Sophia’s left breast. As the kiss got longer and deeper, Warren’s hand was touching and prodding Sophia’s breast and nipple. Warren moved his lips from Sophia and lightly kissed her neck, while he continued his ministrations on her breast.

His free hand reached down and pulled the teddie up, and Sophia helped him get it over her head and off. He kissed down from her neck, down her chest, and started gently nibbling on her right breast while his hand continued on her left.

Sophia’s breathing got more and more labored. The blush on her face, readily apparent because she had a very pale complexion, spread down to her chest. And Warren kept gently sucking, nibbling, and touching. Her breasts had never, ever, gotten this much attention.

“My God,” she said softly in a low voice, “I could get really, really used to this.”

“I’m doing OK, then?”

“Look at me. You have to ask? Shit, you’ve been at this for twenty minutes. I’m used to being **done** in twenty minutes. Wham, bam, thank-you-ma’am. No, dear heart, this is heavenly.”

“I’m not going too slow, am I?”

“I am **not** complaining. Oh God am I not complaining. My boobs are on **fire** right now. You just keep doing what you’re doing. I told you-go on instinct.”

He did. He continued his magic with his lips on her breast, but she noticed his hand gently slipping down her stomach and over her hip. And then under her panties. She quickly reached down and threw them off, provoking a giggle from Warren. He slipped his hand in between her legs.

Slow. Oh, he was **deliciously** slow, thought Sophia. He was still paying attention to her breasts, but his other hand was gently tracing and slipping around her pussy lips. Sophia could not believe how good this was. She was **sopping** wet. Then he slipped two fingers in-still slowly, still gently-and snaked them into her dripping pussy. And then he curled them, and hit her g-spot dead on.

Sophia gasped, sharply. Warren chuckled and said, “Got it right, I’d take it?” All Sophia could muster for a reply was a long “Oooooooooooooohhhhhh”. Warren continued massaging her pussy, and then took his thumb and started rubbing her clit.

Sophia jumped. “Ayeeeeeeeeeeee!” Warren started his fingers in and out, slowly, gently, making sure to keep her clit underneath his thumb. Sophia’s breathing grew more and more labored. The labored breaths turned to groans, which in turn changed to strangled little yelps. And they gave way to a low, keening wail:

“OhGoddon’tstopdon’tstoppleasepleasepleasedon’tstopdon’tstopohGodohGoddon’tstopdon’tstop.....”

Warren didn’t stop.

Sophia’s wails became sharper, and higher, and then-she threw her head back into the pillow, arched her back, ground her pussy into Warren’s hand.....and SCREAMED.

And kept screaming, for a good twenty seconds, while her pussy spasmed violently around Warren’s fingers. She finally stopped screaming, and fell back on the bed, desperately gasping for breath. Warren withdrew his hand, and lied down beside her. He had nicknamed her Wild Woman some time ago, before they fell in love, in reference to her crazy lifestyle. As he looked at his flushed, gasping, **glowing** girlfriend, he found a whole new meaning for the name.

“Oh my God in heaven,” Sophia finally gasped. “What did you **do** to me?”

“You like?” he teased.

“Warren. Oh my God, Warren. I **came**.”

“Yeah, I figured that, considering you shattered three windows and damn nearly broke my two fingers.”

“Warren. You don’t understand.” A pause, and then more softly, “That was the first time.”

“Excuse me?”

“The first time I ever came. Well, with another person in the bed, anyway”

“You’re joking.”

“Nope. You just gave your vastly more experienced girlfriend her very first non-self-induced orgasm. And this one beat any of **those** all to hell.”

“Wow.”

“Wow, my dear Romeo, is the understatement of the century. How.....what....I mean, **how** did you do that? How did you **learn** to do that? You sure you’ve never done that before?”

“No, I’ve never done that before. And you guessed right, before-anatomy textbooks.”

“That’s the where, not the how.”

“Actually, there’s something you don’t know about me.”

“What?” Sophia asked warily.

“I’m a musician. I sing.”

“OK.” Sophia said, confused.

“I also play guitar, and a little piano.”

“OK.”

“I’m a good guitar player. Good dexterity, nice touch-just all around good hands.”

“Ah,” Sophia said with a smile, getting it now.

“So, I figured-G string, G spot, what’s the difference?”

Sophia laughed. “Whatever, it worked. Oh BOY did it work.”

“That was really the first one?”

“Yeah,” Sophia smiled sweetly. “If you had stopped, I would have strangled you.”

“How could I stop? You were wailing ‘don’tstopdon’tstopdon’tstop’ at me.”

“My goodness, was I saying that out loud?”

“You sure were.”

“I’m very glad you listen to your girlfriend.”

“Well you threw in a bit of ‘pleasepleaseplease’ in there, too. So you were polite about it.”

They both laughed, and then Sophia sat up and looked at Warren in mock exasperation. “And look at you, now! I’m all ready to pay you back, and you’ve got entirely too many clothes on!” Warren laughed and reached for his pants. “No, darling, you get the shirt. I will take care of what’s in here.” She unhooked the button, unzipped his pants, and pulled them down. Then she quickly discarded his boxers-and Warren sprung to attention.

“Wow. Warren, you’re **big**.”

“Am I?”

“Oh, yeah. I definitely like **this**. Payback time,” she said.
Whereupon Sophia proceeded to give Warren his first blowjob.

After the blowjob, Warren’s member needed a little rest, so he went down on Sophia. “First time for that, too,” Sophia commented. “Lots of guys think it’s gross.”

“I’m not lots of guys,” Warren replied, and proceeded to lick, suck, and nibble the dumbstruck girl to her second orgasm.

Warren climbed up beside her and held her against his chest while she caught her breath. “Oh my. You are magical. I can’t believe this, I just can’t believe this.” Sophia closed her eyes, and then looked into his, with a little smirk on her face. “And you-you were worried about satisfying me. Little did you know.”

“I didn’t know. It’s all instinct.”

“Your instincts, dear heart, are gold plated.” She inched her face up to his, looked into his eyes, and said, “Warren Kelleher, I want you in me, and I want you in me right now.”

“Ah. This is the worrisome part.”

“Why? I’m on the pill, you know.”

“You mentioned that at one point. But that’s not what I meant.”

“Hey. Follow your instincts. They’ve been just fine so far.”

“My instincts fail me.”

Sophia chuckled. “OK. You’ve done all the work so far, anyway. So I’m going to follow **my** instincts. OK?”

“OK.”

“You aren’t the type that always has to be in control in bed?”

“Since this is my first time in bed, how would I know?” They both laughed. “Try me.”

“OK.” Sophia swung her leg around and climbed on top of him so she was straddling him. “I’ve always wanted to try this.” She lifted up, and lined the tip up with her opening. “I’ve never done it this way.” She started to ease him in her, and then sank part way down. “Oh my. You **are** bigger than I’m used to. I’m going to have to get used to this.” She stopped for a minute.

Warren groaned softly. “You like?” Sophia asked. Warren nodded. “You don’t mind, me taking over like this?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Good” She sank all the way down, and groaned. “Oooooooh. Oh my,”

Warren reached up, put his arms around her neck, and pulled her in. “Congratulations, dear heart of mine,” Sophia whispered, “you’re not a virgin anymore.” Then she lifted up off of him, and brought herself back down.

Fifteen minutes later, desperately close to another orgasm, Sophia realized something. In a breathy moan, she said to Warren, “Not...supposed....to last so long.....on first time!”

Warren, who was equally close, blurted out, “Blowjob took the edge off.....”

Sophia giggled, then plopped down hard on him. Her legs were almost completely gone, but it didn’t matter—she came, magnificently, with another careening scream. Her spasming, buckling pussy was enough to bring Warren to his own orgasm.

A long few minutes later, Sophia was curled up in Warren’s arms, sprawled out on top of him. Warren had finally got his breath back, and he had quietly slipped out of Sophia. He was just holding her tight, lost in the moment.

And then he realized something.

She was crying.

“Soph?”

She just snuggled into him tighter.

“Soph, are you OK?”

“Oh, I’m more than OK,” she sniffled.

“Are you crying?”

“Yeah. A little. This night has been a bit.....overwhelming....and I suppose I lost it a little bit.”

“I thought I might have hurt you.”

“Oh, God, no. Just the opposite, dear heart. You should be very proud of yourself. Not many guys get to make their girlfriends scream **and** cry during sex. And in the same night, even.”

Warren laughed. “There’s a song I like, by Dire Straits, very beautiful song. And one of the lines in it is, ‘When we made love, you used to cry.’”

Sophia giggled. “You’ll have to play it for me sometime. What’s it called?”

Warren grinned broadly. “Romeo and Juliet.”

Sophia looked at him. “Really? Well that seems to be the theme of the day, doesn’t it?”

She fell silent for a second.

Then she said, “Warren, do you regret this?”

“What? No. Not even a little bit. Why?”

“Well.....now that it’s over.....I’m kind of feeling that I rushed you.”

“You did, a little. I would never have made this move, this early. But understand one thing; if I didn’t **want** to be rushed, if I didn’t agree with being rushed, you never would have been able to rush me.”

“OK. But...well.....did you enjoy it?”

“Oh you betcha. Are you kidding? I just don’t scream as loudly as you do.”

They both laughed. Sophia said, “I must say, that I felt a little guilty. Never had an orgasm before, and then I end up having more than the guy I’m with!”

“Don’t sweat that. Wee Willie down there wouldn’t be up for another go-round even if the rest of me were. Actually, I thoroughly enjoyed watching you get off. Good to know that I’m good at it.”

“Oh, dear heart, you are way more than merely ‘good at it’. I feel thoroughly shattered.” She paused. “You know what? It’s a really, really good thing that I was madly in love with you before we ever did this.”

“Why?”

“Because I might otherwise be tempted to **convince** myself I was in love with you, even if I weren’t, just to get more of this!”

“You know what? I might be a hopelessly inexperienced Prep Boy naif, but I know this—it wouldn’t have been anywhere near this good if we weren’t truly in love.”

Sophia thought about that one. “You don’t think sex and love are different things?”

“Yeah, they’re different things. But if you keep them separate, neither is as good. That’s what I think. Look, I didn’t have sex tonight. I had sex **with you**. You’ve had other lovers. Tell me that didn’t make a difference.”

“You might be right. Look, I **know** I love you. Sex doesn’t change that, unless it makes it better. But I don’t know if what happened to me was more because I love you, or more because you’re just good.”

“You want to know a secret? The first time, with my fingers? Towards the end, my hand was just about to fall off. It **still** hurts. I have guitar muscles in my fingers—they’re in a different position with what I was doing tonight. Different muscles. They were **screaming** at me.”

Sophia looked at him, wide eyed. “Why didn’t you stop?”

Warren smiled. “Because you were moaning, ‘don’tstopdon’tstopdon’tstop’!” Sophia looked a little sheepish. Warren continued, “Heck, I might be inexperienced, but I’m not hopelessly clueless. I knew why that was coming out of your mouth. I knew you were close. And I was going to stop? Because of a little pain in my hand? No fucking way. But that wasn’t just sex, or just good technique on my part, that was **love**. I didn’t know, at the time, that it was your first—but I knew you were at the edge, and I wanted to see you go over it. Because I love you.”

“Oh.”

“And it was worth it. I will keep a picture in my mind, for as long as I live, of the look on your face when you came. I will treasure that for a long, long time. And that’s love, too. And, I don’t care how good I am—I don’t think **just** good sex would have made you cry.”

And Sophia sank into Warren’s arms and started crying again. Warren went on, “And you know what? Before we made love, when you offered to take over for me because I was apprehensive? That was love, too.”

Sophia looked up at him through her tears, and smiled. “You’re right. Yes, I wanted you because I wanted you—but all I could think of was making this easier on this dear, sweet love of my life. And the crying, too. And now I can’t stop crying.”

“Y’see? Sophia, I love you so much. I have never loved you more than I do right now.”

“I love you too, Warren.”

“Thank you for an absolutely perfect first time.”

Sophia looked at him, smiling. “Thank you for **my** first time. Sort of!”

They stayed there, kissing and cuddling, for quite a long time.

--end of chapter--

DOES YOUR MOTHER KNOW (Chapter 12)

Sophia bounded down the stairs early the next morning. Her mother sat in the kitchen, sipping a cup of coffee.

“Hi Mom!” Sophia said cheerfully.

“Why good morning, Soph. What are you doing up so early?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right, I forgot to tell you. I’m skating again.”

“You are?”

“Yeah,” Sophia smiled broadly. “With Warren. I found out he used to be a competitive skater, too. In singles. He stopped competing because he never mastered the jumps, but still took lessons. He took me with him last week, and I suggested he try dance. So, we’re going to take lessons and skate on Saturdays and see what happens. Just casual for now, but I missed skating, and skating with him is lots of fun. And he might not be much of a jumper, but his basic skating is very strong. We’re well matched physically, not to mention emotionally”--her Mom smiled at that--“so we’re going to give it a shot.”

Ellen Kovach was amazed. This was the longest speech she had heard out of her oldest daughter in a long time. “Well, you seem to be happy with the decision. I think it’s great.”

“I think it’s great, too. And I’m just generally happy, lately. Anyhow, Warren will be here, soon. I’m going to go meet him. See you!” and she bounded out the door.

Ellen Kovach watched her daughter bounce out the door. My oh my, she thought, Sophia was positively glowing this morning. And Ellen had an idea why.

Sophia breezed back into the house shortly after one. “Hi, Mom! You had lunch yet? I’m gonna make grilled ham and cheese. You want one?”

“Sure, honey, that would be nice.” Ellen Kovach was amazed. “You want me to cook it?”

“Nah, I got it.”

“How was skating?”

“Great. It was only our second time together, so we’re still trying to get basic steps down, but he’s a **very** quick study,” Sophia said. Ellen noticed a little gleam in her daughter’s eye.

There was a knock on the door. “Soph? You home?”

“Come on in, Jess!” Jessie entered and took off her jacket. “You’re just in time,” Sophia continued. “Want some lunch? I’m doing grilled ham and cheese.”

“Sure. Hi, Mrs. Kovach.”

“Hi, Jessie.”

“What, Soph, you cookin’ for everybody? When the hell did **you** become so freakin’ domestic?”

“Ah, ‘snothin’. I was making for myself, so why not make for everyone?” Sophia hummed a snatch of some song or other. “It’s no big deal.”

Jessie looked at Ellen. “What has gotten into her? My best friend is positively bubbly!”

“I dunno, Jess. She’s been like this all morning. She woke up like this, if you can believe that!”

Jessie snorted, “It’s this whole ‘she’s in luuuuuuuv’ thing. It’s positively disgusting, I tell ya.”

Ellen laughed. “Oh, I think it’s more than that. She’s been in luuuuuuv, as you put it, for a month now. Nope, this is different. In fact, I’d be willing to put money down that we are looking at a girl who had her first orgasm last night.” And she winked at Jessie.

Jessie’s jaw hit the table.

And Sophia’s eyes widened, and she **dropped** the plate she had been carrying, shattering it into multiple pieces on the floor. “MOTHER!!!!”

“Oh, come on, Sophie, do you think I’m stupid? I know you’re not a virgin. Do you think I bought that story you handed me last year--here, sign this, so I can go on the pill for “medical reasons”? Yeah, right. In fact, I’d be willing to wager that you’ve been having sex since.....what was his name, Dork?”

Sophie just stared in disbelief. Jessie cracked up. “Dirk, but Dork is close enough, believe me.”

“Right,” Ellen continued. “I also know that your previous boyfriends were assholes. Assholes out of bed tend to be assholes **in** bed. It takes a special guy to help a girl reach orgasm. Believe me, I know. Warren’s a special guy. So, I put two and two together--added by the fact that you are glowing like a small sun--and made a guess.”

Sophia still couldn’t believe it. “Since when did you get so open minded?”

Ellen laughed, “I always have been to some degree. Listen, the drugs and booze worry me, and your inability to use the brains that God gave you in school frustrates me more than you could possibly know. But I know what hormones are. I have them too, you know. I wasn’t much older than you are now when I lost my virginity.” Sophia stared. She never knew that. “No, I wasn’t really upset you were having sex--although I would have preferred you had waited. No, I was upset with who you were having sex **with**. I knew Scott was bad news from day one. Not that you listened to me.”

Sophia looked down. “I should have. Boy, should I have.”

“Ah, well, no use crying over spilled milk--or broken plates.” They all laughed. “Trust me, dear, I have **no** such premonitions about Warren. He treats you like gold.”

“That he does. Mom, you’re amazing. Thanks for being understanding.”

“Well, you should try me more. I’m more understanding than you think. You just never communicate. That’s why I brought it up. At least I got a rise out of you.”

Sophia laughed. “That you did. I think I’m purple right now.” She sighed. “I have to clean this up, I suppose. Where’s the broom and dustpan?”

“Hall closet.”

Sophia turned towards the door. “Hey, Soph?” Jessie called. “Was your mother right? Did Prep Boy actually give you your first orgasm last night?”

Sophia stopped at the door, looked back at them, smiled, and said. “ My first.....and my second.....and my third!” and then walked down the hall.

Jess and Ellen looked at each other in amazement. “Oh, Soph,” Jess said. “You don’t suppose that Prep Boy might perhaps have a **friend**, do you?”

It was a few hours later. Jessie had gone home, and Sophia had spent some time in her room reading. She came out to the kitchen, fixed a pot of tea, poured herself a cup, and wandered out to the living room, where her mother was watching TV.

“Made a pot of tea if you want some.”

“Actually, that sounds lovely.” Ellen went to the kitchen, grabbed a cup, filled it, and went back to the living room. “Mmmm,” she sipped. “Earl Grey?”

“My favorite.”

“Some things never change.” Sophia chuckled. “What are you reading?” Sophia showed her the book. “A Comedy Of Errors? Shakespeare? I’m impressed, Sophie.”

“Blame Prep Boy and his evil influence on me. He’s got me hooked on Shakespeare, of all things.”

Ellen smiled. “He’s got you reading again, he’s got you skating. Jesus, what else of your virtuous past has he managed to dredge up?”

Sophia laughed. “Well, after we did.....you know....last night, we came down here and he thoroughly whipped my behind at chess. Boy, am I rusty at **that**. But it was fun to play.”

“Well, I’d bet your mind wasn’t completely on the chess game.”

“That’s no excuse, because neither was his. It might have been my first orgasm last night, but it was his first **anything**.”

Ellen stared. “Warren was a virgin?”

“Oh, he was more than a virgin. He’d never had his hand up a girl’s **shirt** before last night. He went from your basic kissing to boinking me all in one night.”

“And he made you come **three times**?????”

"I'm telling you, Mom, the boy is good."

"How did he last so long, if he was a virgin? That's unheard of!"

"Oh, only the last orgasm was **that** way. First two were foreplay."

"Ay yi yi."

"Don't I know it." She took a sip of her tea, and sighed. "I guess I can't quite believe that I'm not even fifteen years old yet and I'm discussing graphic details of my sex life with my **Mother**."

Ellen looked at Sophia wryly. "Sophia, any time that I can get you talking to your mother about **anything** is a good thing."

Sophia thought about that for a minute. She sipped her tea, and put her book down. She stared into space for a minute, and then said, softly, "I guess I've been pretty rough on you the past couple of years."

Ellen looked at her daughter. "It's been mutual. Neither of us have been communicating. There have been so many things I should have told you, long before this--things about myself. It might have helped, but I didn't know how to go about it."

