

Crystal Grader
Tag Cavello
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*For My Little Shark-Tech Girl.
I love you to pieces, as I damned well should.*

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PART ONE: The Carrot

The girl, whose name was Crystal Genesio, would remember the night she jumped in front of the speeding car as being warmer than usual for the time of year. She would also remember the crunching leaves beneath her boots as she and her friend approached the road where the chaos began. The dry scent of their death, carried on a light breeze, floated ghost-like amongst the black branches of their birth—this she remembered too, even on the hottest summer days in the big city where she worked. In her hand was a carton of eggs. In her eyes, a sparkle that shined only for the things they wished to possess, and for the chance that someone might dare deny them. No one did on that Halloween night in 2004, when Crystal was just eleven years old. And she noted that—as always—the passenger seat of the speeding car, as it came up over the hill, had been empty. Devoid of the perfect girl. Of course it was devoid! After all, there was but one girl in the entire world who deserved to sit there.

“Is he a farmer too?” Lucy Sommer asked.

They were making their way along the fringe of a wooded area. On their right, a field of winter wheat swayed to and fro in the night breeze, one of many on the outskirts of tiny Monroeville, Ohio. Above them hung a full moon that lit the landscape from end to end.

“*Well?*” Lucy pressed.

“Yes, he’s a farmer,” Crystal replied, not knowing in the slightest what the writer did in his spare time.

“Good for him. I like it out here.”

Crystal spared a glance at her friend, a mousy girl with brown hair and round glasses whom she had taken under her wing as a study partner to improve her grades, which at the time had been flagging in the arena of Cs and Ds like the dying flowers of an inept gardener. And as with most of her endeavors, Crystal had gotten what she’d come for. She was today, early in her first year of junior high, a steady B student. As for Lucy...

“I’m not letting you marry a farm boy when you grow up,” Crystal told her. “Forget it.”

“Oh no no,” the other laughed, “I didn’t say *that*.”

“Good.”

Crystal looked at her boots—a pair of brown hikers—wary of the many things there were to trip over on a walk through the woods. One step up over a fallen limb, another step around an old tractor wheel gone to rust. Nothing at all problematic for a girl on the cheerleading squad. The rest of her consisted of a blue sleeveless top and brown shorts, with a bowed ribbon tied in the wild shock of black hair sprouting from her head.

“Where’s the house?” Lucy wanted to know.

“Top of the hill. See it?”

Slowing her pace, Crystal pointed through the trees. Her other hand tightened around the egg carton. Fifty yards away was the back porch of the house they had come to decorate. A single orange light flickered above a row of crooked wooden floorboards. A pumpkin, uncarved, rested on the step.

“Sweet,” Crystal said, stepping behind a tree. “Everything looks quiet. Lots of shadows too.” Her lips curled into a grin. “By the time we’re done here this guy’s gonna think it’s Easter instead of Halloween.”

“Yeah,” Lucy came back with, looking doubtful. “I mean all we’re gonna do is throw eggs at his back door, right?”

“Right. Unless you brought cherry bombs.”

“No way.” The girl’s glasses took on a curious shine. “You love his books, right?”

“Every single one of them.”

“And this is how you want to tell him about it?”

Lucy had been asking this question, in one form or another, since first hearing the idea during a kitchen study session at Crystal’s house over a week ago. Dodging around the truth of the matter was easy enough—like jumping over old tree limbs and rusty tractor wheels. She’d repeatedly fobbed her friend off with excuses ranging from holiday trickery to revenge stories encompassing sleep-deprived nights under bedroom reading lamps. Tonight though, standing under a full moon with the crisp leaves swirling about her bare legs, and her lungs feasting on the cool autumn air, the true motive behind this mission seemed more willing to stand in the open.

“I mean to tell him a lot of things, Lucy. I figure this is a great way to get his attention.”

The other shook her head. “Getting someone’s attention has never been a problem for you.”

“It won’t be a problem tonight either, believe me.”

“Yeah but why not just go to a book signing or a lecture?” The doubtful eyes came alight. “In fact he’s going to be at our school this week! Tuesday. There.” Problem solved, Lucy’s face seemed to say, now let’s go home.