"What are you talking about, Mom?"

"I remember the first guy that made me orgasm. I was seventeen. Like I said, I lost my virginity shortly after my fifteenth birthday, but it took one special guy to make me orgasm."

"And you fell head over heels."

"You got it."

"What happened?"

"He got me pregnant before I even graduated high school, so I married him."

"My father?"

"Your father. I was eighteen. When we were in bed, he made the earth move. I thought I was in love with him."

"What ever happened with him? You've never told me."

Ellen stared into her teacup. "This is what I should have told you long ago." She took a deep breath. "I think I **did** love him, at least for a while. But sometimes pressure brings

out the worst in people. The pressure of a wife and child, at his age--he wasn't even 21 yet when you were born--brought out his main weakness. Booze."

Sophia paled. "Oh."

"It gets worse. The worst part wasn't that Brian was turning into a drunk--it was that he was a **violent** drunk. I was eighteen years old, had a little baby, and it was becoming part of my routine to wait for my husband to come home so he could beat the shit out of me."

"Oh my God."

"And I know you were too young to remember this, but you weren't spared, either. He threw you around more than once." Sophia stared, wide-eyed. "I was finally--*finally*--getting the gumption up to try to get away from him, when he saved me the trouble by leaving."

"Oh, God, Mom."

"Now you know." Ellen stared into her teacup. "And now you know why I was such a nut when I found out you were drinking, and why I got hysterical when I found out that Scott was beating you. All I could think of was that you had inherited the worst from both your parents--the tendency to drink, and the tendency to allow yourself to get beat up. And I got hysterical. I didn't know what to do."

"I understand why you found it difficult to tell me all this. I wish you had, though. It might have helped me figure out why my self-esteem was plummeting into my shoes. That was the whole problem, you know. It started as a chip, and turned into a chasm. And I kept chasing these guys that made me at least feel **wanted**, in some small way, because I felt so unwanted."

"Oh, Jesus, Sophia. And there I was calling you every name in the book, instead of trying to explain myself to you."

"Mom, I wasn't exactly receptive. Let's face it, it was a vicious circle."

"It was hard, for both of us, I think. Hey, I never said I was a perfect mother. I could have been better than I was, though. I never really knew how not having a father affected you, and since I **hated** your father at that point, I didn't handle it well at all."

"Actually, I think your divorce from Charlie affected me more than losing Dad, because I was too young when that happened. I knew Charlie wasn't my father, but I liked him--still do. But, since he's not my father, I never see him. He gets Tara and Eric, because they are his kids, and I understand that. But he always seemed to be a stabilizing influence. I guess I don't understand that one, because it always seemed that Charlie treated you well."

"He did. Unfortunately, there were a lot of other women he was treating just as well."

“Oh.”

“I forgave the first one. I even forgave the second one, against my better judgement. The third one was the last straw.”

“Oh, Mom, I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

“How could you? You were ten years old.”

“I wish I had known. I wouldn’t have held it against you, like I did. I thought he left because you were a shrew.”

Ellen had to laugh at that one. “Yeah I figured that’s what you thought. And that was just another chip in your self esteem, wasn’t it?”

“I guess it was.”

Ellen took a sip of tea, and thought. “Sophia, how can I help? How can I help you see how wonderful you could be?”

Sophia smiled, “Just keep telling me. I’m more receptive to stuff like that, now.” They both laughed. “I’d like to talk like this more, too.”

“Anytime.”

“And if you really want to bolster my self esteem, just be very, very nice to Warren.”

Ellen cracked up laughing. “Now, honey, it’s called **self** esteem, not Warren esteem. It’s got to come from within. You can’t get it from someone else.”

“I know. He doesn’t give it to me. He just makes it easier to find it within myself.”

“Listen, I have noticed a growing self-confidence in you, ever since the whole Scott thing. I take it you’ve been going out with Warren since then?”

“About a week after.”

“Right. So I’ve noticed the difference in you. I guess I’m just hoping and praying that it’s not superficial. I hope it’s not just Warren, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah. It’s within me. It really is. But I don’t think I would have found it within myself without help, does that make any sense? Warren isn’t inventing anything that isn’t there. He’s just shining a light on what **is** there. That light is crucial, however.”

“How’s Warren’s self-esteem?”

“If we’re not talking about romantic entanglements, it’s just where it should be. Romance is another story.” She smiled. “Although **that** might have taken a bit of a jump last night.”

“Unsure of himself?”

“Very.”

“How did he get the gumption to take you to bed last night, then?”

Sophia laughed. “He didn’t. That was all me.” She told her mother about the note and the baby-doll nightie.

Ellen cracked up. “Oh, that was priceless. And that sounds like a Jessica Reidel idea.”

“Doesn’t it, though?”

“So, you built up **his** self-esteem last night.”

Sophia thought about it. “Yeah, but it wasn’t **me**. It was **him**. His self-confidence was boosted by my reactions, but I was reacting to what **he** was doing. It was all him. Trust me, I wasn’t faking a thing. I was just reacting. Believe me, I didn’t almost shatter all the windows in my bedroom because I wanted to boost his self confidence, it was because he made me **scream**.”

“He made you scream?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m surprised the neighbors didn’t call.” Sophia paused. “And then, at the end, he made me cry.”

“Wow.”

“If he got a self esteem boost from that, he earned it. And, you know what? I think I have, too. Because he’s just reacting. I’m doing this. He’s just there, being supportive, loving me, telling me that I’m all right.”

“I don’t say this enough, Sophia, but you are more than all right.”

“Thanks, Mom.” She thought about it. “You know, not only did I set last night in motion--I’m the one that asked him to go out with me. I don’t think he would have ever done it.”

Ellen laughed. “I think you’re right. You **are** doing all this. If you had the gumption to ask him out, and then take him to bed, I think you’ll be just fine.”

“It’s strength. If he’s giving me anything, that’s what it is. He’s very strong. The whole Prep Boy Nerd façade obscures that, but he’s the strongest person I know.”

Sophia took a sip from her tea. "Thanks, Mom."

"For what?"

"For listening. For being understanding. I know that finding out your little baby is a raging sex kitten must be a little difficult."

Ellen laughed loudly. "I can think of worse things to be than a raging sex kitten. And I think I'm figuring out that you're a lot more than that, too. You're a pretty strong person yourself, you know."

"I'm learning."

"You're doing just fine." Ellen smiled. "Warren coming over tonight while I'm in work?"

Sophia smiled, blushing. "Uh-huh."

"Have fun."

"I don't think I'm going to get used to this."

"What? Your mother knowing that you're a raging sex kitten? You'll get over it." They both laughed.

Warren came over after supper. He was sitting next to Sophia on the couch, as Ellen was getting ready to leave for work. "You guys all set?"

"Sure thing, Mom."

"OK. I'm working until 2AM or so again, so the house is all yours. Try not to shatter any windows, and clean your own sheets this time, OK?" She walked out, as Sophia burst into laughter.

Warren looked at Sophia. "What was **that** all about?"

Sophia grinned at him. "She knows, Warren."

"WHAT? How?"

Sophia related the whole story, and her two conversations with her mother.

"Wow," said Warren when they were done. "And she doesn't mind?"

"No. Surprised me, I can tell you that. She **really** likes you, you know."

“I know. I’m glad.”

“I must admit I feel a little funny, doing it when my mother **knows** I’m going to be doing it and all.”

Warren looked at her. “You want to take it easy tonight?”

“Not on your fucking life.” She got up off the sofa, and grabbed Warren’s hand. “Come on, Romeo. Let’s go make some walls shake.”

Laughing, they headed up the stairs.

BRAVING THE ELEMENTS (Chapter 13)

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Sophie, happy birthday to yooooooooou!”

Sophia blew out the candles on her cake. Her mother had had a small gathering in the house, prior to Jessie’s big bash. Her brother and sister were there, of course, plus her stepfather. And Warren.

As they all devoured the cake, Sophia opened her presents. Her mother got her some nice clothes and her stepfather a gift certificate to the local CD store. Then Warren handed her a package.

“It’s kind of humorous, but you’ll love it. And this one there is no **way** I’d have you open at the party!”

Sophia tore open the paper. It was a very large, leather-bound book, very nice. She read: “The collected works of William Shakespeare. Oh, Warren, this is **great!** What a wonderful present. Thank you so much!”

Warren chuckled. “Hey, if I’m going to turn you into a Shakespeare addict, least I can do is finance it, right?”

“You got that right. Warren, this is the perfect present. Especially from you.”

“No, that was the second most perfect present.” He handed her a small box.

“Another?” She opened the package. It was a jewelry box, which she opened. And gasped.

Inside, was a gold pendant. On the pendant, hung a small gold heart. All around the outside of the heart were a series of small, perfect diamonds. Inscribed on the heart, in very small letters, it said “Love, Warren.” It was gorgeous.

“Oh, Warren, this is beautiful.”

“No more beautiful than you.”

“I think I’m going to cry.”

“’sokay. It’s real gold, it won’t rust.”

Sophia laughed and cried at the same time. “You goof! Put it on me?”

“Gladly”. Warren undid the clasp and placed it around her neck from the behind, and redid the clasp. “It looks perfect on you.”

Tara, her sister, had to come check it out, as did her mother. “Sophia, this is beautiful. Nice job, Warren.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Kovach.”

They walked out of the house, and headed to Jessie’s house for the party.

“So, you’re fifteen now. I’m officially dating an older woman,” Warren teased.

“And don’t you forget it.”

“Sweet Fifteen and never been.....no, you’ve been kissed. And never been.....no, you’ve been **that**, too.”

“Warren!”

“Sweet Fifteen and never been.....Soph, is there anything you **haven’t** done?”

Sophia’s eyes twinkled. “Anal.”

“Really.”

“Yeah.” She looked at him. “Hmmmmmm. I’ve always been curious, though.”

Warren laughed. “That, ruler of my heart, is a project for another evening. Now we have to go face the jackals.”

“Hmmmm. I’d rather go back home and have sex.”

“Sophie!”

“OK. Some other time.” She stopped. “What did you just call me?”

“When?”

“A minute ago, when you said it was a project for another evening.”

“Hmmm. Oh. Ruler of my heart, of course.”

“I like that.”

“Soph, you are. You are the ruler of my heart. You’ve got it hanging around your neck, don’t you?”

“Dammit, you’re going to make me cry again.”

“You’ll ruin your makeup.”

“You goof! Well, this is Jessie’s house. Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be, I suppose.”

They walked in the back door, into the kitchen.

“Well if it isn’t the birthday girl and her escort, Studley!”

Sophia laughed. “Hi, Jess.”

“Hi, Jess”, Warren chimed in. “Where can I put this?” He held out a bag.

“What’s in it?”

“My world famous chip dip.”

Jessie laughed. “Warren, you’re such a nerd.” She paused. “Is it good dip?”

Sophia interjected, “I can answer that. It’s fabulous. Be nice to him, I told him to make a batch.”

Jessie laughed, “Alrighty then. Put it on the table around the corner, there, Prep Boy.” She looked at Sophia. “What’s this?” She reached out and lifted the necklace. “Nice. B-day gift from Studley, there?” Sophia nodded. “How sickeningly sweet of him. “

Sophia laughed. “We the first ones here?”

“Pretty much. Oh, I have bad news. I think Alexandra is coming. I tried to make sure she didn’t hear about it, but I think she did. Oh, and John and Annie will definitely be here.”

“Oh that ought to be fun.”

“What ought to be fun?” asked Warren as he re-entered the kitchen.

“Nothing, dear heart. Just discussing some of the jackals I’ll have to fend off tonight.”

Warren smirked. “Did you grow your claws to slash ‘em, or did we leave that to Jess?”

“You watch your tongue, Prep Boy. I’ve been known to bite them off.” Jess interjected.

“Well, Jess, I’m taken, but I think I’ve got a friend that would enjoy that.”

“Really.”

“Yeah. He’d like your claws, too.”

“Oh, really. So, Warren, do **you** like claws?”

“I wouldn’t know. Sophie bites her fingernails.”

Jessie laughed. “You’re alright, for a preppy, Warren.”

“And you’re not bad for a she-devil, Jess.”

“You just remember that.”

“Ahem,” interjected Sophia. “Is the mutual admiration society for the Preppy and the She-Devil over yet?”

“Yeah, he’s all yours, chickie-babe.”

“Thanks.” Sophia said dryly.

“Beer’s over there. Coke is also over there, Warren, I know that’s what you drink. You need help with any.....problems....just holler. This is **your** birthday, Soph--anyone gives you serious shit, they are so out of here, got it?”

“Got it.”

They went out and grabbed the loveseat where Sophia usually held court during Jessie’s parties.

“So”, Warren asked, “What am I going to be up against?”

“Don’t worry, dear heart,” smiled Sophia. “There will be some people that give us shit. Now, there are some people who I don’t **care** if they give us shit or not. Some people I **do**. You’ll be able to tell the difference. Just go with the flow.”

“OK.”

Sophia popped open a beer. “It might go a bit easier if you grabbed one of these.”

“I am not particularly fond of the taste of beer. And, yes, I **have** had it. I’m not a goody-two-shoes completely. In fact, if Jess has any rum, I could be persuaded to pop some in my Coke.”

Sophia laughed. “Rum? Really? Next time Jess breezes by, I’ll ask her.”

“There she is.”

“Jess! You got any hard stuff?”

“A little. Right over there. You steppin’ up from beer?”

“Nah. Warren likes rum.”

“Prep Boy likes the hard stuff? Wonders never cease.....”

Sophia giggled. Warren just smirked and dumped some rum in his coke.

The party filled up quickly. A few people wandered over to Sophia, and wished her happy birthday. Nobody had yet taken too much notice of Warren.

“Hi, Sophia, Happy birthday.”

“Why, hello, Lisa.”

Lisa looked at Sophia, and then at Warren. “And what...is **this**?”

“This is my boyfriend, Warren. Warren, this is Lisa.” Sophia shot Warren a “trouble coming, watch out” look.

“Boyfriend? **That**?”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t know him. He doesn’t look like your type. Does he go to Oceanside?”

“St. Michael’s.”

“You are dating a preppy?” Lisa giggled. “Oh, wait till everyone gets a load of **this**. This is the funniest thing I’ve ever **seen**. Sophia Daniels is going out with a geek! And you used to think you were so cool, too. What a pity,” Lisa smirked.

“Ah, well, Lisa, you know how it is. There are more important things than being cool.”

“Like what?”

“Earth-shattering, mind-blowing sex, for one.”

Lisa looked at Warren with amazement. Warren just got a little grin on his face. “You’ve got to be joking,” Lisa said.

“No joke. He’s a stud.”

Lisa just walked away, shaking her head. Sophia and Warren looked at each other and cracked up.

“You are **shameless!**” Warren exclaimed.

“Yup. Hi, Karen.”

“Hey, Soph. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks. This is....” Karen interrupted her.

“Warren Kelleher? How you doin?”

“Karen Laskovich? Long time no see!”

“You two know each other?” Sophia asked.

“Went to grammar school together,” Karen smiled. “Warren got me through fifth-grade math almost singlehandedly. You’re about the last person I expected to see **here**, though. Did you switch from nerdiness to partying?”

“Nope, still a nerd.” Warren laughed. “Just a nerd that happens to be going out with Juliet, here.”

Karen blinked. “You’re going out with **Sophia**?”

“Yeah. For about a month now.”

Karen grabbed a chair across from them. “This is just about the last two people I **ever** expected to see hook up. No offense--Sophia, you know that I love you, and, Warren, you know I think you’re the salt of the earth. But, **together**? Wow.”

“You weren’t the only one surprised,” interjected Jessie, who was walking behind them.

“You just shut up or I’ll bite those fingernails off,” called Warren.

“Promises, promises,” Jess shouted back.

“Let’s face it, Soph, he’s not your typical guy. Heck, I’ve always liked Warren, but he’s not **my** typical guy, either,” Karen was saying.

“Yeah, well, my ‘typical guy’ has been treating me like shit for too long.”

“I heard about what happened with Scott. Was Warren the knight in shining armor that I heard about?”

“Yeah. We were just good friends, then. And then we were more than friends.”

“Good for you. It’s working?”

“So far so good.”

“Good for **both** of you, then. Nice to see you again, Warren. I’ll see you later.”

Sophia looked at Warren. “That one was better.”

“Yeah, well, Karen always was good people. Even when I knew her, she was a bit of a hell-raiser, but very non-judgmental. She’d talk to me when lots of people wouldn’t.”

“I like Karen, always have. But here comes a crucial one.” Warren looked up to see a guy approaching them.

“Sophie-dophie!” Sophia stood up and gave the guy a big hug. “Happy birthday, little one. Having a good one?”

“So far, so good. How are you, Nickie?”

“Super and duper, all at once.” Sophia sat down back on the loveseat. Nick grabbed the chair. “How you doin’? Is the asshole still locked up?”

“Last I heard.”

“Good. He ever gets out, I kill him. I wish I had been there when he pulled this shit. Thank God for the guy who **was** there, I heard you had someone who took some punches for you.”

“Yeah. Speaking of which, this is Warren. Warren, this is Nick, one of my best friends in the world.”

"Nice to meet you," Nick said. "Hey, I know this guy. Didn't you go to East Elementary?"

"Yeah."

"I was a year ahead of you, I think."

"Yeah, you were." Warren had a disturbed look on his face.

"Warren, something wrong?" Sophia asked.

"No, everything's fine. I'm going to grab another coke. Want a beer?"

"Yeah, thanks." Warren got up. Sophia watched him go. "I wonder what got into him?"

"I think I know," Nick said. "Soph, I'm not always a nice guy, you know that. I can be brutal to people."

"Only those that deserve it."

"No, not always. Sometimes to people who are weak, or who are easy to bully. I've gotten better--and I've **never** done that to a girl or anything--but in grammar school, I hung around with a couple of bullies, and got carried away a few times." Nick took a deep breath. "And your friend there was one of the victims, I'm pretty sure. Warren, you said?"

"Yeah. Warren Kelleher."

"Yup. It was him. He recognized me right off, I could tell."

"Oh, shit. And I introduced you as one of my best friends. After what he did for me concerning Scott, he must be **furious** that I'm calling someone who beat him up one of my best friends."

"Sophia, I'm sorry. Wait a minute. **He's** the one who took the punches from Scott?"

"Yeah."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Believe it, Nick. He's got a lot more guts than you realize."

"Anyone who takes a bullet for a woman is all right in my book. I have to see what I can do to fix this when he comes back. Any friend of yours is a friend of mine--shit, I never even **knew** the guy, he was just an easy target."

"We do need to fix this. Nick, you **are** one of my best friends, despite your faults," she smiled at him, "and Warren is my boyfriend."

“BOYFRIEND? Shit, I thought you guys were just friends. You’re dating HIM?”

Sophia giggled. “For about a month now. You jealous?” she teased.

“Of course not. We’ve never had that type of relationship, and, besides, I have Missy. But you, and **him**? I mean, what’s the attraction, besides gratitude?”

“If it were just gratitude, we’d still be only just friends.”

“OK, so why **are** you going out with him? I just don’t see it. He’s so different than the guys you used to be attracted to.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t fucking beat me up, for one.”

“OK, I suppose I deserved that.”

“Nick, he’s brilliant. He’s funny--keeps me in stitches most of the time we are together--he’s fun to be with. Believe it or not, we like a lot of the same things. He’s a skater, too--in fact he got me back on the ice, and we’re going to try dancing together. He likes the Beatles. He’s got me reading again. He’s delightfully endearing. He’s sweet, caring, and treats me like an absolute princess. He’s got me believing in myself again, I didn’t think that was even possible.”

“Wow.” Nick looked at her and saw the necklace. “Birthday present, from him?”

“Yeah.” She showed it to him. “He gave this to me because he says I am the ruler of his heart.”

“Sophia, you are glowing. You’re really in love with this guy, aren’t you? I **know** it can’t be the sex, not with him,” Nick added dryly.

Sophia punched him playfully on the arm. “First of all, yes I am completely in love with him. I love him more than I ever thought I could love another person. He loves me just as much. And, for your information, the sex is mind-blowing.”

“You **are** kidding.”

“I would never kid about something like that, not with you. I’ve shared my sexual encounters with you since I began having them. You always told me that the guys I was going to bed with were creeps, that a real man would make me....you know.....feel it. Well, Nick, you were right. Warren is a real man, a thousandfold.”

“Wow. I think I’ve got some serious reassessing to do. And some serious fence mending. Where is he?”

“Over there. Don’t look. He’s lurking, kind of watching us. I think he’s waiting for you to leave.”

“Damn. I don’t want this hanging over your head, Soph. I care about you too much for that.”

“Let me take care of it.” She raised her voice. “Hey, PREP BOY, where the hell is my BEER?????”

The whole room cracked up. Even Warren forgot his trepidation about Nick, and hurried back to the love seat. “Sorry, ma’am, here you go, ma’am” he said in mock submission as he sat back next to her and handed her the beer.

“There’s a good boy. You can bow and scrape later, in bed.” Warren blushed. “Oh, you are **too** damn yummy when you do that!” Warren blushed harder. “I may have to attack you right here.”

“Oh, baby,” Warren giggled. He put his arm around her and gave her a big kiss.

Nick just laughed. Warren abruptly realized that Nick was still there, and dropped his hand, and got a blank look on his face. Sophia grabbed his hand and put it in hers, and squeezed.

“Nick was telling me about your....history.”

“Oh.”

“Listen, Warren.” Nick began. “I’ve done some things I’m not proud of. Bullying people in elementary school is one of them.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, really. I had some problems back then. Hopefully I’ve worked them out. I’m not proud of my part in what was done to you back then.” Nick took a deep breath. “I suppose I’ve been quick to categorize people. And now it’s coming back to haunt me. Because I see a guy that, a few years ago, I wrote off as a loser--a wimp--a pussy--I see this guy here, and he’s making my surrogate little sister light up like a Christmas tree. And I know that this same so-called wimp took a beating on behalf of the same little sister not too long ago. I like to think I’ve gotten better at judging people, and I certainly hope so, because I so obviously misjudged you back at East. Anyone who can make Sophia glow like that is someone that I’d like to get to know better. Sophia’s very important to me. I haven’t seen her smile like this in a long time.” He took another deep breath. “So, Warren, whatever went on back then, whatever I did--I am truly sorry.”

Nick held out his hand.

Warren thought for a second. And then took it, and they shook.

BRAVING THE ELEMENTS 2 (Chapter 14)

Things got a little better after that. Nick pulled up a chair, and was quickly joined by his girlfriend Missy, who Warren remembered from East like he remembered Karen, a nice girl who was always friendly to him.

Karen joined them, as did Jessie when she wasn't being, as she put it, "the Royal Hostess." Nick realized Warren **was** a nice guy, and actually knew as much as Nick did about baseball, something Nick would have never believed. A joint came passed around, and nobody gave Warren a hard time when he refused it. Sophia smiled, and refused it, too. Some people were surprised to see Sophia there with Warren--she was lying with her head on his lap, so there was no mistaking it--but didn't give them any shit. Not with Nick--not to mention Jessie--glaring at them to make sure they didn't.

But the night wasn't over yet. Alexandra walked in.

Ignoring the glares from Nick and Jessie, she marched right up to Sophia and looked down at her. "Happy birthday, Sophia. Here's a birthday present I **know** you'll enjoy. Scott's out of jail."

Sophia shot Jessie and Nick an "I'll handle this" look, then said to Alexandra, "Oh, is he, really?"

"Yeah. A bunch of us raised his bail money. I picked him up earlier today. Then we went to my house and had **great** sex."

"That would be a first."

"Oh, really? I never heard you complain when **you** were with him."

"That's because I was stupid."

Alexandra just laughed. "Sure you were. No, Sophia, you blew it with him. And now you're trying to cover with this..." she pointed at Warren..."this ridiculous wimp here."

"Yup, I'm so upset."

"You should be. Scott is the best lover ever."

"Sure he is. If you prefer bruises over orgasms, that is." Sophia said. Jessie sniggered.

"Oh, he would never do such a thing like that to **me**."

Sophia laughed. “Alexandra, you might be a conniving, contemptible bitch, but, still, I hope you never find out the hard way what Scott is **really** like.”

“He’s not like that, at all--now that he’s going out with someone who really appreciates him. I wish you could see how he treats me. I wanted him to come here--to show you how happy we are--but he didn’t want to rub your face in it **that** badly.” That made Sophia sit up straight in the seat, trying to reel in her mounting fury.

“Oh, fuck that, Alexandra. He didn’t come because I have a fucking restraining order on him. He can’t come within a hundred feet of me, and, since everyone here knew this was a birthday party for **me**, if he got within shouting distance of the driveway he’d be back in jail.”

Alexandra looked surprised at that. Sophia went on, “Let’s not forget, dear Alexandra, that he’s only out on bail. He’s still got a trial. He’s still accused of a whole laundry list of stuff. So, hopefully, he will be back behind bars some day very soon. So, if I were you, I’d go enjoy as much of that ‘fantastic loving’ of his as you can get before the trial. Shit, Alex, maybe, if you’re really lucky, that asshole will give **you** a separated shoulder and four broken ribs like he did me!” Warren rubbed her back, and she relaxed a little bit.

Alexandra looked confused. “He told me that he was in jail for breaking **Wimpy’s** ribs! I thought all he did to you was hit you in the face once.”

“Oh, look! He’s lying to you already! No, Alex, he gave Warren a black eye. The broken ribs, the separated shoulder, the enormous cut in my mouth--before that, the black eye and the almost-broken cheekbone--that was all me. Oh, yes, I am **so** regretful that Scott is out of my life. I really miss being a fucking punching bag.”

Alexandra was dumbstruck. Warren said, quietly, “Sophia’s upset. This is her birthday. I think you should leave now.” She did.

The group got quiet for a minute, as Sophia breathed heavy, on the verge of tears. Warren pulled her in close, rubbing her back. “Relax. It’s over. She’s gone.”

“Shit, he’s out of jail.”

“He comes near you, I swear to God, I’ll kill him.”

“I’ve got a really sharp pocketknife,” Nick added helpfully, which broke the tension somewhat.

“Cool.” Warren smiled. “Of course, I’d probably be too much of a Preppy to use the thing, so you can play backup, Nick.”

“Gladly.”

Sophia stood up. “I need to go out. I need a cig. Jessie, come too?”

“Sure.”

“Me, too,” added Karen.

“You want my muscle out there covering your back?” Warren asked.

Sophia laughed, “No, dear heart. If anything happens, I’ll scream, and you and Nickie can race to see who can come to my rescue first.” Nick and Warren both laughed.

“Meanwhile, Nick, Missy, keep an eye on Romeo, here, would you?”

“Surrre.”

The next hour or so was quiet. Nick and the rest had wandered off to socialize, and Sophia and Warren were cuddling on the loveseat.

“Hold my place, Romeo, got to go pee.”

“OK.”

Warren sat alone, and looked up to see a girl and two guys approaching him. Oh shit, he thought to himself, I didn’t know **they** were part of this crowd. He hated Anne and John Vassar. They had spent most of grammar school torturing him, especially John, who was two years older. Anne was his age.

“Oh, Jesus Christ. Warren Kelleher? What the fuck are **you** doing here?” Anne said.

“Hey, John, look! It’s Warren Kelleher!”

“Warren Kelleher? John turned around. With him was his best friend Rob James, another real nice guy. “Wimp-man Kelleher! Who let **you** in here?”

“Jessie did, seeing as it’s her party.”

“Oh, Goody! The entertainment! Jessie let you in so the rest of us could play with you, eh?” John sat next to Warren. “This is gonna be **fun**.”

“Umm...that seat is taken.”

“Yeah. By me. Now. You got a problem with that?”

“Yes.” Warren refused to be intimidated. “And the regular occupant of the seat will **definitely** have a problem with it.”

Karen was watching out of the corner of her eye. She went and found Jessie. “Jess, we’ve got trouble. Where’s Sophie?”

“On the loveseat, with lover-boy.” Jessie sniggered.

“No, she’s not. And Lover Boy is currently being accosted by the ever-charming John Vassar, his equally charming sister, and that slug he calls a best friend.”

“Shit. Where’s Nickie? Fuck that, he went to the store. Damn. You’re right, we need Soph. You check the bathroom, I’ll see if she’s outside smoking a butt.”

“Got it.”

“Now, **who** would have a problem with me taking this seat for myself? Heck, I just want to spend some time with my **good friend** Wimp-man.” John was saying. “Who would want to sit next to you so badly anyway?” Anne and Rob laughed.

“My girlfriend,” Warren said.

“Girlfriend?” All three lasted uproariously. “Don’t you mean blow up rubber doll? Yeah, like a wimp-man like you actually has a **girlfriend**.”

Karen was knocking on the bathroom door. “Soph, you in there?”

“Yeah, Karen. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Shake a tail feather. We got a problem.”

“Alexandra again?”

“No. Worse. Mister and Miss Wonderful, John and Anne Vassar. And they have found Warren.”

“Shit.” Sophia finished in record time, flew out of the bathroom with a “Thanks, Karen” and ran down the stairs.

“Blow up rubber doll, that was a good one,” Anne said.

“Wasn’t it.” John said. “Now, Warren, ol’ pal, ol’ buddy, I don’t think that a piece of plastic will fight too hard over this seat, do you?”

Warren smirked. “I don’t know if she’ll appreciate being called a piece of plastic, that’s for sure.”

“Oh, come on, Warren.” John said. “Nice try, but you and I both know that you’ve got no girlfriend, you just want me to get out of the seat. No Kewpie Doll. Nope, you’re here, and I’m going to keep you company **all night**.”

“Hey, Sophia!” Anne saw her approaching from behind. “Happy Birthday!”

“Soph!” John saw her come around the front of the loveseat. “Happy B-day, kid. Having a good one?”

“Yes I am, John. Anne, Rob. I’m having a great birthday. Now, John, you wanna get out of my seat?”

“Huh? What?”

“My seat. You’re in my seat, John.” John stood up, unsure what was going on. Sophia sat down, then spread out, her feet hanging off the edge, her head in Warren’s lap. “Aah, that’s much better.”

John looked at Anne. “What the **fuck** is going on here?”

Warren just grinned. “Rubber inflatable doll,” he said, pointing at Sophia.

“What?” Sophia asked.

“I’ll explain later.” Warren said. Then he looked up, “I **told** you my girlfriend was in this seat.”

“Wait just a minute,” John sputtered. “Sophia Daniels, I’ve known you since you were born.”

Warren looked at her. “Our mothers are best friends,” Sophia explained.

John continued, “You can **not** expect me to believe that you are actually going out with Wimp-man Kelleher!”

“Believe it. And his name is Warren. Or Romeo, whichever.” Warren laughed. Sophia went on. “So you can stop calling the love of my life nasty names right now, you hear me, John Vassar?”

John just stared. Anne took a shot. “Sophia, have you taken leave of your senses?”

“No. Why?”

“How can you possibly go out with **him**? I mean, of all people. Consider your rep, for Chrissakes! What’s gonna happen when the whole gang finds out you’re going out with a nerd?”

“Well, the whole gang pretty much knows, now, since you guys got here late. And, it’s funny, you all didn’t seem too fucking concerned when I was going out with a guy who everyone thought was cool and a good partier and not a nerd--all the while he was fucking beating me up!”

Anne looked down, and then looked guiltily at John. John looked at Sophia and said, "Soph, we didn't know about that. None of us did."

"I know. I didn't at first. My point is, I'm done with judging people by how good of a partier they are, or how cool the gang thinks they are, or how macho they seem. I'm done with it. You guys are supposed to be my friends. You didn't know about Scott, true, but if you had known I'd have expected you to act like my friends."

"We would have." Anne said. John and Rob nodded agreement.

"Right. So act like my friends now. This guy whose lap I am lying on is the most wonderful guy in the world. Don't judge a book by its cover. He treats me like gold, and I am in love. Respect that, or leave me--and **him**--alone."

John thought for a minute. Then he looked down at Sophia.

"You happy, Soph?"

"Immensely."

"Really?"

Sophia looked John in the eye. "Happier than I have been in a long time. Really, John. This is one special guy. "

John took a deep breath. He looked at Sophia, then looked at Warren. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Who the fuck am I to argue with that?" He gave Sophia a lopsided grin, which she returned, and said "Happy Birthday, Sophia." Then he turned to Anne and Rob. "Let's go find the damn beer!"

"It's over there," Warren pointed helpfully.

John just looked at him. Sophia cracked up, "He's been fetching mine for me all night."

Even Anne had to laugh at that. "Well, at the very least, you've got him well trained."

"You betcha," Sophia agreed happily. The threesome walked away, heading for the beer, and Sophia exhaled. "I'm sorry, Warren."

"Shit, I think half of your old friends used to torture me at one point."

"Oh, John and Anne are complete assholes--to **most** people. I'm almost family, though. And when I talk, John Vassar listens--because he knows if he doesn't I tell his mother." They both laughed.

The rest of the party proceeded nicely.

WHISPERS (Chapter 15)

Sophia sat at a table in the cafeteria at Oceanview High, tearing into a salad. She usually ate with Jessie, but Jess had something to do today and was going to be late, so Soph was alone. That was OK.

Behind her Maureen Kenney was sitting. She was quickly joined by two of her best friends, Cheryl Wheeler and Christine Vlora.

“Hey, look,” said Cheryl. “That slut Sophia Daniels is sitting behind us.”

“Yeah, and she’s all alone,” interjected Christine. “She must be in between boyfriends.” Christine and Cheryl sniggered.

“Shh! Keep your damn voice down,” demanded Mo.

“What’s gotten into you, Maureen?” asked Cheryl.

“Because I have to be nice to Sophia Daniels, now, or I’ll hurt someone that I care about a lot.”

“What is going on, Mo?” asked Christine.

“The slut behind you is now, God help me, my best friend’s fucking girlfriend.”

“Huh?” Chris and Cheryl looked at each other. Then Cheryl realized “WARREN?”

“Yup.”

“Warren Kelleher is going out with SOPHIA DANIELS?”

“Believe it or not, it’s true.”

“What has gotten into **him**?” asked Christine.

“He’s getting laid, no doubt,” smirked Cheryl. “What I can’t figure out is what’s in it for **her**? I mean, Warren’s a wimp. He’s not the usual type of burnout asshole she goes out with.”

“Ah, she probably just wanted to bag a virgin,” said Christine.

“Which Warren most definitely **is**, or was--I don’t know for sure that he’s slept with her,” admitted Mo.

“I have to say, I’m just worried that that little viper is going to chew Warren up and spit him out. “ Mo sighed. “Y’know, I’ve never felt that way about Warren, but if I knew he was going to hook up with someone like **her**, I would have asked him out myself, just to save him from it.”

“Ah, nothing you can do about it now,” pointed out Cheryl

“True,” agreed Mo. “I just hope that little slut doesn’t leave my best friend in **too** many pieces when she’s done with him. Warren’s experience with girls is just about nil. If she just fucks him and moves on to the next victim, he’s going to be devastated. He thinks he’s in **love**.”

“With **her**?” laughed Christine. “Poor boy, he’s in deep. Girls like her aren’t there to fall in **love** with, they are there to sleep with. Warren needs a slap!”

They left the table, still laughing over Christine’s joke. They didn’t look back at Sophia.

If they had, they would have seen her crying. She had heard every word.

Sophia talked with Warren that night, but didn’t say a word about what she had overheard. She thought about it--knowing Warren would be furious, but Mo was his friend. Sophia didn’t want to come between that. Warren had acted like a true friend in allowing things with Nickie to be sorted out--the least she could do is do the same with him where Mo was concerned. No, she would try to handle this one herself.

She made sure she got to the cafeteria early, got her lunch, chose an outdoor table, out of the way, and then went to try to intercept Mo before she could be joined by her friends.

She grabbed her coming out of the lunch line. “Maureen?” Mo looked up, and frowned. “I’m Sophia Daniels.”

“I know who you are.”

“I’d like to have a talk with you, if you’re willing.”

Mo laughed. “What, on earth, could we possibly have to talk about?”

“Warren.”

“I do **not** need **you** to talk with me about my **best friend**.”

“I know. But **I** need to talk to **you** about him.”

Mo sighed. “All right, if I must.” Sophia led Mo to the table she had picked. Mo sat down, looked at Sophia, and said, impatiently, “Well?”

Sophia took a deep breath. “Firstly, I heard you talking about me with your two friends yesterday. I heard every word.” Mo looked up, startled. “Don’t worry, I haven’t said a word to Warren. And I won’t.”

Mo regained her composure. “You weren’t meant to hear that, but I really don’t care what you do or don’t tell Warren about it.”

“I care. Look, Warren thinks the world of you. He’s told me that. He calls you his surrogate sister.”

“True. We’re **very** close, you know.”

Sophia took another breath. “Have you told him what you think of me?”

Mo blinked. “Not quite in the words I used yesterday, no. But I have voiced my displeasure. He knows I think he’s absolutely nuts.”

“OK.”

“Of course, he won’t listen to a fucking word I say.” Mo was starting to get worked up. “You’ve got him so hoodwinked he thinks he’s in love with you.”

“He is.”

“Oh really.”

“Yeah, he really is in love with me.” Sophia got a little lopsided smile. “Almost as much as I’m in love with him.”

Mo couldn’t believe her ears. “Oh, don’t give me that shit! You? In love with Warren? Get real!”

“What, you think it’s impossible for someone to fall in love with Warren?”

“No, Godammit, and you know that’s not what I meant. I mean **you**. You? Fall in love with someone? No fucking way. You’re incapable of truly loving somebody, especially somebody as sweet and kind and generous as Warren. So go back to sleeping with every roughhouse burnout loser you can find, and leave my best friend alone!”

Sophia looked down. She didn’t want to cry, dammit. She did **not** want to cry. Finally, she said softly, without looking up: “I know I have a reputation. I know what it is. And at least part of it is probably deserved. I’m not going to deny that. But I’m done with it. I

can't live like that anymore. I have had enough of roughhouse burnout losers. And if we were having this conversation six months ago, you'd most likely be correct--that **I was** incapable of truly loving someone." She looked up, her eyes moist. "Until Warren showed me how."

Mo blinked. Sophia went on. "I really do love him, you know. I fell for him **so** hard it still hurts." Even Mo had to grin a little at that. "I'm not using him. I'm not going to chew him up and spit him out. I'd rather slit my wrists than **ever** hurt him." Now the tears were readily apparent. Sophia paused and sniffled, trying to control herself. Mo didn't know what to say.