But it only made Crystal laugh. “Lucy when I see something I want—I mean *really* want—I don’t share it. Not a chance.”

“I know that about you. But—“

“Shh!”

A shaggy white dog was trotting across the area at the bottom of the hill. Its ears were pricked up as its nose searched for a scent. Damn. The first complication of the crack.

“Of course there’s going to be a dog,” Lucy said, as if reading the expression on Crystal’s face. “This is a farmhouse.”

“Yeah well I didn’t bring any steak to make friends with it. Did you?”

“As a matter of fact...”

A small box of treats slipped from the inside of Lucy’s coat.

“Oh you covert bitch,” Crystal exclaimed. “High five.”

Their hands clapped in mid-air, and it was hard not to notice the expression of joy that came over Lucy’s face at the thought of having pleased her friend—hard not to notice, yet very easy for Crystal to understand. They’d been hanging out together for less than a year, which meant there was still a lot of work to be done with this girl. Brilliant but unconfident, enterprising yet skittish, all of it described Lucy to a T. Crystal wasn’t certain she could handle the job—but then, *something* had to be given in return for those study sessions.

“Of course it may not take the treats,” Lucy pointed out. “It may just bite our hands off instead.”

“It didn’t look like a very mean dog.”

“Nope. Can you whistle?”

“Open the box first.”

Once one of the treats was in her friend’s hand, Crystal pursed her lips and whistled as loud as she could. Instantly the dog appeared back in their field of view. Its tail searched the sky for a few seconds, in need of another beacon.

Crystal whistled again. “Here boy!”

Now the dog saw them. Barking furiously, it charged.

“Hold it,” Lucy commanded after seeing Crystal flinch. “Don’t run.” She held the treat out. “Hey fella. Here ya go. Look at this!”

Still barking, the dog burst through the first line of trees. A scream rose in Crystal’s throat. They’d messed up in royal spades. Whatever kind of dog this was, it couldn’t be bought off with biscuits and pretty music. Oh no. Trained animals knew better than to fall for such tricks. They also knew, and were doubtless quite happy to demonstrate, how to tear out an interloper’s throat.

The eggs dropped from Crystal’s hand. Her lungs filled with a gasp, their last ever. The dog snarled, opened its jaws—

And skidded to a stop on the dry leaves.

“That’s a good boy,” Lucy told it, proffering the treat. “What’s your name? Huh? What’s your name?”

A series of high, happy yips came back by way of reply. Raising its front paws off the ground, the dog snatched the treat from Lucy’s grasp.

“Wow,” was all Crystal could think to say.

“You were right. It’s not mean at all.” A second treat disappeared from Lucy’s hand almost as fast as she could get it out of the box. “In fact, he’s quite a sweetheart,” she giggled. Then, at the dog: “Are you a he? Hmm?”

More happy barking. The snarl had become a big, bounding smile. To Crystal’s untrained eye the dog looked to be of the sheep-herding variety, about sixty pounds—only fifteen less than what she’d last seen on her bathroom scale. She began to wish she hadn’t called it, that she’d thought of a different way to reach the writer’s porch. Nothing about dogs in general bothered her much, but this one was maybe a little too big to play with.

“Can you make him stop?” she asked Lucy as her eyes searched the farmhouse for movement.

The fourth treat of the evening dangled from the other girl’s fingers, prompting their new friend to stand on his hind legs for the next bite. This he managed by stretching his neck out, wetting Lucy’s knuckles with his nose in the process.

“You are such a good dog!” she cooed.

“His name is Chubby.”

Both girls screamed at the strong, deep male voice that came from the shadows.

A flashlight popped on, illuminating the flora around them. Crystal held her breath. Blinded, she had no idea who the owner of the light might be. Chubby trotted past her, his tail cranking. Footsteps crunched in the leaves, and before long, a man appeared. *The*

man. At the sight of his face, Crystal's heart began to dance to a brand new rhythm, though the beat was just as fast.

"Oh gosh," she plumed. "Oh wow."

"Ladies?" the writer—whose name Crystal had no trouble remembering as Jarett Powell—asked. "Can you tell me why you're sneaking around my property with a bunch of eggs? Now please. I'd like to get the bullshit behind us and in the dust as soon as possible."