"Look," Sophia went on, calmed down a bit. "I'm not asking you to open your arms and start hanging around with me." Mo smirked. "All I'm asking is that you give me a chance. Give us--Warren and me--a chance. The absolute **last** thing I want is to come between Warren and someone who is as important to him as you are. I can't change my past, and there's no point in apologizing for it or trying to explain it. But Warren knows, and understands. Please, please believe me--he knew what he was getting into. He knows what I'm like **now**, and he knows that we really do love each other."

Sophia stood up and gathered up the remnants of her lunch. "For Warren's sake. If it were just me, I wouldn't care. But I don't want Warren hurt. Any more than you do."

Sophia walked away. Mo had a lot to think about.

"So, you're having the first outside bash this Saturday?" Warren was on the phone with Mo

"Yup. And they're calling for good weather."

"The whole crew gonna be there?"

"Looks like it. Crash and Ally coming?"

"I think so. I'll have to make sure, though."

"Good. Oh, and Warren? Bring Sophia."

Warren paused. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Mo smiled. "After all, she **is** your girlfriend, isn't she?"

"Thanks, Mo."

CONFESSION (Chapter 16)

“Warren, heads up!”

Warren took the pass, looked up, and went over his opponent to put the ball in the hoop.

“Nice pass, Rick.”

“Of course.”

The party at the Kenney’s was just getting started, and a group of them had taken over the basketball court for a little three-on-three. Warren was teamed up with Rick Kenney and their neighbor Jack Houle, while the opposing threesome were the brothers Kittredge, Matt and Kevin, and Rick Kenney’s best friend, Darren Volauskas.

Mo was holding court at the picnic table with Cheryl and Christine. Mo and Rick’s sister, Tina, was there with her best friend Kate Rinelli. Lisa Nevin, who lived next door to Warren, was sitting in a lounge chatting with Len Gallagher, who lived next door to the Kenney’s. More people were on their way.

Matt lobbed a pass to Darren. He went up for a shot, and Warren swatted it away. Rick corralled it.

“Damn,” said Darren. “Since when did you become a shot blocker?”

“Just lucky, I guess,” grinned Warren.

Rick brought the ball back in—they were playing half-court—and passed it into Warren. Warren was covered by Darren, so he made a nifty bounce-pass to Jack, who laid the ball in.

Just then, the gate to the yard opened, and in entered.....”CRASH!” as everyone yelled it at once.

He was accompanied by Alison.

“Damn, I feel like Norm on Cheers,” Crash grinned. “Oh, look, HOOPS!”

“Go in for me,” Warren offered. “I need a breather.”

Warren went over to the picnic table, where Alison was saying hello to everyone. “Yo, Ally, what’s up?” greeted Warren as he sat next to her.

“Hiya, Studley.” Alison teased. “How’s the love life?”

“Couldn’t be better.”

“Yeah, if you like sluts,” Cheryl whispered. Warren heard her but ignored it.

“I heard,” Alison continued. “I’m glad. You happy?”

“Delirious.”

“Good. She coming here tonight?”

“Yup. Should be here any minute.”

“WHAT?” Cheryl was incredulous. “Sophia Daniels is coming **here**?”

“I told Warren to invite her,” Mo said quietly.

“WHAT? Mo, you are nuts.” Cheryl was beside herself. “You’re letting **her** in your **yard**?”

“Yeah, well, she lets you in, so obviously the standards aren’t all that high,” quipped Warren.

“Shut up. Mo, **what** were you **thinking**?”

“She’s Warren’s girlfriend. Warren is my friend. Everybody is always welcome to bring friends, and **especially** boyfriends or girlfriends to my parties. You know that.”

“Oh, yeah?” Christine interjected. “You weren’t all that open-minded about the little slut when we were talking about her at lunch the other day.”

“What?” asked Warren.

Mo looked embarrassed. “Yes, Warren, I confess. We were discussing your girlfriend at lunch the other day, and I said some things that weren’t very nice. We all did.” Mo looked at Cheryl and Christine. “I found out later that she heard every word.”

“Dammit, Mo!” exclaimed Warren.

“I know, I know. Sorry, Warren, but she **does** have a reputation, and it’s not a good one.”

“I would think that a friend of mine, which you are supposed to be, would cut my girlfriend a bit of slack, reputation be damned.”

“That’s what she said. Although she was nicer about it.” Mo smiled. “She grabbed me at lunch the next day. Told me that she really loved you, that I shouldn’t be worried, and that she’s not using you.”

“She’s not.”

“OK. And she was right—she’s **your** girlfriend, you are one of my best friends, I **should** cut you guys some slack. That’s why I told you to invite her. It was a nice conversation. I may have misjudged her—I’m willing to find out.”

“Thanks, Mo,” Warren said.

“Oh, yeah, **thanks** a whole hell of a fucking lot, Mo.” Christine interjected.

“My party. My invites,” said Mo quietly.

Meanwhile, a car had pulled up out front. Sophia got out and looked around hesitantly. A woman who was out getting something out of the car saw her.

“Can I help you, dear?”

“Is this the Kenney residence?”

“Yes it is. I’m Sharon Kenney. Can I help you?”

“Hi. I’m Sophia Daniels. I was looking for Warren Kelleher.”

Mrs. Kenney smiled. “Sure, dear, follow me. I’ll show you where they are. Are you a friend of Warren’s?”

Sophia smiled. “His girlfriend, actually.”

Mrs. Kenney smiled in surprise. “Really? I didn’t know Warren had a girlfriend. That’s wonderful, he’s **such** a nice guy.”

“He certainly is.”

Mrs. Kenney led Sophia into the yard, and over to the picnic table.

“Hey, look, Juliet found the place!” Warren exclaimed.

“I sure did, Romeo,” Sophia laughed. They shared a kiss. “Hi, Maureen.” Sophia said.

“Romeo? Juliet? I think I’m gonna be sick,” Cheryl whispered to Chris.

“Hi, Sophia,” smiled Mo. “I’m glad you came.”

“Hey, Ally!” Sophia exclaimed. “Where’s Crash?” Ally laughed and pointed towards the basketball court.

“Hiya, Crash!” Sophia shouted.

“Hey, gorgeous, where you been all my life?” shouted Crash. Sophia just giggled, while both Ally and Warren mock-glared at Crash, who faked an innocent look.

“Whozzat?” asked Rick. “I thought Ally was your girlfriend?”

Crash laughed. “I’m just kidding. Ally **is** my girlfriend. **That** stunning creature is Sophia —Warren’s girlfriend.”

“You’re kidding,” said Jack.

“Nope.”

The basketball game came to a halt, as the guys looked at Sophia. “Hey, Warren!” Matt shouted. “You didn’t tell us your girlfriend was a complete, total, knockout!”

Warren laughed, as Sophia blushed. “Now you know.”

“You’re a lucky guy,” shouted Jack. Sophia just blushed even deeper, as Chris whispered to Cheryl, “Just wait, Jack, you could get lucky with her, too.”

“Why aren’t you playing?” Sophia asked Warren.

“I was. Then Crash came in, and I needed to take a breather. Now if I go in, the sides will be unequal.”

“Let’s both go in.”

“You play?”

“Used to. I was always pretty good.”

“Let’s go.” They joined in, Warren with Rick’s team like he was before and Sophia with the other team, over the protests of those guys. “How could can she be? She’s a girl!” They quickly found out that she wasn’t too bad at all. She could shoot, and at one point she picked Crash’s pocket, turned around, and fired in a three-pointer.

“Jesus Christ, getting my pocket picked by a **girl**.”

"Serves you guys right. How good can she be, she's a girl, my ass." Sophia teased

“Just tickle her next time.” Warren advised.

“Yeah, right. You’d kill me. Ally would **really** kill me.”

Warren laughed. “Too true.”

Sophia had the ball, and tried to go up for a lay-up, but Warren was guarding the basket. He tried to hold his ground as Sophia slammed into him, but he went down in a heap, with Sophia on top of him. Sophia looked at him, and, instead of getting off of him, snuggled into his chest.

Crash cracked up. “You guys all right?”

“Yeah,” Warren said, while Sophia laughed.

“OK!” said Rick, as he stood over them, making some sort of mock-referee motions with his hands. “That’ll be a technical foul for MOLESTATION! Two shots for the lucky guy on the bottom of the pile.” Everybody cracked up at that.

The girls at the picnic table were watching this. “Jesus, how disgusting,” Cheryl was saying. Christine nodded agreement. “Why doesn’t the little slut just boink him right there on the court?”

Ally overheard this one. “Y’know what?” she said. “I don’t usually say anything out of respect to Mo, but, Cheryl, you’ve always been a nasty little shrew.”

“Who cares what you think?”

“You don’t care what anybody thinks, except your robotic little buddy over there,” Ally spat out disgustedly, pointing at Christine. “You don’t care about Warren. You don’t care that Mo and Warren are friends, and that Warren and Sophia truly love each other, and that Mo—since she’s Warren’s friend—is trying to make this whole thing easier for them. You don’t care about any of that. All you care about is how many nasty digs you can get in. And you’re supposed to be friends with Mo, and you don’t care about what an uncomfortable position you’re putting Mo in—Mo’s too damn nice to say anything, but it’s certainly plain to **me** that you’ve put her between a rock and a hard place.”

“Yeah, well, Mo knew how we felt about that slut when she invited her here.”

“Maybe,” Mo finally spoke up, “but I mistakenly thought you’d have a **little** class about it.”

Cheryl sputtered, and started to say something, but the basketball game was breaking up, and the players, including Warren and Sophia, were making their way back to the picnic table.

“Whew!” Sophia exclaimed. Warren handed her a Coke. “Thanks, dear heart. I needed this.” She took a sip. “Oy. I can’t remember the last time I worked up such a sweat.”

Warren got a gleam in his eye. “This morning, with me.”

“Oh yeah!”

“That’s disgusting! Do we have to hear the details of your little sex life?” Cheryl spat out.

Sophia cracked up. Warren just looked at her blankly, and said, “Actually, I was talking about ice skating.”

Cheryl stared blankly. “What?”

“Ice skating. We’re skating together, and we did so this morning. Sophia used to be an ice dancer, and since I was always a singles skater with crummy jumps, she persuaded me to take up ice dance, and to take it up with her. And we were working hard today, and worked up a sweat.”

“Yeah,” Sophia agreed, “but it’s a lot easier to make that sweat go away when you’re working in a cold ice rink.”

Mo smiled at them. “So you guys are skating together? That’s really cool.”

Sophia smiled back. “Yeah, I really missed it. I hadn’t skated in a couple years. Luckily, I didn’t forget much. We’re going to use the next year to train and stuff, and, a year from September, we’re planning on competing, see how we do.”

“Excellent!” added Ally.

“We gonna see you in the Olympics some day?” asked Crash.

Warren laughed. “Well, anything’s possible, but most skaters that get **that** far train a hell of a lot more than we have the time to do. Considering we just started skating together, however, it’s gone swimmingly well.”

“How cozy,” spat out Cheryl. “How positively cozy. So Sophia has limited getting her body all sweaty to the confines of ice rinks?”

Sophia just laughed at her. “Not hardly. There’s basketball courts, too.” She smiled at Warren. “And a few other places I can think of.”

“I thought I said we didn’t need to hear details about your sex life, slut.” Cheryl said.

Sophia stopped laughing, and looked down. Ally looked like she was going to slap Cheryl, but Warren took over: “Geez, Cheryl, I think we **should** give you all the details. You could take notes. And then you’d have a reference, just for the odd chance that someday you might find a guy stupid and or desperate enough to give **you** a sex life that doesn’t involve your right hand and a cucumber!”

Mo got all wide-eyed, and said, “Warren!” but there was a slight smile on her lips. Crash and Ally fell on the floor laughing, as Sophia looked at Warren with a huge smile. Cheryl was, of course, indignant. “I don’t have to sit here and take this from you!”

“Good,” Warren said. “Don’t sit there. Scram. Good bye. Do Svidanya. Don’t let the fucking door hit you in the ass on the way out. On second thought, **do** let the fucking door hit you in the ass on the way out.”

Cheryl sat up straight. “You cannot tell me to leave. I am Mo’s friend. I was invited here.”

“Yup. I was, too. And so was **Sophia**, who has sat there and taken your abuse—and we’ve heard every word of it—and not said a thing. And she wouldn’t, out of respect for Mo. Something you apparently have none of. Come on, Soph, let’s leave these two hyenas to their cages.” They got up off the picnic table and wandered over to the chairs on the grass, finding Lisa, Len, Tina, and Kate holding court. There were a few chairs left, but Sophia and Warren grabbed a seat on the grass. Crash, Ally, and most of the crew from the basketball game joined them. Cheryl and Chris were left alone at the picnic table, along with Mo, who really was caught between a rock and a hard place.

“Do you **believe** the nerve of him?” Cheryl said.

“Yeah, I believe it,” interjected Mo. “You certainly deserved it.”

“What?”

“Come on, Cheryl. You know you did.”

“Some friend **you** are!”

“After that little display, Cheryl, I could say the same for you.” Mo made a decision. She got off the picnic table and started heading towards the chairs. “And, by the way, the cucumber line was dead-on.” And off she went, leaving Cheryl and Christine alone and indignant.

The gate opened. “OK, Dah-lings, I’m here—the party can now begin.” It was Siobhan Bates, the one of Maureen’s school friends that Warren actually liked. She made her way over to the knot of people on the grass.

She was exchanging greetings, blowing kisses in her flamboyant way, when she got to Sophia.

“Sophia Daniels? Oceanview High’s favorite party favor? What on earth are **you** doing here?”

Sophia’s heart sank. Not again, she thought. But Warren spoke up, “Be nice, Siobhan, that’s my girlfriend you’re talking about.”

“Huh? WHAT?”

“Yup,” interjected Mo. “I told Warren to invite her. They’ve been going out for a couple months now.”

“Oh,” said Siobhan. “Well, that’s different. I’m sorry, dear, I shouldn’t have said that. I know Warren well enough to trust that he’s made an honest woman out of you?”

Sophia just smiled and nodded.

“Good. Any girlfriend of Warren’s is a friend of mine.” She looked over at the picnic table. “What’s with **those** two?”

“Ah, well,” Warren said, “they weren’t as accepting of my choice of girlfriends as you are.”

“Figures. Well, War, they don’t love you like I love you.” She blew kisses at him. “You happy, me happy.”

Everyone laughed at that. “Besides which, Cheryl is just a complete bitch anyway, and, as for Chris, she’s still kicking herself for turning you down. More so now, I’d surmise.”

“Turned you down?” Sophia asked.

“Warren asked her out, about six months ago.” Siobhan supplied. “Turned him down flat.”

Sophia just looked at Warren. Warren grinned sheepishly and said, “Desperation.”

“True,” grinned Siobhan. “As some of us **told** you at the time, War. Anyhow, she shot him down, wasn’t nice about it at all—which got him over her in a damn hurry, thank God—and I have it on good authority that she regrets it. And now she sees you getting all cuddly-like with a girl who is forty times better looking than **she** is. She must be having a conniption.”

Warren laughed. “Here’s a question—if she’s been kicking herself, why’d she turn me down in the first place?”

Siobhan looked at Warren like he had three heads. “For the same reason we told you not to ask her out in the first place, dummy. Because if she went out with you, she’d never hear the end of it from Cheryl. And Christine doesn’t take a dump without Cheryl’s permission.”

“Ah.”

“I’ll have to go over there and thank her for saying no.” quipped Sophia. “Now I get Romeo here all to myself.” Everyone laughed at that.

“Nope, you still have to share him with me,” said Siobhan. She blew more kisses. “However, I **am** generous with my men.”

“All zero of them,” joked Warren.

“Ah, my dear,” said Siobhan, “that is only because I am very discriminating.”

“Oh, really?” said Warren. “Is that why you went out with The Fabulous Mike Kelly for six months?” Siobhan shot him a glare.

Sophia was amazed: “You went out with Mike Kelly?”

“You know him?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Ah well,” said Siobhan, “we all make mistakes, don’t we? Hopefully we learn from them.”

“Yes, we do,” said Sophia happily, “and, I can tell you that **I** sure learned from mine,” as she snuggled into Warren, getting a chuckle out of everyone.

“Who’s Mike Kelly?” asked Alison.

Siobhan just rolled her eyes. Sophia giggled, and responded, “Mike Kelly is the most gorgeous, most fantastic, most desirable guy at Oceanview High. And if you don’t believe me, just ask **him**, and he’ll tell you all about it.”

“Aah,” said Ally knowingly. “One of **those**.”

“Yup. A legend in his own mind,” quipped Sophia.

“I’ll tell you, it was an interesting experience,” related Siobhan. “I spent the whole relationship feeling like a fifth wheel, intruding on the fabulous romance between him and **him**.”

Sophia laughed, “Well, the closest I’ve ever come to that is my current relationship with The Genius, here.” Everyone laughed at that, except for Warren, who was busy trying to look intellectual. “He only crosses the line into insufferably smug once in a great while, luckily.” Warren gave her a “who, me?” look. “Yes, you, Romeo.”

“Uh, huh. Is that why you gave me a boatload of shit because I had trouble with that sequence on the ice today?”

“Of course. Payback’s a bitch, darling.” Even Warren laughed. “I am a better skater than you are. That is the one and only thing I am better than you at, and **don’t** you forget it.”

“I agree—with the you being a better skater part, of course.”

“Good boy. He’s easily trained, at least.”

“Oh, come on, Sophia.” It was Cheryl. She and Christine had snuck up on the group unnoticed. “You mean to tell me that the only thing you’re better at than Warren is **skating**? Jesus, you’d think you’d have enough experience in **other** areas to lord it over poor, inexperienced Warren.”

Mo shot her a look, about to say something, but Sophia spoke up first. “Well, Cheryl, experience is fine, but mere experience is nothing compared to sheer, unadulterated, overwhelming **talent**.”

“Yeah, right. Surrre,” piped up Christine.

“Yup,” said Sophia. “I won’t go any further, because y’all said you didn’t want to be bored with the sordid details of our sex life, but, I’ll just tell you, Christine, that you made one heck of a big mistake when you turned him down. A big mistake. You should’ve taken him up on it. He’s so good he might have even made a sourpuss like you **smile** once in a while.” Sophia looked at Warren. “Oh, look, he’s blushing. He is so damn **cute** when he blushes.” Whereupon she launched herself at his lap and tackled him into the grass, kissing him, provoking laughter from most of the gang, cheers from Siobhan and Ally, and sputters of indignation from Cheryl and Chris.

“Y’see?” said Cheryl. “The little hussy would probably do him right here.”

“Not a bad idea,” agreed Sophia. “Anyone got a camera?” she said with a grin. Then she climbed off Warren, who sat up, blushing but bemused. “Ah, well, why tempt ourselves, dear heart?”

Most of the gang couldn’t conceal their laughter. Cheryl, however, was still trying to get digs in. “So, Sophia, did you have cozy little scenes like this with the rest of your boyfriends?”

Sophia stopped smiling. She got a hard look on her face, and made a decision. “No. No I did not. In fact, I wouldn’t have **dared**. I wasn’t allowed to do things like that.”

“Allowed?” snorted Cheryl. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Sophie, you don’t have to do this. Not for those two,” Warren interjected.

“Yeah, I do. Maybe not for those two, but for myself. And maybe for people like Mo and Siobhan, who have been so nice to me, but I know still have their doubts.” Mo and Siobhan started to say something, but Sophia cut them off. “You do, and it’s natural. You care about Warren. It’s all right, I understand, having a little bit of experience in caring about Warren.” She grinned lopsidedly at Warren, and then got serious again.

She took a deep breath. “My reputation precedes me. It’s not a particularly nice one, but it’s not entirely right, either.” She looked at Cheryl and Christine. “You call me a slut.

Now, that implies that I sleep around, something I've never, ever done. I've been to bed with more than one guy, but it was always one at a time. Slut also implies that I enjoy sex, something that also isn't true"—she blushed, and smiled a little—"well, it **wasn't** true before Warren. Slut also implies that I had some choice in the matter, which was only half-true."

She reached her hand in her pocketbook, and withdrew a photo. Warren saw her, and tried to stop her. "Sophie, you **really** don't have to do this."

"Yeah, I do. Warren, trust me. There are parts of my past that I have to answer to—but there are parts that I do **not**, and I'm tired of trying to answer to them. But I also have to face up to this. It's over, and now I have you"—she smiled at him—"but it happened. I've avoided talking about it, a lot. Maybe that was a mistake. These are your friends. They care about you. They worry about you. They deserve to know the truth about your girlfriend."

She took a deep breath, and looked at Cheryl and Chris. "You asked me if I had this kind of fun, the kind I have with Warren, with my previous boyfriends. No, I didn't. I have a picture here of the kind of 'fun' that my previous boyfriends, especially my last one, provided for me. I keep this picture with me all the time, as a reminder of where I was, and as a reminder to make **damn** sure I never get there again. I got lucky. I got myself out of this, with the help of the most wonderful guy in the world. But this is what my life was like when you all were calling me a slut."

She handed the picture over to Mo, as Siobhan, Cheryl, and Chris looked on. It was a picture taken in that week after she had dumped Scott, in the aftermath of the beating. She had had Jesse take the photo, as a reminder, and also to give copies to the police. She was naked from the waist up, except for a bra, but the vicious bruises on her shoulder, chest, and back were plainly apparent—as was the black eye, bruised cheek, and bloody lip.

"Oh Jesus," commented Mo. Siobhan just gasped. Chris and Cheryl had the good sense not to say anything, but even their eyes got wide. Mo handed the photo back to Sophia.

"So. There it is. Do I party too much, not do well enough in school, hang around with some less than savory friends? Yeah, I do. But I was **never** a slut. And the guys who were spreading around rumors that I was a slut were also doing **this** to me." She pointed at the photo. "I wasn't a slut. I was a victim of boyfriend abuse." She took a deep breath, and looked at the four girls. "If you pray for anything, please pray really, really hard that you never let your self-esteem plummet to the point where you allow anyone to do this to you. Because it ain't pretty." She forced a smile. "Luckily, Romeo over here forced a self-esteem elixir down my throat before things got any worse. Not to mention that he treats me like a princess—for the first time in my life; I'm happy—for the first time in my life; and he's almost as good in bed as he is at making chip dip." Even Warren laughed at that. "And I'm going to get up now, and go over and grab some of that faaaabulous chip dip, because, if I stay here, I'm going to break down." Warren started to get up. "No, dear heart. Stay with your friends. I'll be back in a minute." She walked away, unsteadily, sobbing a bit, to the table where the snacks were set up.

The group was silent for a minute. Then Tina, who hadn't seen the picture, said, "What was in that photo?"

Mo replied, "Sophia looking like she just went five rounds with Muhammed Ali, in his prime. It was brutal. Man, that took a lot of guts to do that."

"Yes, it did," agreed Ally, looking pointedly at Cheryl and Christine.

"You're right. It did," agreed Cheryl.

"I love her so much," said Warren. "I want to kill the guys that did that to her. Ah, well—all I can do is pray that she continues to heal."

"Is she?" asked Mo.

"Yeah, she is," smiled Warren. "Slowly, surely, but she **is**."

"I think you're a big part of that, Warren," said Siobhan.

"A small part, maybe. This is mostly her."

"Hey. That's enough morbidity. Let's play some POKER!" said Crash.

GIRL TALK (Chapter 17)

They played poker for a while, then the party broke up into little knots. Crash and Warren commandeered the boombox, programming an old-school party mix of Beatles and Motown. Some of the other guys joined them as they discussed sports. Sophia joined Mo, Ally, Tina, Kate, Cheryl, Siobhan, and Christine around the picnic table.

"All right, Sophia, spill the beans," Mo demanded. "Have you and Warren really slept together?"

"Yes."

"I could never see Warren taking a girl to bed," commented Siobhan. "He's historically been very shy around girls. In fact, I can't see him asking you out."

Sophia smiled. "He didn't. Both times."

"You scamp!" said Mo. Sophia just grinned.

“I’m trying not to be judgemental, I really am, but I can’t see losing my virginity this young.” Cheryl said.

“I was twelve,” Sophia said.

“TWELVE?” Cheryl asked.

Sophia sighed. “Seeing as I’ve shared some of my past with you, you can understand that saying ‘no’ was **not** one of my strong suits. Especially with a guy declaring undying love in my ears, if only I would do it with him, at a time in my life where I was very vulnerable to that sort of thing.”

Cheryl looked at Sophia. “Do you regret it?”

“Oh, yeah.” Sophia replied. “I regret a lot of things. I commend you for not giving that up until you’re damn good and ready, I really do. Wish I had. Are most of you still virgins?”

Most of the table nodded assent. “Good for you. No sin to wait. Wish I had.”

“So do I,” commented Siobhan.

Mo looked at her in disbelief. “You’re **not** a virgin?”

“No.”

“You never told me this,” said Mo. “WHO?”

“Mike Kelly,” Mo and Sophia laughed at that one, and tried to stifle it. “Go ahead, laugh, I deserve it. However, since it lasted about seven seconds”—everyone cracked up—“I have forgotten about it and have chosen to reclaim my virginity.” General laughter all around, as Siobhan got a wry smile. She looked at Sophia and said, “So, are we the only fallen women at the table?”

Nobody spoke up. Sophia asked, “Ally?”

“Nope, still not deflowered.” Everyone laughed. “Crash and I have come awfully damn close, mind you, but I’m not quite ready.”

“Good.”

Mo asked, “So how do you know that you’re ready?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” said Sophia. “Make sure you want, really **want** to do it. That you’re not doing it to make him happy, or because he begs you to, or because you figure what the hell, or because you think all your friends are doing it and you’re falling behind. When you say to yourself, ‘I **want** this, it feels right’ with no hesitation, no reservations, then you’re ready.”

“Have you ever felt that way?” asked Cheryl.

“Yes,” Sophia smiled. “With Warren, every time. That’s how I know the difference.”

“How long were you guys going out the first time?” Cheryl asked.

Sophia looked sheepish. “Three and a half weeks.”

“That’s ALL?” exclaimed Christine.

Sophia blushed. “Like I said, when you really want it, when it feels right.....”

“Does it still feel right?” winked Mo.

Sophia blushed deeper. “Uh-huh,” she managed to squeak out.

“All right, Soph, time to spill the beans,” demanded Siobhan. “Look, we’ve all known Warren Kelleher a long time. He’s the sweetest guy I know, but let’s face it—he’s a nerd, a preppy, a geek. And you’ve been hinting all night that he’s some sort of fantastic lover!”

Sophia’s blush was purple. “He is.”

Mo looked dumbstruck. “You’re not kidding, are you? You’re not saying this just to get a rise out of someone, are you?”

“No,” Sophia said. “Look, you ASKED.”

“Yeah, I did,” said Siobhan. “I just can’t square this with the image I have of Warren. Warren Kelleher, good in bed? Who woulda thunk it?”

“Look,” Sophia tried another tack. “Despite that, you’re obviously very fond of Warren. You consider him a good friend.”

“Yes.”

“So, what do you like about Warren? What do you consider some of Warren’s better qualities?”

“Let’s see,” said Siobhan. “He’s smart. Imaginative. Very funny, great sense of humor. He’s warm, kind and generous to a fault. He’s unbearably sweet at times.” They all laughed. “And, as an added bonus, he’s a good singer.”

“Right. That’s a pretty good list of some of his finer qualities,” Sophia agreed. “And here’s a romance lesson for you all from someone who knows both sides of the fence. If you decide to start looking for a lover, Siobhan’s list contains **the** most important

qualities. Not good looks—although Warren has a great ass”—they all laughed—“not muscles, not machismo, not the right car or how he dresses or how good a partier he is or how cool he is, or how cool your friends think he is. Kind, warm, generous, sweet, imaginative, funny—they are all **far** more important. Trust me. And the ability to croon a decent love song after we’re done should never be underestimated.” They all laughed at that.

“Look, good technique is nice—and Warren’s got that, especially with those magical hands of his, and now I am no doubt blushing.” Laughter all around. “Oh, there’s another good quality. Go to bed with a guitar player. They know how to use them fingers.” More laughter. “And I’m purple now, I’m sure. Anyhow, the **most** important thing for a girl to enjoy sex is to go to bed with a guy who **wants** his partner to enjoy herself. That’s the most important thing. Look, those of you who are virgins will find out quickly enough that a guy can get himself off pretty easily. Most girls can not. It takes some patience. Warren’s patience and loving attention amazes **me** sometimes. It certainly amazed me the first night.”

“How so?” asked Cheryl, who was now paying rapt attention.

“Well, with my previous boyfriends, if it took twenty minutes, it was a long time.” They all laughed, and Siobhan interjected, “I can relate,” to more laughter. “Right. Anyhow, the first time Warren and I went to bed, we were there for over **three** hours. And I’m not counting the hour of kissing and cuddling and love-song crooning after we were done. He spun my head around so hard that night I still haven’t recovered. And he still does.”

“Yeah,” Siobhan asked, “but did you spin **his** head around?”

“What? You kidding me? Watch this.” She called, “Hey ROMEO!”

“Yes Juliet?” she heard from the darkness.

“Could you please get me another Coke?”

“Sure.” They heard scrambling from across the yard, heard Warren reaching in to the cooler, and then he appeared with a Coke. “There you go.” Then he noticed the uproarious laughter coming from the table. “What’s so funny?”

Sophia turned to the table and said, “Well, girls? Whipped?”

Mo laughed, “Oh, you betcha.”

“Completely whipped,” agreed Siobhan.

Warren got a wry smile, “Hey, I resemble that remark.”

Sophia smiled at him, “The girls wanted to know if I spun your head around in bed like you spun mine around. I figured a visual demonstration would be most effective.”

“Oh, REALLY. Then you wouldn’t mind me doing my own visual demonstration.”

“Oh, No.”

“Oh, YES.” Warren sat next to her, put his arm around her, and brought his other hand to her face, and started touching it.

The girls looked on in rapt amazement. “What is he doing?” demanded Cheryl.

“Making me completely weak in the knees, mostly,” Sophia sighed. Warren danced his fingers on her face for a minute, lingered a minute on her lips, and then withdrew, standing up and saying, “And don’t you forget it!” as he walked away from the table.

“What did we just see?” Mo asked.

“You just saw my boyfriend make me completely turned on, that’s what you just saw,” Sophia sighed, blushing. “He discovered early on that my face is an erogenous zone. I told you, great fingers.”

“Wow,” was all Siobhan could say.

Most of the girls were still at the table some time later, but Sophia and Warren had gone to sit on the grass together, cuddling and kissing a bit. Every so often, the girls heard laughter from one or both of them.

“Wow,” said Siobhan. “They really do seem happy together.”

“Yeah, they do,” agreed Mo. “I think she’s really good for him. And, with what she told us earlier, and what I know about Warren, I have no doubt that he’s really good for her. Boy, did I misjudge her.”

“We all did,” said Christine.

“She’s actually very sweet,” added Mo. “More damaged than I hope to ever be, but sweet all the same. And you watch her and Warren, would you ever think that they’re only 14 and 15 and have only been dating a couple of months?”

“Good sex,” commented Siobhan.

“No, it’s not just that. My bestest buddy really is truly in love. And she loves him right back. Good for them.”

THE UNSUSPECTING STUDENT AND PEDRO MARTINEZ (Chapter 18)

Sophia got up for school on Monday morning, actually looking forward to it. She was amazed. She was looking forward to her second period of the day, which was English. Today was the day they took a quiz and started discussion on their latest assignment—*Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare.

This was the first time Sophia could ever remember that she had actually already read an English assignment. She had even seen a production of the play—Warren had gotten a copy of a video from his English teacher, who had shown it in class. Warren’s teacher had shown it because he had said you didn’t get a lot of the subtleties of the humor from just reading it—especially the bawdy stuff. Warren had agreed, and after he had shown the video to Sophia, she had also agreed. She re-read the play last night, and was actually going into a class feeling well prepared. Amazing.

She walked into class and sat down next to Jessie. Jessie was the only person from her usual crowd in this class, and that was a good thing, because she was afraid her rep was about to take a severe beating. Ah, well, fuck it.

Keith Waters walked in to face his Freshman English class. He was kind of dreading it, because he was teaching Shakespeare. Lots of high school freshman had trouble with Shakespeare, and this was **not** any kind of advanced-placement class.

He gave a quick ten-minute quiz, just to see who had read the play. He took five minutes to correct all the quizzes, so he could see what was what, and saw that a few kids had gotten all the questions right. He was, however, completely dumbfounded that one of those people was Sophia Daniels.

He started a discussion on *Taming of the Shrew*. Lots of kids hadn’t read it, not to his surprise, and some kids had tried and had not gotten it, also not to his surprise. But some kids had read it, and had gotten it—and to his sheer amazement, one of the kids that seemed to have gotten it the clearest was the heretofore completely unteachable Sophia Daniels.

Insightful comment after good question after insightful comment. He couldn’t believe it. After one particularly good insight, Mr. Waters couldn’t resist himself.

“OK, Sophia, tell me. Is that really **you**, or were you somehow replaced by a pod person?”

The whole class laughed at that. Sophia looked a bit sheepish, “It’s really me.”

“You **read** one of my assignments?”

“Oh, I read Taming of the Shrew over a month ago. I just had to re-read it.”

“You. Read. Shakespeare. For **fun**.”

“Yeah. I love him. I even got the Collected Works as a birthday present.”

“There goes your rep, Sophia. Destroyed. For ever,” interjected Jessica Reidel from behind Sophia. Even Mr. Waters laughed at that.

“I’m still trying to figure out what got into you.”

“Her preppy boyfriend, that’s what,” said Jessie.

“Thanks, Jess,” said Sophia dryly.

“You have a boyfriend who introduced you to Shakespeare?” asked Mr. Waters.

“Yeah,” Sophia smiled. “He loves him, and got me completely hooked on him.”

“Older guy?”

“No, a freshman.”

“He goes here?”

“No.” Sophia was smiling, but her voice got very soft. “St. Mike’s.”

The whole class started whooping and hollering at that. Sophia Daniels going out with a guy from St. Michael's? Unbelievable.

Even to Mr. Waters. “You.....are going out with a Prep guy?”

“Yeah,” Sophia said, blushing a bit and somewhat sheepish, but proud. “Ranked third in his class, even.”

“Wow,” said Mr. Waters. “I do believe I need a drink.” The whole class hooted at that one. “Later, perhaps. Now, back to Miss Daniels’s favorite author.....” He shot her a smile, which she returned.

At the end of the class, Mr Waters called Sophia over. He handed her the quiz with 100% written on the top. “Great job, Sophia. If there are any other great authors that your boyfriend wants to introduce you to, tell him he’s got my permission.”

Sophia laughed. “I’ll do that.”

“Seriously, Sophia, I think it’s great. I love Shakespeare myself. Anyone who converts is OK by me. Of course, I would prefer that it would be my fabulous teaching technique that would convert them, but who can compete with a boyfriend?” They both laughed. “Seriously, since you learned to appreciate Shakespeare on the fly, if you have any ideas to get it through to some of the kids who aren’t getting it, I’d appreciate hearing about them.”

Sophia thought about that. “Well, the main thing Warren—that’s my boyfriend—emphasized to me when I first started reading Shakespeare, was not to get bogged down with the language. He says lots of people get frustrated by this word or that, and miss the poetry and meaning of the play.”

“Good point. Was *Taming of the Shrew* the first one he gave you? I always find it a good one to start with.”

“No, *Taming of the Shrew* was the second. This is my boyfriend, remember, we’re in love and all that—what do you think he gave me first?”

“Aah. *Romeo and Juliet*,” Mr. Waters smiled.

“You got it. Remember, this is **me** we’re talking about, and I’m dating a complete, total Preppie. The whole lovers-from-different-worlds thing sucked me right in, like Warren knew it would. Although we are, as Warren says, trying to avoid that whole double-suicide thing.”

Mr. Waters laughed. “So, he sucked you in with *Romeo*, and then gave you *Shrew*. Good approach. And you had no problem with *Shrew* when you read it?”

“No, but that reminds me. I didn’t get it **all** until I **saw** it.”

“Saw it?”

“Yeah. Warren’s teacher over at St. Mike’s showed them a video of a theatrical production of *Taming of the Shrew*. Warren borrowed a copy from him to show to me. You really don’t get how risqué and funny that play is until you see it done.”

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right. Think Warren could get me a copy of that video?”

“I’ll ask him.”

Sophia walked into work positively bubbly. She had actually had a good day at school. A **really** good day. Not only English, but she had gotten an 85 on an Algebra test. She couldn’t wait to tell Warren.

Warren was thrilled. Sophia, happy about school? He was so happy. A few more days like this, he thought to himself, and that self-confidence of hers would be at an all-time high. He agreed to ask Mr. Rogolli about the video, and didn't think it would be a problem.

Walking home that night, Sophia was still on a high. Warren loved it.

"Well, Soph," said Warren, "a day like that deserves a reward. I didn't plan it to be a reward, but what the heck. It'll just make your day better."

"What are you talking about?"

"We have to cut practice short this Saturday."

"This is a good thing?" Soph asked.

"Yeah, because of the **reason** we have to cut practice short." He grabbed his wallet, and withdrew two tickets, and held them up to her. "First base side, above the dugout, not too far up, and Pedro is going to be on the mound. And it's the Yankees, even."

Sophia squealed, and wrapped him in a bear hug, right in the middle of Washington street. "You dear, sweet, boy, you!"

"I can't remember the last time I was at Fenway," Sophia said as they found their seats. "It was before Mom divorced Charlie, and that was four or five years ago."

"Really? Nick's a big baseball fan, I thought he might have taken you once or twice."

"Nickie and I don't usually socialize outside of parties. That would have pissed some people off."

"Aaah."

"No such worries with you, though," smiled Sophia.

"True. If Nick took you to a game, the only reason I'd be jealous is that he didn't get a ticket for **me**."

They both laughed. They settled into their seats, juggling the food and sodas they had gotten.

Warren looked around. These were good seats, he expected to be surrounded by businessmen-types, but they weren't. Must be because it was a weekend. In fact, the rows around them seemed to be full with college guys. And Warren heard their mumbling—they had **definitely** noticed Sophia.

"Hey, check out the babe!"

“Best-looking girl I’ve seen at a baseball game, I’ll say that.”

“Look at her, she’s too young for you!”

“They’re never too young.”

“Boyfriend must have dragged her to the game.”

“I did that once. Brought a good-looking girl to a ball game. Never again.”

“Why not?”

“The scenery might have been nice, but she spent all game asking stupid questions. Nope, no more pretty girls at baseball games—I prefer to go with people who actually know something about baseball!”

“Ah, who cares? Look at her! Who cares if she asks stupid questions? All she has to do is look pretty, and I’d be in heaven.”