“Will you *please* get the fuck out of my way?”

Crystal’s hand slammed on the horn button—which was already broken—in effort to communicate to the traffic in front of Greenhills Plaza that she was late for work.

No one paid her the time of day. It wasn’t like they could. Cars were backed up in either direction for two kilometers around the little red Hyundai Getz that she drove. The temperature outside shimmered at thirty-two Celsius. People stood everywhere on the sidewalks, waiting for a taxi cab, or a bus, or a Jeep to take them to the next crowded place. Manila at two o’clock in the afternoon—hot, cramped, and in a rush while rarely seeming to go anywhere—never changed. That went double in front of places like Greenhills, one of the city’s most popular malls.

“It’s *green!*” Crystal shouted, staring at the nearest traffic light. “Jesus Christ, what the fuck is wrong with you people? Fuck it.”

She gunned the motor just as the light went yellow and the car in front of her crossed. Immediately a Filipino traffic officer dressed in blue stepped in front of the Getz with his hand raised. Crystal’s foot hit the brake, but it was too late. The cop was motioning for her to pull over.

“*Goddammit!*”

Spinning the wheel, Crystal got the car over to the curb and lowered the window.

“Your license please, Miss,” the cop said.

“The light was yellow.”

“Your license please, Miss,” the cop demanded.

She handed it to him. He looked it over, then showed her a sheet with a list of violations on it. A gloved finger hovered over one—reckless operation by a red girl—before tapping the two thousand peso fine typed next to it.

“I don’t think so,” Crystal told him.

“Yes ma’am. I will confiscate your license and you can pay this fine at the Gilmore traffic center.”

“Or,” Crystal tempted, “I can just give you one hundred pesos right now and we can forget this ever happened.” She let her smile widen. “What do you say?”

The cop smiled back. “Two hundred, ma’am.”

Crystal reached into her bag. She knew that the man might have taken fifty had she offered it straight away, but in Manila it was best (and this she had learned after three years living here) for foreigners to spread the butter a little more thickly when it came time to pass out sandwiches to anyone carrying a badge. The cop told her to wait for a moment, shielded the window with his body, then took the money.

After this his voice lost all officiousness.

“Salamat!” he called out. The license went back into Crystal’s hand. “Drive safe, ma’am! Ingat!”

“Walang anuman!” Crystal said back, waving. But once the window was rolled up and the car was moving again: “Now go fuck yourself!”

Nobody at the call center noticed she was late.

Except her boss.

Crystal hurried into the wing of her account, where rows of computer monitors flickered in front of the talking heads of myriad tech support agents. The whole area was drab and cheerless, decorated with the ugliest color scheme Crystal had ever been nauseated by. Blue carpet lay underfoot; fluffy orange partitions divided the cubicles. Her own computer was located in the quality assurance section. Here, too, sat several busy people, most female. Some were coaching agents on their conduct, while others worked on quarterly reports, or spread-sheets, or presentations for new ideas that would likely never see the light of day. Fresh method did not whisk often amongst the throng.

Still, faces smiled at her as she passed. All but one in fact.

“Crystal, may I see you in my office after your class?”

Of course the account manager, a tall individual who had changed his name from Robert to Roberta after deciding he liked life better as a woman than a man, just happened to be idling in the exact wrong place today—which was to say, right next to Crystal’s cubicle.

“Sure, no problem,” Crystal told him—her—trying to sound cheerful.

Nothing by any stretch stood further from the truth. She stooped to turn on her computer, hit her head on the desk while standing back up. Pencils rolled, coffee cups jingled.

Cries of *Oy! Oy! Oy!* rang out from all around.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Crystal had to assure them, rubbing the back of her skull.

“Late for class again is not fine,” Roberta put in curtly, but turned on his heel and pranced off without waiting for an excuse.

Now all the faces which had been smiling earlier looked sympathetic. Even DoDo Garcia, who sometimes went drinking with Roberta, provided a commiserative furl of the brow.

“Go,” she pleaded. “They’re waiting for you.”

Crystal went.