Warren leaned into Sophia’s ear and whispered, “You seem to be the center of attention.”

Sophia blushed. “I noticed. Boy are **they** in for a surprise.”

“How so?”

“Watch me.”

Warren wondered what she was up to. Then they posted the starting lineups.

“Jesus Christ, **what** is Jimmy thinking?” Sophia asked, loud enough for the previous commenters to hear her. “He’s batting Lewis leadoff again? Why not just start the game with one out and nobody on?”

“Well, Offy’s knee is acting up again,” said Warren.

“I know,” said Sophia, “which means you have to play Lansing because he’s your only other second baseman. So what’s Jimmy do? Put Lewis in the lineup, so we get a **second** automatic out. I don’t care if a lefty is pitching, leave Nixon out there, and let him lead off. His OBP is 100 points higher than D-Lew.

Of course, what do I expect from a manager who bat Dead Sprague cleanup last year? Hey, Jimmy! Even Pedro needs a run or two!”

Warren took a furtive glance at some of the college guys, and they were looking at Sophia in absolute **shock**. He stifled a laugh. Sophia was grinning from ear to ear.

And she kept it up all game. “C’mon, Pedro. Throw a changeup. O’Neill can’t hit your changeups, he never has.” Pedro threw a changeup. “Strike three! Thataway, Petey, baby!”

“Pettite throws that pitch again, Nomar is taking him deep.” CRACK! Over the wall. “Attaway, NO-MAAAAAHHHH!!!!”

“First and third, one out, and Torre is bringing in the right-hander. We’ve only got a one run lead, and Lewis is up. Daubach is on the bench, he’s a lefty, and he’s one of the better clutch hitters on this team. If Jimmy doesn’t pinch hit, I’m going to go down into the dugout myself and strangle him.” Daubach came out to pinch hit. “First good move Jimmy’s made all game besides being lucky enough to have Pedro to start.” Daubach lined the first pitch into right field for a two-run single. “Attaway, Dauber!!”

Warren had just sat back all game, thoroughly enjoying Sophia’s commentary and unbridled enthusiasm. After the Daubach hit, the guy behind him leaned over.

“Hey, buddy.”

“Yeah?”

“That gorgeous babe next to you who knows so much about baseball—that’s your girlfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow. You are the luckiest guy in the universe.”

Warren just smiled. “Yup. I am.”

They left their seats to file out after a fine 3-0 Sox victory.

“I definitely need to take you to more baseball games,” Warren said.

“Enjoy yourself?”

“Immensely.”

“I sure showed those guys. Pretty girls don’t know anything about baseball, my **ass**.”

Warren chuckled. “After Daubach got that hit, the guy behind me told me I was the luckiest guy in the universe.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Warren smiled. Sophia was beaming. “Hey,” Warren said, “Let’s check out the souvenir shop.”

“OK.”

They looked around for a while. Sophia was hovering around the Red Sox jackets “I’ve always wanted one of these.” She looked at the price tag. “Next time you take me to a game. I’ll remember to bring more money.” They wandered off to look at other things. They separated again, and Warren doubled back to the jackets. He checked the price tag. He had enough money on him. What the heck.

They met up again outside the shop. Warren had a bag with him. Sophia was empty handed.

“Couldn’t find anything you liked?”

“Not really, except for those jackets. Next time. What did you buy?”

“Just a little something.”

“Let me see.” He opened the bag and withdrew a Sox jacket. Sophia was surprised. He had one—in fact, he was wearing it. “Outgrowing your old one?”

“No, silly, does it look it? No, it fits just fine.”

“So why’d you buy another one?”

“You really are dense sometimes, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“This isn’t for me.” He walked up behind her. “Hold out your arms.” She did so, and he slipped the jacket over her arms and onto her shoulders.

“Warren Kelleher, you are the sweetest guy in the universe.”

“No, no—remember? I’m the **luckiest** guy in the universe!” They both laughed.

“I must be the luckiest girl then,” Sophia said, admiring the jacket. “Warren, I can’t believe you did this!”

“Just a little token of my esteem, dear Juliet.”

She just smiled at him, and they walked, hand-in-hand, to the subway station.

MOTHERS AND SONS, BOYS AND GIRLS (Chapter 19)

Peg Kelleher was amazed.

It was 9:30 AM, and Warren was out of bed. He'd been out of school for two weeks, and, unless he had to work—he had picked up some early shifts at the donut shop—he was sleeping until noon. She knew he had today off, and here he was, up and at 'em.

"Hi, Honey," she said. "You're up early."

"Yup," he said, slathering cream cheese on a bagel. "Got plans."

"What kind of plans?"

"It's Sophia's last day at school."

"Oh really? Oh yeah, that's right—the public schools get out later." Peg was a teacher, but she taught at Wilkins Academy, another private school in the area.

"That's right. Anyway, she gets out at 11:30, so I'm going to surprise her by showing up at her house."

Peg looked concerned. "Warren, do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure. Let me just get finished cheeseifying this here bagel and get myself a cup of tea and I'll meet you in the kitchen."

Peg waited, and Warren quickly planted himself in a chair with his bagel and tea. "What's on your mind, Mom?"

"Sophia."

Warren grinned. "No, no, Mom, you've got it all wrong. Sophia is supposed to be on **my** mind. **Dad** is supposed to be on **yours**."

Peg couldn't help but laugh. "Warren, I'm trying to be serious!"

"Ah, c'mom, Mom, have you ever known me to be serious?"

"Yeah, actually, I have. Way too much, in fact. About Sophia."

"Aah. I should've seen this coming."

"Warren, I'm worried," Peg sighed. "You're fourteen years old. You just finished your freshman year in high school. And you are in a relationship that seems to me to be **way** too serious for your ages."

Warren sighed. “You know what, Mom? You’re right. You’re absolutely right.”

Peg was surprised. “Well, I’m glad you agree with me. I didn’t think you would. I think it might benefit you to cool it off with her, see her less, maybe see other people.”

“Can’t do that, Mom.”

“Why not? I thought you just agreed with me that you were getting too serious?”

“Not getting, gotten. I agree. We’re way too serious. I never expected to be in a relationship this intense when I was fourteen, I can guarantee you that.”

“So, make it less intense—that’s all I’m saying.”

“Mom, you don’t get it. We crossed that line a long time ago. This isn’t a lightswitch that you can turn on and off. I’m in a serious, intense relationship. The relationship is that way because of the way we feel about each other. You’re right—if this happened when I was eighteen and not fourteen I’d probably be better off. But it happened. That’s the way it is. I can’t make it not happen.”

“You think you’re in love with each other.”

“Mom, if this ain’t real, true love—I don’t think I’d be able to **handle** the real thing,” Warren replied with a lopsided smile.

Even Peg had to grin at that. Warren continued, “You don’t spend a lot of time with Soph and me. We’re at her house more often, because it’s more convenient. It’s love. Yeah, it might be fourteen-year-old love, but it doesn’t seem it. And the only way I’m going to know for sure is to **not** be fourteen anymore and see where we’re at then.”

Peg smiled and sighed at the same time. “Warren, you’re one of the most levelheaded teenagers I know—and I teach teenagers, remember—but you’re also an incurable romantic.” They both smiled. “I worry about you getting hurt.”

“I know. But if this **isn’t** true love, I’m gonna get hurt sooner or later in any case.”

“I know. I just worry about the hurt if you let this relationship go too far, and then it ends, at your age.”

“What do you mean, too far?”

“Well, you know.”

“I have a guess, but I don’t really know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, I mean sex.”

Warren blushed, and thought for a minute. “Mom, you always said I could tell you anything, and I can’t lie to you. That particular genie has been out of the bottle for some time now.”

Peg’s jaw dropped. “You’re kidding.” She paused. “Are you sure we’re talking about the same thing?”

“Are you asking me if Sophia and I are sleeping together? Yes. Sophia and I are sleeping together.”

“Oh, Jesus, Warren. You are **too young** for this! What if something happens?”

“Mom, you know me better than that.”

“Well, I thought I did.”

“Come on. We are responsible about this. There are not going to be any grandchildren in the near future, I guarantee it. We are very well protected. Sophia’s on the pill, and we usually use something else, too, as a failsafe.”

“Well, that’s a relief. You’re right, I shouldn’t have doubted you about that. But you are still too young.”

“Mom—I’m too young to be ending my freshman year in high school, I should be ending eighth grade. I was too young to read when I started, too young to do algebra when I started. I was too young to play the guitar when I started. Too young to read Shakespeare when I started. Heck, I was too young when you started leaving me to baby-sit Ryan and Kristin. I’ve been too young for almost everything I’ve ever done in my life. Why should this be any different?”

“That’s academics. Love and sex aren’t an academic exercise.”

“No, but neither is babysitting your younger brother and sister when you’re only ten.”

“Well, we did that because you were reliable and trustworthy and responsible.”

“I still am.”

“I know, Warren, but, before Sophia, you were at a complete loss when it came to girls. Going from a complete position of naivete to **this** seems like too much, too fast.”

“I don’t necessarily disagree, Mom. But I trust my instincts. I trust my feelings. I’d trust Sophie with my life at this point. I guess I’m just asking you to trust me.”

“I do, Warren.”

Warren smiled. “You always have. In fact, you’ve always given me a remarkable degree of freedom to make my own choices; freedom that most kids my age didn’t get. And have I disappointed you much?”

Peg smiled. “Pretty much never. And, trust me, I am **not** disappointed with you, now. Concerned, but not disappointed.”

Warren smiled back, “I know. Listen, I know all too well that this might all blow up in my face, and I’ll end up a quivering pile of romantic goo pining over my lost love six months from now.” Peg had to laugh at that. Warren continued, “But what the hell is the point of even getting out of bed if you don’t give it a shot? I’m so happy **right now**, that it’s worth it.”

Peg stared at her son. “I’ve got to say, Warren, that I’m amazed. I’ve never known you to be so---well, so carefree. Since I know that you’re responsible on top of it, it makes me feel a little better. She’s actually loosened you up—it’s good to see.”

“Y’know what? Sophia always gives me credit for something valuable—she says that she learned from me that tomorrow’s important. But I learned something equally valuable from her—that today’s important, too.”

Warren stood up, and kissed his mother on the cheek. “And what’s important **today** is to go welcome my girlfriend home from school like the quivering pile of romantic goo that I so truly am.” He reached around the corner into the foyer and pulled a large case out. “Heck, I’m even bringing my guitar so I can serenade her with romantic-gooey love songs. See ya!”

The last thing Warren heard as he left the house was his mother’s laughter.

Sophia walked home from school in a heck of a mood. School was out for the summer, and she was actually walking home with a good report card. Wasn’t **that** a kicker. She couldn’t wait to show her Mom. And Warren!

She turned onto her street, and heard music coming from somewhere. She thought she recognized it—and then she realized she did. It was “Romeo and Juliet,” the Dire Straits song that Warren had played for her. But it didn’t sound like Dire Straits. As she got closer to her house, she realized that it wasn’t—it was Warren, on her porch, playing a guitar and singing it.

She was so happy to see him, she almost ran to the porch and tackled him. But she didn’t. She walked up and sat next to him, while he played the song. She realized something—while he had sung to her, many times, she had never heard him play. As he went through the song, she realized something else—he was **good**. Really good.

“That was fantastic. I’ve never heard you play before.”

“Magic fingers, I’m telling you.” They both laughed.

“C’mon inside,” she said, kissing him. “I’ve got something I want to show you, but I want Mom to see it, too.”

“Hi, Mom!”

“Hi, Sophie! Glad to be out? Oh, Hi Warren!”

“Hi, Mrs. Kovach”

“OK. Mom, Warren, you need to see this.” She withdrew a piece of paper from her bookbag, and handed it to her Mom.

“Oh, my God! Sophia! All B’s except for one C? That’s fantastic!”

“Really?” Mrs. Kovach handed the report card over to Warren. “Look at this! Sophia, I’m **so** proud of you!”

“Me, too, Honey,” Mrs. Kovach agreed.

Sophia was beaming. “And that means I passed all my classes for the year.”

Warren was still reading the report card. “Look at these comments! ‘Most drastic improvement I have ever seen in a student.’ ‘One of the most gratifying B’s it has ever been my pleasure to give out.’ ‘I don’t know what happened with this student, but I’d like to find out if it can be bottled.’ Sophia, you should be so damn proud of yourself.”

Sophia blushed, but admitted. “I am.” She looked at Warren. “If I keep this up, you won’t be the only brain in this relationship any more.”

Warren smiled, and said, “I never was.”

Mrs. Kovach looked at Warren. “What did your report card look like, Warren?”

Sophia sighed in mock-exasperation. “Must we bring that up? I was enjoying this!”

Mrs. Kovach looked at the two of them. “Did I say something wrong?” They both laughed. “I was just curious. I have no idea what kinds of grades Warren gets.”

Sophia sighed, “Mom, let’s just say that if he brought home this report card that I’m so proud of, **he’d be devastated.**”

“Sophia, I wasn’t trying to make up for over two years of school neglect, either. Your achievement is every bit as good as mine. You can’t compare our marks.....yet.”

“Yet?”

“Sophie, I promise you, if you keep this up, next year, your report cards will start to look like mine.”

“Really? You think?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“OK,” Mrs. Kovach interjected, “Now that we’ve all done our bit to prop up Sophia’s self confidence”—they all laughed—“I still am wondering what Warren’s grades are.”

Warren took a deep breath. “One A-minus, the rest all A’s, and I was deeply cheesed off by the A-minus.”

“Wow.” Mrs. Kovach said.

“See what I mean?” Sophia smirked. “Deeply cheesed off by the A-minus, my ass.”

Warren smiled. “I do **not** study for three hours a night to get A-minuses.”

Sophia grinned. “My boyfriend, the studyaholic genius scholar Prep Boy. If I didn’t love him, I’d have to kill him.”

Sophia and Warren were on the living room couch, half-watching TV and talking. Mrs. Kovach had fixed them some lunch, and was now cleaning up.

“Got read the riot act by my Mom today a bit,” Warren said.

“You? The perfect son?” Sophia sniggered. “What about?”

“Us, what else? I’m too young to be in such a serious relationship, you know.”

Sophia laughed. “Well, at least she doesn’t know quite **how** serious.”

Warren grimaced. “She does now.”

“You told her?”

“Yeah. She said something about worrying about us going too far, and I asked her what exactly she was talking about. She said she was talking about sex, and I said, in effect, ‘Oops. Too late.’ I never could lie to my mother, not about stuff like that.”

“Ouch. How did she take it?”

“Actually, not all that badly. I got the ‘you’re too young!’ bit, and she definitely now knows that her son is **not** perfect, but, all in all, it really wasn’t all that bad.”

“But I’ll bet she’d be happier if we cooled things off,” Sophia said, depressedly.

“Sophie, she’s worried. I’m fourteen. You’re my first girlfriend. The relationship is rather intense. She’s worried that this is just teenage infatuation, and that we’re going to outgrow each other—or, rather, that you are going to outgrow me, dump me, and leave me a pathetic shell of my former self mourning my lost love and writing bad poetry.”

Sophia burst out laughing. “What did you tell her?”

“I reassured her that I **never** write bad poetry.” Sophia laughed and playfully swatted him on the shoulder. “Anyhow, I do think I reassured her, to some degree. I told her the truth—that I love you, and you love me. That we are very young, I know that, and I have no idea what the future will hold, but right **now** I’m deliriously happy.”

Sophia looked at him for a minute. “Warren, do you ever think about it?”

“What?”

“The future.”

“Our future?”

“No, you ninny, the Red Sox’ future!”

“That’s way too depressing a subject to think about.”

“Goof! Yes, I meant our future.”

Warren paused for a minute. “Yeah, I think about it. Much as I try not too.”

“Why do you try not to?”

“Because it’s a long way away. Lots of things can happen. One day at a time.”

“Warren, you plan **everything**.”

“Yeah, but that’s different. Planning my grades, planning school, planning a future career—all of these things depend almost entirely on **me**. I work hard enough, I’ll get there. Planning a future with **you** involves **you**. It’s an added variable. How do I know you won’t outgrow me? How do I know you don’t want different things in life? And it’s so far away. We’ve never talked about this—how can I plan a future with you before we even talk about it?”

“So let’s start now.”

“This will **really** worry my mother.”

Sophia laughed. “No, I mean the basics. The things we want in life. Do you see yourself getting married some day?”

“Absolutely.”

“Me, too. Kids?”

“For sure. Love ‘em. I’d love to have a whole houseful.”

“Me, too. Are you a dog person or a cat person?”

“I like both, but I’m a dog person.”

“OK, we can have one of each.” They both laughed. “I don’t mind dogs, but I’m a cat person. City or suburbs?”

“Suburbs, but close to a city. No boonies.”

“OK. Cold weather or hot weather climate?”

“Cold. Definitely cold. No Florida for me.”

“Cool. That was the one I thought we’d disagree on. I didn’t know you were a fellow snow-bunny.”

“Absolutely.”

“Minivan or BMW?”

“Minivan. They’re cheaper. Cars are functional. Extraneous luxury spending goes for musical instruments, not vehicles.”

Sophia laughed. Then she got serious. “War, do you ever dream about this stuff?”

“Sure.”

“I do too. Always have. And, of course, since I dream about the whole family thing, there’s always a husband in the dreams. But it’s funny—the husband-like creature has always been indistinct, kind of a blur. Even when I had a boyfriend, the husband in my dreams was always unknown. It wasn’t whoever I was going out with at the time.” She blushed, and said softly, “Until now. Now it’s you.”

Warren said, “You’ve been in mine since three days after I first met you.”

“Really?” Sophia giggled. Then she got serious. “Look. I know we’re too young. I know we have a lot ahead of us, I know anything could happen, I know we could outgrow each

other, I know **all** of these things. Dammit, I know.” She took a deep breath. “But, if I were a betting woman, and I was forced to make a bet on this.....the bet I’d make is that someday you will be putting a ring on my finger.”

“I’d make the same bet, Soph.” They looked at each other, and smiled. “I do **not** think that I will be telling my mother about this conversation.” They cracked up laughing.

Then Sophie got serious. “So, now we’ve confessed our innermost dreams to each other. So where do we go from here?”

“Same way we’ve been going.”

“How do we do that? Maybe it’s me—I think something’s been irrevocably changed here.”

“Ah, Soph, we’ve just put into words what we’ve both been thinking.”

“Yeah. But putting it into words makes it more.....I don’t know, it makes it more real, somehow.”

“Maybe you’re right” Warren sighed. “Look, I told my mother tonight that, although I thought what we had was a real, lasting love, that it was at least possible that it was just fourteen-year-old love. I told her I had no way to be sure, seeing as I **am** fourteen, and the only way to tell is to wait until I’m **not** fourteen and see where we’re at.”

“Yeah, but I’m **fifteen**,” Sophia smiled.

“Yes, older woman, but you know what I meant.”

“Yeah. Wait and see, is that what you’re saying?”

“No, I’m saying—today is today. Tomorrow is tomorrow. If we take care of things, **today**, and it turns out that it’s right, than tomorrow will take care of itself. Right now, **today**, I love you more than words can say. I don’t want to **plan** anything—I’ve planned too much of my life as it is. I just want to love you, right now, today, as much as I’m able.”

Sophia wrapped her arms around him. “I love you, too. I guess I just get caught up in my dreams.”