Five minutes later she was in front of her class in training room Alaska. That name fit it well, as the air conditioner pumped weather that made her want to don a snow suit and go skiing. Goose-pimples rose on her arms as she greeted everyone. Thirty pairs of Filipino eyes followed her across the room. Their contempt was near palpable. This particular batch for English grammar had not been going well so far. At only three sessions in, it was clear to Crystal that they did not care for their instructor. Snickers were always coming from the back row, whispers, pointing fingers, as if a button were missing from Crystal’s blouse, or her hair had a dead bug in it.

Today was no different. One of the girls, a beach-ball belly who went by the name of Maribeth Dominguez, sneered without greeting her back. Somebody else gave a mock sneeze—*ah-shit!*—which made good for a few titters up and down the rows. The grammar here at Benton, Asia, Incorporated might not be so good, Crystal thought, but the western culture in it seemed to be going just fine.

“All right,” she said, dropping her bag, “yesterday we left off with the quiz on prepositions. Today we’ll grade them—“

“Can’t we do an icebreaker first?” one of the other girls wanted to know.

“Um...”

Sammy Senen’s hand went up next. “How about charades?”

“Bakla!” Tim Alvarez shouted from the other end of the room.

Laughter erupted from everyone else. Sammy grinned and raised his middle finger at Alvarez.

“Not charades again,” the girl implored. “Something different. Maybe a story game, like Truth or Dare?”

“Spin the bottle!” a man’s voice called from the back row.

“*No!*”

More laughing. More middle fingers. Seconds later seat-mates resumed chatting, the way they’d been when Crystal had first arrived. And just like that no one, not even the more respectful students like Gretchen Furlong and Dennis Jambrich, felt obligated to pay the class the slightest bit of attention.

Once more Crystal’s temper began to heat up. Despite evidence to the contrary, these people were not children—they were twenty-something call center agents who needed work on their grammar skills for writing email. Trouble was, they didn’t seem to care. Worse, she didn’t know how to make them care.

“*Hey!*” she yelled. “*SHUT UP, EVERYONE!*”

The room froze. Everyone—everything—stopped.

“Better,” Crystal nodded. “If you guys want to play games you can go to Tom’s World at the mall and drop tokens into the kiddie cars. In this room you *learn*. Beth,” she said to the girl with the fat belly, who hadn’t stopped grinning, “I live *on* this street or I live *in* this street’. Which is it?”

“I don’t care,” Beth answered right back.

Crystal pointed at the door. “Then get the hell out of here!”

Stunned gasps from the others. Petrified faces. Crystal could feel her own face turning red, but her gaze remained fixed on Beth. To let it drop now, she knew, would be like giving an apology, and she was damned if she owed any of these obnoxious laggards one of those.

“I will not waste my time,” she promised, “on people who don’t care. I would rather look at an empty seat than do that.”

“So you really want me to leave?” Beth replied.

To Crystal the inquiry, spoken in a tone of bravado that had doubtless been manufactured as a showpiece for the rest of the class, sounded like a threat, which infuriated her beyond the breaking point.

“*What are you, deaf as well as fat?*”

“Oh my god,” someone whispered.

“*Yes! Get out! NOW!*”

Beth rose from her seat like an old woman. She picked up her bag and lumbered towards the door. Her body bounced and jiggled. Seeing it disgusted Crystal even further, and an evil pleasure swelled in her heart as she noticed that the big girl had begun to cry.

The door clicked open, clicked closed. Beth was gone. Drama over.

Almost over, anyway. For the rest of that session, no one spoke unless spoken to. A few of the girls wept quietly, their hands shaking as they read aloud from test papers answered during lunch breaks, or in between mock support calls. The men all looked like they were plotting murder.

Like Beth, Crystal didn’t care. She wanted a cigarette and maybe a glass of whiskey to go with it. Not a single one of the students said goodbye after class. Once she was

alone Crystal turned off her computer, picked up her bag, and went to face the music with Roberta.

“Please,” the transvestite said, “sit.”

Man that he was, he towered over everything in the office. Making it even worse were the high-heeled dress shoes on his feet; it hurt Crystal’s neck to look at him. She put herself down in one of the two chairs in front of his desk. On the blotter was something she hadn’t seen before—a smiling ceramic frog with the words *Hop to it!* swirled into a caption underneath.