“Not planning is **not** the same as not dreaming, o ruler of my heart. Feel free to share your dreams with me anytime.”

Sophia sighed happily. “OK, Husband-of-my-dreams, what do you think for kids’ names?”

“I’ve always been partial to Jessica.” Warren smiled. Sophia giggled.

And Ellen, who had overheard the whole conversation, had to hide a smile of her own.

FOURTH OF JULY (Chapter 20)

“What a glorious day we have for the Forth of July,” Peg Kelleher said happily.

“Yup,” agreed Jim. “It’s a scorcher.” He was firing up the grill to barbecue. His oldest son emerged from the house. “Hey, Warren!”

“Hey Dad. Mom.”

“You going to walk over Sophia’s to get her?”

“Nope, her Mom offered to drop her off.”

“Great,” said Jim. “So, what are the plans today?”

“Well, first we appreciate your great grill technique,” Warren said. Jim laughed. “Then we’re going to hang out, probably watch the Sox. Later, we head up to the Kenney’s for **their** Big Barbecue Bash. Lots of people coming to that one.”

“Sounds cool.” A car pulled up in front of the house. “Sounds like that’s your lady, Warren.” Warren went out in front of the house.

Sophia and Warren were still exchanging kisses, but Ellen Kovach went around the back of the house. “Hello, you’re Warren’s parents?”

“Yes, we are,” said Peg. “I’m Peg Kelleher, and this is Jim.”

“I’m Ellen Kovach, Sophia’s mother.” They exchanged handshakes. “Listen, I was wondering if I could talk to you two sometime, preferably when the kids aren’t around.”

“Actually, I think that would be a great idea, Mrs. Kovach,” Peg said.

“Please call me Ellen.”

“OK, Ellen, we’re Peg and Jim.”

“Whenever you’d like to arrange this, just let me know.”

“Actually,” smiled Peg, “I think we could do it now. Are you free for a few?”

“Yes, I am. My other two kids are with their father. But what about Warren and Sophie?”

“I’ve got a plan for them. HEY, WARREN!”

Warren and Sophia came around the back of the house. “You bellowed?” Warren said amusedly.

“Yes, I did. I need more Coke. You and Sophia mind taking a little walk?”

Warren looked at Sophia, who smiled and nodded. “Sure. I need some cash, though.”

Jim reached in his back pocket and took out his wallet. “Bank of Jim, at your service,” he quipped. Warren took the fiver and saluted. “Back in about twenty—don’t burn the chicken wings before I come back, OK, Dad?”

“Wouldn’t hear of it.”

They walked out the driveway, headed towards the store. Peg and Ellen took a seat at the picnic table, while Jim kept his eye on the grill.

Peg took a deep breath. “Let me start. There’s one thing you need to know. I found out that Warren and Sophia are sleeping together.”

Ellen just smiled. “I know.”

“You KNOW?”

“I’ve known for a while.”

“I must say, you seem remarkably **not** upset about it.”

“I’m not, not all that much. But I’ll get back to that, because this all ties in together.”

“OK,” Peg said warily.

“First off, I overheard a conversation between those two kids. They do **not** know I overheard them, and it’s probably best to keep it that way. But I wanted to discuss it with you. The gist of the conversation was that you all seem concerned about their relationship, and how serious it is.”

“I am. We are. It seems dangerous. They’re so young. I can’t help but worry that they are setting themselves up for quite a fall.”

“And if I were in your shoes—if Warren were my child—I’d probably share those feelings.”

“But you don’t.”

“No.” Ellen took a deep breath. “What do you know about Sophia before she met Warren?”

“Not much,” admitted Peg. “I’ve surmised that her previous relationship was a violent one, but that’s all I know.”

“OK,” Ellen took another breath. “I am probably betraying Sophia horribly with what I’m about to tell you, but it is important that you know. It’s also important that you realize what kind of a young man—and I used the word ‘man’ deliberately—your son is.”

“Go on.”

“First of all, I’m not overly worried about Sophia sleeping with Warren for a lot of reasons, but one of them is that Warren is **not** her first. I’m not sure how many, but there’s at least three that I’m almost positive about. I’m not sure exactly when, but I’m pretty sure she lost her virginity before her thirteenth birthday.”

“She was TWELVE?”

“I think so. And I am pretty sure that **none** of her sexual encounters were entirely voluntary. I don’t know where the line between coercion and rape is—especially with a twelve or thirteen year old—but the scum she had for boyfriends back then were certainly skirting that line, if not crossing it. Especially considering that I’m pretty sure that **all** of them, not just the last one, were hitting her.”

“By the way, you must know—but I’ll tell you anyway—that the non-voluntary thing does **not**, in any way shape or form, include Warren. I know for an absolute fact that he did **not** coerce or force her. In fact, I also know that their first time was arranged, completely, by Sophia—and how she pulled that off is a delightfully romantic story that makes me wish I was fifteen again—but I’ll let **her** tell that one if she’s so inclined.” Even Peg smiled a bit at that.

“If you had asked me, six months ago, to predict my daughter’s future, I would have bet money that I would have been attending her funeral before I attended her high school graduation.” Peg and Jim gasped, and looked at each other. “Not only was she having less-than-voluntary sex with guys who hit her, she was on drugs. She was drinking. She was flunking out of school. She was a miserable wreck when she was in the house. She had the self-esteem of a slug. And, when I looked into her eyes, I didn’t see a fourteen-year-old girl. I saw a thirty-year-old woman—and it was a thirty-year-old woman who had been beaten down, **hard**. I was watching my oldest daughter slip over the abyss. And I was powerless and clueless to help her.”

Peg and Jim were listening raptly now. Ellen took another deep breath. “I had Sophia when I was eighteen. I thought I was in love. Unfortunately, the man I thought I was in

love with turned out to be more in love with the bottle. And when he drank, he got violent—towards me, and sometimes towards Sophia. He left when Sophia was three. Thank God, because I couldn't gather up the courage to leave him. And I saw Sophia, drinking, getting beat up by men—and I collapsed. I was powerless. I didn't know what to do. I thought I had lost her. For good."

Ellen had been looking down as she said this—now she looked up, a slight smile on her face. "Now, look at her. She quit drugs. I think she might still have the odd beer at a party, but I haven't seen her drunk in months. She actually brought me home a report card with all B's and one C—I thought I'd faint." They all chuckled at that. "She believes in herself. She has a boyfriend that truly loves her and treats her like a princess. If she's having sex, it's because she **wants** to. Best of all, despite the fact that she's in an advanced relationship for her age, I look into her eyes and I see a fifteen-year-old girl. A happy, healthy, fifteen year old girl. If the price I have to pay for this miraculous transformation is that she's got a boyfriend who, in her words, pushes every button she's got and has turned her into a raging sex kitten, well, I think I can live with that." Peg and Jim couldn't help but laugh.

Peg looked at Ellen. "I teach high school, at Wilkins academy. I've seen some kids slide down into the abyss. It's **very** rare for them to come back as far as Sophia evidently has. How did this happen?"

Ellen just shook her head. "You don't get it, do you? No, evidently you don't. It's **Warren**. Don't you see? Now, Sophia did this herself. She worked hard at it. But Warren was her lifeline, her anchor, through the whole thing. Those two kids—even though they're just kids—have a connection that I can't fathom, much less attempt to interfere with." She got a wry look on her face. "I've been married twice and I don't think I've ever been that much in love." They all laughed.

"Sophia has been glowing, and I mean **glowing**, for three months now. I don't care how good the sex is, you don't get that from **just** sex. She's lit up like a Christmas tree. You must have noticed the same with Warren."

Peg smiled, "Yeah, I have."

"Good. Listen, you need to know this—I give thanks to God, every night, that your son wandered into my daughter's life when he did. And I thank God that you two raised him to be the caring, kind, considerate, fine young man that he so obviously is. He helped give me my daughter back."

Peg looked concerned. "Thank you. Warren's a great kid. We **are** proud of him. But..... Don't you worry about what might happen to her if they were to break up? That she might slide backwards?"

"Sure I do. I'm hoping if that ever happens, that her self-confidence will be strong enough that she realizes that she **did** do this herself—even if Warren's help was invaluable.

That's all I can do. But, I have to tell you—I spend more time with them than you do. They're over my house more than they are here."

"True."

"Well, you watch them. Make them come over here more often, now that it's summer, and watch them. And after you watch them, you tell me if there is any logical, rational reason why you'd think that they'd break up any time soon. I can't see it. Yeah, they're young. Yeah, things change. But, remember what I said—a connection between them that leaves me awestruck. Heck, even their skating coach sees it."

Peg laughed. "She does?"

"Yeah. I went to watch them practice last week, and introduced myself to June. She said to me, 'I love those two. I never know if I should be preparing them for ice dance competitions in a year, or mailing out the invitation to the wedding shower. You think they'll make it through high school before they get hitched?' She was kidding—your studyaholic diligent son is too focused for that—but I do know a bit how she feels."

"And it's selfish of me, and I'd never say this to them—they have to let themselves take their own path—but I hope they **never** break up. I hope I'm sitting with you two about ten years from now at a wedding. Because I love Warren, like he was my own, and I love what he's helped Sophie become."

"So now you know."

Before anyone could say another word, they heard Warren and Sophia approaching up the driveway, laughing and giggling. They emerged into the backyard, with Sophia on Warren's back, getting a piggyback while holding the bag with the Cokes. The parents looked on, bemused, as Warren dipped Sophia low enough to place the cokes on the table with a jaunty "Voila!" and then Warren straightened up again. They cavorted around the yard, piggyback, until Warren tripped on something and fell forward, and went sprawling.

With Sophia on top of him.

The parents looked concerned, and were about to ask if they were all right, when the bellowing laughter told them they were in fact all right. Warren extricated himself from under Sophia, sat up, and exclaimed,
"That's IT!"

"That's what?" Sophia asked.

"The ending pose to our free dance! It's perfect! The Daniels-Kelleher Sprawl!" Everyone laughed at that.

"You goof!" said Sophia, as she crawled over to where he was sitting, and tackled him, and then kissed him.

The parents tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle giggles.

“Uh.....er.....Soph?”

“Yes, Warren?”

“We are currently being watched while we make out by every parent we’ve collectively got.”

“Oh.” Sophie sat up, and looked over at the bemused parents. “Hi, y’all!” Then she looked back down at Warren. “Oh, you’re **blushing!**” She looked at the parents. “He’s the cutest thing in the world when he blushes.” And then she tackled Warren and started nuzzling his neck.

The parents couldn’t hold in the giggles by now.

“Uh.....Soph? We’re **still** being watched.”

“Yeah, so, what if I’m an exhibitionist at heart?”

“Well, that’s all well and good, but the problem is my DAD is watching and he’s NOT paying attention to the GRILL and he’s gonna BURN the CHICKEN WINGS!”

“Oh, that’s different,” Sophia said, climbing off Warren, and standing up. “Where **are** my priorities?” She hopped up on the picnic table, sitting on top of it, and said, “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?”

Warren stood up, and in his best bad-junior-high-acting impression, recited,” Hark! What **light**.....through-yonder-window BREAKS? It-is-the-**east**.....and Juliet.....is the sunnnnn.” Whereupon Sophia started clapping and yelling “Author! Author!” while Warren mock-bowed to all four corners of the backyard.

By this time, the parents were in stitches.

Sophia hopped down from the table, and turned to Warren, and said, “C’mon, goofball, didn’t you say you needed my help in finishing the potato salad?”

“Oh yeah,” Warren said. He walked towards the house, just behind Sophia, and as he walked by the table, he leaned towards the parents and said, “I want to see the emotional mushball over there chop some onions.”

“Oh, you’ll be surprised at what I can do with a sharp object in my hand.”

“Promises, promises,” Warren quipped as they headed into the house.

Peg was wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes. “OK, Ellen, you’ve been around them more than I have, like you said. Is this **typical**?”

Ellen was laughing, too. “Yeah. Now, they **do** have serious talks. And they cuddle a lot. But, believe me, I get a **lot** of this. They mock-quote Romeo and Juliet at each other all the time. Did you know that that’s one of their sets of nicknames for one another? Romeo and Juliet?”

Peg smiled, “No I didn’t. There are others?”

“Yeah. Pookie for her and Snugglebear for him. She also calls him Dear Heart. He occasionally calls her the aforementioned Sex Kitten.”

They all laughed. Peg said, “I’m a bit relieved. I was under the impression that there was a lot more overly-romantic super-serious mooning at each other.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, they do that, too.” Ellen laughed.

Peg looked at Ellen. “I’m glad you came. I think it helped.” She smiled. “We’ve got an absolute boatload of food. If you don’t have any other plans, we’d love for you to stay for eats.”

Ellen smiled. “I’d love to. But let me ask permission.”

“Permission?”

“Hey, Sophie, come to the window.” Sophie did. “Warren’s parents asked me to stay for lunch. That okay with you? I wouldn’t want to cramp your style or anything.”

“Ah, you don’t do that.....much.....for a Mother.” They both laughed. “I think it’s great. You can tell us what you thought of our awe-inspiring potato salad!”

THE SKATE BABE CHAT HAREM (Chapter 21)

“Ah, Jesus, Warren, he’s starting D-Lew again!”

“Hmm. Must be a lefty on the mound for the Blue Jays.”

“Yeah. Wells.”

“Who we got?”

“Arrojo. At least Offy is playing. Lewis is batting ninth.”

They were sitting in the Kelleher's living room—Peg, Jim, and Ellen, with Warren and Sophia. Warren's younger brother and sister had stayed outside. Sophia and Warren had turned on the Red Sox.

"You're a Sox fan, Sophia?" asked Jim.

"Big time," confirmed Sophia with a smile.

"She's the Fabulous Baseball Babe," quipped Warren, drawing laughter from the room.

"Yeah, they went to a game about a month ago," Peg smiled. "All I know is Warren spent all his money and was begging me for lunch money by Wednesday," she said with a wry smile.

"War," asked Sophia, "does your Mom know **what** you spent all your money on?"

"Ah, well—no."

"Oops."

"OK, now you've got me curious," said Peg. "What, exactly, did you spend all your money on?"

"Red Sox jacket."

"I'm confused. You have one. It's hanging up, it's the same one you had since last year."

Sophia grinned a little. "Actually, he bought **me** a Red Sox jacket. I was admiring it—I was **not** hinting, I really wasn't."

Peg laughed. "Suuuure you weren't."

"Actually, Mom, she wasn't," interjected Warren. "She just said that she would make sure she brought enough money to get one the next time. I had the cash, so I bought it."

"Ah, yes, young love, I remember it well," mused Jim. "How sweet, how precious, how.....**expensive!**" Everyone laughed at that.

"Actually, I thought you had bought that yourself," said Ellen. "That's kind of an extravagant gift, Warren. Those things aren't cheap."

"Ah, heck," said Warren. "Sometimes, you've just got to say, what the heck. That's the only extravagant gift I've ever gotten her. I don't have the money to do **that** every day." They all laughed at that. "Well, except for the pendant. But that was different—it **was** a birthday gift."

"Pendant?" Peg asked.

Sophia smiled. “The one I’m wearing. I never take it off.” She got up and walked over to Peg, so she could see.

“Sophia, that’s lovely!” Peg smiled. “Warren, you’ve got good taste.”

“In women **and** jewelry.” Warren quipped.

“Yeah, but **not** in baseball teams,” Sophia grumbled. “Delgado just took Arrojo deep, with a man on.”

Peg just laughed. “Well, it’s a lovely pendant, in any case.”

“Yeah, I got all misty when he gave it to me,” Sophia laughed. “He said I was the ruler of his heart, so I had to wear it around my neck.”

“Remember that mushy romantic stuff that I said they only do sometimes?” asked Ellen. “Well, here it comes.”

“Warren, I just realized—I’ve never bought you anything like this.” Sophia said.

“Yeah, well my birthday isn’t until January.”

“I know, but you didn’t get me the jacket for your birthday.”

“Sophia, it doesn’t matter. I did the jacket on the spur of the moment. This isn’t a competition.” Sophia relaxed. “However,” Warren added with a gleam in his eye, “there is a twelve-string Rickenbacker down at Guitar Center I’ve had my eye on.”

“That’s a type of guitar, I take it?” Sophia asked. Warren nodded assent. “How much they cost?”

“Oh, thirteen hundred dollars.”

“Well, then, dear heart, you just keep your eye on it. Because that’s **all** you’re gonna have on it.”

Warren made mock pain noises. “Fine. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to repair to my recording studio—otherwise known as my bedroom—and write myself a new Country Western hit song entitled, ‘I Gave My Love my Heart to Wear Around Her Neck, and She Won’t Even Buy Me a New Gee-tar.’”

Sophia hit him with a couch pillow, and then mock-intoned, “So, thus endeth the gooey romantic mush portion of our program.”

The parents were in stitches by now. Sophia sat up, and said, “That reminds me. I’ve never seen your bedroom.”

“Thought you wanted to watch the Sox.”

“Ah, they suck if Pedro ain’t pitching.”

“OK. Let’s go.” They got up off the couch.

“Uh, Warren,” Peg said seriously. “You’re taking her up to your room?”

“C’mon, Mom. She just wants to **see** it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Really,” Sophia smiled, as she disappeared around the corner and up the stairs.

“C’mon, Peg,” Ellen smiled. “They’re not going to do anything with all of us down here. Don’t you trust them?”

Peg smiled at that. “Yeah, you’re right. However, I do find it hard to trust **anything** involving a fourteen year old boy’s hormones, a bed, and a girl as pretty as Sophia.”

The three parents chatted for a while, getting to know one another. Time passed, and Peg looked at her watch.

“Uh, I’m trying to be trusting, I really am—but they’ve been up there for over an hour. I’m trying to accept that they’re----uh, doing it—but **not** here, not with Ryan and Kristin around.”

“I’d agree—Sophia knows not to risk Eric and Tara seeing any of that—and I **do** trust them. But maybe we’d better go check..”

They got up, and went up the stairs. The door to Warren’s bedroom was closed—not a good sign, although they didn’t hear anything coming out of the room. Peg knocked.

“’sopen. Come on in,” they heard Warren say.

They walked in, and found Warren sitting on his computer chair, typing into the keyboard. Sophia had pulled up a chair and was gazing at something on the screen. Beatles music was playing on Warren’s stereo. And, much to the relief of Peg and Ellen, they were fully clothed.

“Yo,” Warren said without looking up. “And this is the official Bourne and Kraatz website,” he said to Sophia. “You can get to all of this stuff from the SkateWeb page.”

“Cool,” said Sophia. “And that mailing list?”

“Yeah, see, you can subscribe from right here. What’s your e-mail address?”

“SexKitten23 at aol.” They both laughed. “What’s yours, by the way?”

“I have two. Preppy99 at hotmail, and BeatleMusic at prodigy.”

“That figures,” Sophia said. “Both of them.”

Warren laughed. “Anyhow, there you go. You are now subscribed to the skatefans list, and the participant skaters list. Check your computer every day, you will be **bombarded** by emails. Especially when skating season starts.”

“Great.”

Peg and Ellen had gathered around behind them. Sophia looked up, and smiled. “Warren is showing me some of the neat stuff on the web.”

“Porn, mostly,” Warren quipped.

Sophia laughed. “He’s joking. Really.” Peg and Ellen laughed. “No, he showed me lots of music stuff, and now he’s showing me some skating stuff.”

“Oh,” Peg looked chagrined. “You guys were up here so long....and we were worried....”