Where the hell did you get that stupid thing? Crystal wanted to ask.

She decided that it had to be gift from a very close friend, for it wasn’t like Roberta at all to even pretend to be cute. Plain white walls decorated with achievement certificates surrounded the desk. Gray cabinets. Stacked files. The occasional broken Cisco router. As usual, Crystal found it all very austere. Even the green dress Roberta had on looked like something brought up from the basement.

“So what happened today?” he asked, taking a seat behind the desk.

Crystal cleared her throat before answering. “The traffic in front of Greenhills was terrible. I—“

Roberta’s head shook. “No, no, don’t worry about that anymore. In class I mean. Beth was in here a few minutes ago. She was crying,” he added, as if such a thing were beyond the comprehension of account managers.

It startled Crystal for a moment and she cleared her throat again. But then she expected to come clean about the incident eventually. Now was as good of time as any.

“She wasn’t crying yesterday,” Crystal rejoined, “when I asked her for the assignment I gave and she didn’t have it. She didn’t do it at all.”

“So you attacked her like a dog?”

“She told me she didn’t care, so I told her to leave. I told her I don’t have time for people who don’t care.”

“She cares, Crystal. She’s a good agent.”

Crystal blinked. The statement was as ludicrous as it was ignorant. “How can you know that? She’s never taken a single live call on her own.”

“She’s from a good school. It’s on her resume.”

“And that makes her a good agent?”

“It means she has potential.”

“The only potential I see in Beth is for a lot of open tickets and disgruntled dropped calls.”

“You’re not giving her a chance.”

“She needs to try before I can do that.”

“Did you call her fat?”

A grimace spread over Crystal’s face. Calling Beth fat...yes, that had been bad. A moment to regret for a long time to come. The stuff of fourth-grade playgrounds.

“I’m afraid I did,” she had to admit, keeping her eyes on Roberta’s by the sheerest willpower. “That part of the incident I wish I could take back. But not the rest.”

It did not have the effect she’d been going for. The account manager’s face remained stern, stony. Her heavy dark eye-shadow made Crystal think of assassins in the wings of black parapets.

“To judge someone by his or her personal appearance,” she intoned, “is very unwise. Especially in my domain.”

“It wasn’t spoken from the heart.”

“I hope not. But either way I can’t let this one rest, Crystal. I’m going to meet with—“

The phone rang, cutting her off. It left Crystal alone with the frog for a few minutes while Roberta handled whatever it was that needed handling.

Hop to it! it told her again.

Beth had to dislike it too, only for a different reason: the message. Crystal was certain that girls like Beth did not hop to anything except Big Macs and Quarter Pounders with extra cheese.

Roberta put down the phone. “Okay then. Where were we?”

Crystal saw no reason not to be succinct with her answer. “I believe we were about to discuss disciplinary action. Pertaining to me.”

“That’s right. Yes, I’m going to meet with each of your students in turn. Also their team managers. The time has come for... a full investigation of your conduct, in and out of the classroom. You’re late several times a month. Your absences are piling up.”

“I understand,” Crystal said. What else was there to say?

“Afterward we’ll decide whether or not anything needs to be done. By *we* I mean myself, the TMs, and probably the client.” Her hands folded on the desk. “In the meantime, you’re on probation.”

“Probation?”

“There will be another trainer present during all of your classes. Also, the QACs in your work area will be reporting to me daily on what you do with the time between. What you do and where you go.”

A hot, harsh breath of air plumed from Crystal’s lungs. “What’s the matter, Robert?” She knew he hated to be called this. “Did somebody from IT find another way around the firewall so all us girls can go back to playing on social media during work hours?”

“This is why, Crystal,” Roberta explained, looking vindicated. “This is why I have to press my thumb down. You have a temper. You respond poorly to discipline. Just the other day I heard you swearing in the bathroom. Something about the coffee dispensers—“

“They’re disgusting, yes.”

“They’re also free. If you don’t like what we have here then go to Starbucks.”

Crystal’s lip twisted.

“You also swear quite a bit on the client’s personal chat service,” Roberta continued. “That’s forbidden and you know it.”

“You’re asking me to change.”