Warren looked up, bemused. “You were afraid we were up here rutting like rabbits.” Peg and Ellen looked at each other, embarrassed. “Don’t worry, Mom. There ain’t no lock on that door, and all I’d need is to get walked in on by Kristin and I’d have to explain sex to my nine year old sister. I’d rather have a piano fall on my head.”

They all laughed. “I’m sorry, Warren,” Peg said. “We should have trusted you.”

“As long as the house ain’t empty, you can trust us,” Warren quipped.

“Although,” Sophia smiled, “if you had walked in about 45 minutes ago, you **would** have found us making out a little bit. But all articles of clothing were in their proper place.”

“Yeah,” smiled Warren, “all except for her bra, because she’s not wearing one.”

Sophia blushed. “It’s too **hot** to wear a bra.”

“Surrre..”

“Sex maniac.”

“Oh, really? Which one of us, again, is the one with Sex Kitten in their email address?”

“Touche.”

Peg and Ellen looked at each other, bemused. “Uh, huh,” said Peg. “Well, please keep the rest of your clothes on, OK?”

“Sure thing, Mom,” Warren chuckled. Peg and Ellen left.

The speaker on Warren’s computer made a noise. “What’s that?” Sophia asked..

“IM. Instant message.” Warren looked at the screen. “Christine!” He typed, the words displaying on the screen where Sophia could see them. “Christine Sixteen! Wassup, Skate Babe?”

“Not much, Hunk. Spending the Fourth cooped up on the computer?”

Warren turned to Sophia. “Christine’s a singles skater, lives in Colorado. She really is sixteen. We chat all the time.”

“No,” he typed, “just a little bit. Figured I’d come up here to the computer and gaze at that gorgeous ass of yours for a while.”

“LOL,” she typed back. “And I’ve got your finest qualities right here in front of me, too.”

Warren clicked another window. A picture came up. “That’s Christine,” he said. The picture was of a very pretty blonde girl, on the ice, doing a spiral.

Warren clicked the IM window up again, and typed, “You just keep squeezing that monitor and pretend it’s my ass, and you’ll feel a **whole** lot better.”

“Ooh baby ooh baby,” came the reply.

Unbeknownst to Warren, Sophia was taken aback a bit; in fact, she was **worried**. Warren was **not** a flirt, not that she’d ever seen. And now he was flirting, shamelessly. They had even exchanged **pictures**! She wanted to say something, but wasn’t sure she should. After all, she **trusted** Warren. Didn’t she?

Warren, for his part, had almost forgotten he had an audience. He was typing again, “So, Skate Babe, how **is** that triple flutz of yours coming?”

“For your information, I do **not** flutz! And it’s coming along fine. At least I **can** jump, and didn’t have to go into **Ice Dance**, thank God!”

“Ah, yes, but since I get to Ice Dance, I don’t have to worry about those silly little jumps, and can concentrate on just shaking my booty, so you can admire such.”

“LOL! Well, you certainly are shaking **something** in this picture you sent me, but I think it’s your **partner**, not your booty, there, Hunk.”

Sophia blinked. Warren hadn't sent this girl a picture of **him**, he had sent her a picture of **them**. Skating.

And she was typing again, "Speaking of that partner of yours, how **is** the Faaaaabulous Sophia?"

"The Faaaaaabulous Sophia is just faaaaaaabulous, as always."

"She didn't dump your ice dancing ass yet so you can move to Colorado and make me happy?"

"LOL. You just keep dreaming of my ice dancing ass, and Sophia will just keep grabbing it."

Even Sophia had to laugh at that one.

"You tell her to keep doing that, or I'm gonna take over, you hear me?"

"Oh baby oh baby."

"Hey, Ice Hunk, I gotta run. Kiss kiss. Now that I got you all worked up, go find Sophia, eh?"

"LOL. Keep working on that flutz, Skate Babe, I wanna check out that ass on TV at Nationals next year, you hear me?"

"I'll flip my skirt up in the air just for you, Yummy. Ciao." And Christine broke the connection.

Warren smiled at Sophia. "That's Christine." The computer went PING again. "Oh, look, all my SkateWomen are on the net tonight." He typed, "Andrea, sweetie! How's my favorite pairs skater today?"

"Hi, there, dreamboat. How's my favorite ice dancer?"

Warren clicked another time, and a picture of a small brunette being lifted by a guy came up. "That's Andrea, and her partner, Brett. They train out with John Nicks in California," he said to Sophia.

Sophia was watching in increasing amazement.

Warren went back to typing: "I'm just dancing on the ice, as usual. What's your beautiful self up to today?"

"Well, Warren, you can give me a wet one, today. We landed the throw triple sal. Four times!"

“Big Wet Sloppy Kiss! Andrea, that’s fantastic! Brett must’ve been thrilled that he didn’t throw you into the boards like last week.”

“LOL! And how.”

“So how is that partner of yours, anyhow?”

“Aaah. The usual. You know Brett. You are very lucky to be in love with your partner, instead of wanting to throttle her half the time.”

“Don’t I know it, beautiful.”

“And how is the love of your life today?”

“Sitting right beside me.” **That** made Sophia smile.

“Really? HI SOPHIA!!!!!! I’m Andrea Wallach, I skate pairs. You taking good care of that gorgeous boyfriend of yours?”

“She says Hi, and Yes.”

“Good for her. Gotta run, o love of my life, Ice Dance Division. Check your sweet self later on, ‘K?’”

“Right-o, beautiful.”

“GO HAVE SEX! Sophia is, no doubt, horny. If I had your sweet self in your bedroom, I wouldn’t be on no computer! <G>”

“LOL! Good advice, as always. Big Kiss, Andrea.”

“Kiss you right back, War. Bye.” And she signed off.

Warren looked over at Sophia, smiling. And noticed something a little amiss in her own smile back.

“Everything alright?”

Sophia sighed in response. “Everything’s fine, dear heart. I’m just a bit surprised, is all. I do believe I’ve just seen a side of you I’ve never seen before. I suppose it took me aback some.”

“Really?”

“Warren, I have never known you to be a flirt. And here you are, practically having cybersex. I was **really** worried until Christine mentioned that I was also in the picture you sent her.”

“Oh. I suppose I should have warned you. I’m much more of an enthusiastic flirter on-line, especially with my Skate Girlfriends. Although I **do** flirt in person, some.”

“I don’t remember ever seeing it. It just seemed a bit out of character.”

“Sophie, I flirt with Jessie **all** the time.”

Sophia had to smile at that. “You’re right, you do. It just never bothered me, because it’s **Jessie**.”

“I also flirt with Siobhan Bates, every time I see her.”

“Yeah, but **that** doesn’t bother me because you’ve known Siobhan for years and you’re good friends.”

Warren smiled, but then turned serious. “If **this** bothers you, then I’ll stop doing it.”

Sophia smiled at him. “No, dear heart, I should know by now that I can trust you. In fact, when Christine started talking about ‘the faaaaaabulous Sophia’, I felt so guilty for doubting you, even for a second.”

“Aah, ‘sokay, Soph. I should have warned you about Christine, we can get pretty down and dirty when we’re chatting. But, trust me, ruler of my heart, they **all** know about you.” He clicked another button. “In fact, the ones that I’ve exchanged pictures with, **this** is the picture that I’ve sent.”

Sophia looked. It was a picture of them practicing, in a close dance hold, smiling, and looking in one another’s eyes with undisguised adoration as they glided along the ice. It was a positively charming picture, and one that made **no** mistake about how the two people in it felt about each other. Sophia felt a little sheepish.

“In fact, when I sent it to Christine, she said, and I quote, ‘Jesus! How the hell did the ice survive all that **heat**? They must have called for an emergency Zamboni!’”

“Warren, I’m sorry. My insecurity bugs the shit out of **me**, sometimes.”

“Ehh. I love you, that’s all that matters.” Sophia reached over and gave him a big hug. “You want me to shut this thing down?”

“No. Not at all. I’m actually having fun, now that I’ve beaten my insecurities back into the dark hole where they belong.” They both laughed. “You need to show me how to set this up on my machine when you’re over my house, though.”

“Deal,” Warren said. The computer went PING again. “Oh, look, it’s Melanie! She skates singles, too. She’s my age, fourteen, and she skates in Detroit.” Sophia just put her arm around Warren, smiling, and watched him as he typed.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS (Chapter 22)

Ellen was getting ready to go, and went upstairs to say goodbye to Sophia.

“We’ve been up here three hours?” Sophia asked incredulously?

“Yes, you have, dear,” said Ellen with a smile. “I will see you later, at home, OK?”

“Bye, Mom.”

They came down shortly after Ellen had left. “Were you guys on the computer the whole time?” asked Peg.

“Yeah,” Sophia admitted with a smile. “I think he’s got me hooked. I was chatting with figure skaters from all over the country.”

“Oh, yeah,” Peg smiled, “Warren’s SkateGirl Harem.”

“Well, one guy,” Sophia laughed. “Jack, a singles skater from Washington.”

“Yeah, he’s one of the few **guys** I chat with regularly. He knows about my flirtsessions with a lot of the girls—I think he was glad to find out that **you** were there with me so he could flirt with you.”

“It was fun, after watching you flirt with every female figure skater in the country, seemingly,” laughed Sophia. “The only thing I didn’t like is that you didn’t have a picture of **him**. You have one of all the **girls**,” she teased. “Although it seemed like he had ours.”

“He does. I have his, too.”

“Why didn’t you show me? And why did you type to him at the beginning that I hadn’t seen his face yet?”

“That was code. I wanted you to enjoy yourself. I don’t think you would have been able to flirt so easily if you had seen his picture.”

“Why? Is he ugly or something?”

“Not at all.”

“And, waitaminnit....what do you mean, what you typed to him was code? What kind of code?”

“It was code for ‘She doesn’t know who you are.’”

“Well, of course I don’t. He’s just an anonymous skater.”

“And that’s what I let you think. If I had shown you his picture, you would have realized he was Jack.....or John, Garrison.”

“Jack is JOHN GARRISON?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You mean to tell me I just spent thirty minutes cyber-flirting with the US NATIONAL SILVER MEDALIST?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Wow.”

“Not everybody knows who he is. He’s a really nice guy. As is Liz.”

“Liz.”

“The girl I was flirting with before Jack came on?”

“Yeah, what about her?”

“That’s Elizabeth Cushman.”

“World Champion Elizabeth Cushman????”

“The same.”

“Wow.”

“Almost **nobody** knows who she is. I figured it out, last year, because all the times that Liz disappeared from the computer coincided with the times that Elizabeth Cushman was away competing somewhere. And, after Cup of Russia last year, I caught her. ‘Liz’ popped back up, IM-ing me as always, and I said, ‘So, how was St. Petersburg?’ And she blathered about it for a couple minutes before she caught herself, and said, ‘Waitaminnit. How did you know I was in St. Petersburg?’ And I said, ‘Because I’m very good at putting two and two together, and I do believe I just watched you win Cup of Russia on my TV set, Miss Cushman.’”

“Oh, that’s priceless. She must have peed her pants.”

“Well, she spent the first couple of minutes trying to deny it. Finally, I said, ‘Liz, I am convinced that you are Elizabeth Cushman, but your secret is perfectly safe with me. I just enjoy the fact that I spend all kinds of time flirting with a World Champion.’ She laughed and typed back at me, ‘OK. I admit it. I’m Elizabeth Cushman.’ I think she enjoys the fact that she has one computer buddy who she doesn’t have to hide it with. She IM-ed me right after she got back from Worlds in April. What a great chat that was. I think that World Championship surprised her, because Katya Yurcheskova had been skating so well.”

“Wow. You rubbing shoulders with the Skating Elite. How come you never told me this?”

“I dunno. Well, I did want to **show** you what this was all about before I **told** you, because it’s easier to explain with a visual demonstration. As for Jack and Liz, well, I’ve been taken into a confidence, here, and I guard their privacy **very** carefully. They’re my friends. Liz was especially helpful when I was going through all that with you before we hooked up.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. She was sending me e-mails from a laptop at Worlds, for heaven’s sake, making sure I was all right. She landed in Germany the week of the whole Scott blowup, and she’s sending me emails asking me ‘Are you OK? How’s your face?’ and I’m emailing her back telling her to forget about me and go PRACTICE!” Sophia laughed. “And then, I get an email from her that said ‘Guess what? I won my qualifying round’ and I got to email back to her, ‘Guess what? Sophia asked me out!’ I think she was more excited by that. Then, she got back from Worlds, and we got to celebrate World Championships and True Love, all at once.”

“Wow.”

“She’s a peach, is Liz. Great skater, better person. You are the single, only person that I have revealed her identity to. Jack already knew, but, as far as I know, **nobody** else on the skating lists and chats around the internet knows that Liz is Elizabeth Cushman. I will tell her that I told you, she won’t mind **you** knowing.”

“Her secret is safe with me!”

The Fourth was always a big bash up at the Kenney’s. Sophia and Warren were one of the first ones there, and grabbed a couple chairs in the corner to hold court. There were a bunch of people on the picnic table, and Warren was telling all about the baseball game.

“.....and she was there making like Peter Gammons. It was great. The guy behind me leaned over to me and said that I was the luckiest guy in the world.”

Rick Kenney smiled and said, "I think knowing a lot about baseball would be high on my list of qualities I'd want in a girlfriend."

"That, pal," said Warren, "is because you eat, sleep, and breathe baseball. Don't get your hopes up, there, Rich—Sophie's a rare bird when it comes to that."

"So, Warren," Cheryl began. Cheryl had been a lot nicer to Sophia since her revelations, but was still as catty as ever. "Does it intimidate you?"

"What?"

"Going out with a girl who's **so** beautiful, when you're... **you**."

Sophia was butting in with "Oh, of course it doesn't," but Warren was saying, "Cheryl, don't go there."

"What," Sophie asked, "it **does** intimidate you?"

"Well, not usually."

"But....."

"The other day at the beach."

"Oh."

Warren turned to his friends and explained. "I didn't mind the guys checking her out, or anything—it was kind of inevitable, you should've seen the bikini she was wearing."

Sophie blushed. "I just wanted to tan as much of myself as I could."

"Uh-huh. Anyway, **I** would have been checking her out, too. It was the two guys that tried to pick her up when I had gone to the bathroom."

Sophie sighed. "It was awful. I kept telling them that I had a boyfriend. Then Warren showed up, and they wouldn't believe me when I said that he was my boyfriend."

Warren was frowning. "Yeah, they were real charming. Him? He's your boyfriend? NO way. And all that kind of shit."

"I know it upset you, but they were just assholes."

"It wasn't just them, Soph. I heard other comments along the same lines."

"Oh."

Warren turned back to his friends. “It really isn’t the fact that she’s better looking than I am, not entirely. It’s something different. It’s somewhat apparent when we’re in street clothes, but it’s **really** apparent when we’re in bathing suits.”

“What are you talking about?” Sophia asked.

“When we strip down to bathing suits, I look like what I am—fourteen. You, however, look eighteen or nineteen.”

“Ah.”

“Those guys that tried to scoop you had to be at least twenty. And I heard lots of comments along the lines of ‘He must be her little brother, he can’t be her boyfriend.’ I can live with a girlfriend who’s a babe. Having a girlfriend who looks like my older sister is a bit tough.”

“Oh, Warren, I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“I’m sorry I brought it up, Warren.” Cheryl said.

“salright, Cheryl. I’ll live.”

Sophia looked at Warren. “Snugglebear, I have a suggestion.”

“OK, Pookie, shoot.”

“I’ve been wanting to talk with you about this for a while. Not because of your looks—you know I love you just the way you are—but for another reason. Your looks would be a side benefit.”

“Go on.”

“Look, you don’t look fourteen in the face. Your legs are fine. We all know how much I value that delicious ass of yours.” Warren laughed. Sophia took a deep breath. “Warren, I think you should start lifting weights to develop your upper body. It’s your torso. And I wasn’t thinking about this in terms of your looks, I was thinking about lifts. You’ve got to get stronger in the upper body or we’re going to have trouble with lifts forever.”

“You’ve got a point.”

“Lifts?” asked Mo.

“Ice dancers have to lift,” Sophia said. “He has to lift me a prescribed number of times in both the original dance and the free dance. It’s not like pairs, where the guy hoists the girl

over the head and skates around the rink, but he **does** have to get me off the ground, and he's having trouble."

"She's fat," Warren said. Everyone except Sophia glared at him. "No, guys, that's a little joke we have."

Sophia smiled. "The preferred body type for female ice dancers makes Christine"—who was quite thin—"look like Pregnant Amazon Woman." Everyone laughed at that. "Anorexia is rampant in ice dance. I will be **damned** if I get an eating disorder from something we consider a fun hobby, but we **do** want to compete, and we have to compete with me being about 45 pounds overweight."

"45 pounds overweight???" Mo asked incredulously, looking at the perfectly proportioned Sophia.

"For an ice dancer? You betcha. I know an ice dancer who is 5'8" and weights 100 pounds. I'm 5'8" myself. I do **not** weigh 100 pounds, I can guarantee you. And it's made worse by the fact of where a lot of my weight **is**."

Everyone stared at her. "She's top heavy," Warren explained helpfully. "When we do start competing, I can pretty much guarantee that, whatever competition we enter, Sophia has a hands-down lock on the prize for the Biggest Tits. Ice dancers all have smaller chests that **I** do." Everyone howled at that, even Sophia.

"Believe me, the **only** time he ever complains about the size of my chest is when we're on the ice," Sophia said mischievously.

"Anyhow, I can see where me lifting weights might help me get you off the ground. And maybe I could fill my scrawny chest out enough to pass for your boyfriend on the beach." Sophie just smiled at him. "I wouldn't know how to get started, though."

"I have the answer to that," Sophia smiled. "Nickie."

"Nickie?" asked Cheryl.

"Nick Panapopoulos. A year ahead of Soph at Oceanview, and one of her dearest friends. I used to hate him back at East, but it turns out he's a really good guy."

"Yeah," Sophia said, "and he's a really good guy who used to be scrawny until he started lifting."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I know he could help you. He belongs to a gym. He's got a regular program and everything."

"He's going to be at Karen's party Saturday night?"

“As far as I know.”

“Great. I’ll talk to him, then.”

“You took it rather well, Snugglebear.”

“Well, I **am** scrawny in the chest and arms. We **do** need to get better at lifts. And I really don’t mind you trying to make me more of a Sophie-Toy Hunk for you, Pookie.”

Sophia grinned at him. “Just don’t do a **thing** to that tight ass of yours!”

“Yes. Ma'am.”

“Hey,” asked Sophie suddenly, “where’s Crash?”

“Didn’t feel like coming.”

“Really?” Mo said. “He always seemed to have a blast at my parties.”

“Well,” Warren said, “I haven’t had a chance to tell you guys this—not even Sophia—but he and Ally broke up.”

“Oh, damn,” said Mo. “Well, he should have come anyway, we would have cheered him up!”

“Wait a minute,” interjected Sophia. “I thought I **saw** Ally, earlier, over by the basketball court.”

“You’re right!” said Mo. “I **did** see her. I just kind of assumed Crash was around somewhere, until Sophia asked about him and you said he wasn’t coming.”

“You’re right,” said Warren. “Ally **is** here. With Matt Kittredge.”

“Oh, shit,” said Sophia.

“Oh, shit, indeed,” agreed Warren. “And now you know why Crash didn’t feel like coming.”

“I’ll bet.”