“No. I’ve been asking you to change for the past three years, and that’s been all, because until recently our agents have always shown improvement after taking your classes. Now I’m done asking. Now I’m telling.”

Ultimatum given, Roberta stared over the desk. Crystal stared back, letting the silence draw out like a held breath. It took a long time, but eventually she needed some fresh air.

“All right,” she said.

“Good,” Roberta nodded. “So we’re done here. You may go.”

Crystal stood up. Anger and frustration swelled in her chest. Something needed to be said, some parting shot to fracture the ever-present, ever-frigid composure that seemed to glow like an aura around Roberta no matter what the circumstances. Yet she couldn’t think of a thing. Without lifting her eyes, she left the office. Several dozen agents stared at her as she passed—she could feel them all, rays of heat that they were.

The comfort rooms were at the end of a narrow corridor just outside the work area. Crystal went into the ladies’, sat down inside one of the stalls, and cried. It helped a little. The swelling in her chest faded. Her fists came unclenched.

It was just too bad there was a mirror in the comfort room as well—a rather large one that took up the entire wall. Crystal splashed her face at the sinks, and when she looked up, a forty year-old woman appeared. Too bad indeed. She was only twenty-five, after all. Her black hair, once vibrant (Peter Pan hair, her friends from school had sometimes called it), now looked tame. Sleepy. Her eyes, once a deep, rich blue, were tired as well, their shine cast over by the haze of some distant fire—a fire that burned eternal and was making its way ever closer to the hostess who could not keep herself from looking back.

“Are you all right?” DoDo ventured, after Crystal returned to her workstation.

“Yes I’m good,” she answered, faking a smile.

“Beth went home.”

Crystal shrugged. News always did travel fast in a call center. “She’ll survive.”

“Yeah but you might not. Everyone’s talking about you on the chat service.”

“I guess that’s reasonable considering,” Crystal said. “But don’t worry. Nobody here wants to kill me.”

DoDo gave a sardonic laugh. “Are you sure?”

“Oh yeah,” Crystal replied, adjusting her seat. “I mean I know how killing feels. I’ve done it before.”

The gymnasium filled up fast on Tuesday.

Tension in every classroom had been tight all morning, especially among the girls. It stood to reason. That day's guest was a popular writer of romance novels, and while it was true many of them were considered too mature for the junior high reading clique, the school board had booked him under the confidence that any questions from the audience pertaining to heated story segments would be off limits.

In any case, Jarett Powell's lecture promised to be a fascinating one. Most of Crystal's friends kept copies of his work hidden either at the top or bottom of their lockers, along with other contraband such as make-up kits, chewing gum, and even the occasional pack of cigarettes.

He had no idea what he was getting himself into—of that much Crystal felt positive. An article in the previous day's paper had him quoted as saying: "With the junior high students I'm expecting a lot of tentative questions about where I get my ideas, and how do I get inspired. Typical things that every young author wants to know."

The shortest skirt Crystal could get away with ended about four inches above the knee. This certified a dangerous view for Powell when he noticed her sitting in the front row. It came with a pink belt that went splendidly with the sleeveless blouse she'd taken out of her closet that morning. In the bathroom before class, she'd surreptitiously applied a light sheen of make-up, including lip-stick and eye shadow.

Fully equipped, she went back to her desk. At just before 10AM grades six through eight were called into the gym. Rows of folding chairs facing an empty podium had been set up on the basketball court where Crystal did her cheering on Friday nights. Yellow and black—the school's colors—dominated the walls, mostly in the form of championship pennants dating back to her mother's time beneath these glass backboards and nylon nets.

Blocking out the steady chatter from the other students as best she could, Crystal sat down directly in front of the still vacant podium. Two men and one woman—the principal, the vice-principal, and the sixth grade English teacher—stood nearby, chatting between oblivious smiles. Of Jarett Powell there was no sign.

"Waiting in the wings," Lucy said into Crystal's ear. "If he stood there in plain sight until ten o'clock everyone would just gawk." Then, sounding a little worried: "Do you think he'll remember us from the other night?"

"Oh hell yes," Crystal said. "How could he forget?"

"I was afraid you'd say that." A sigh escaped her lips. "This is one time I wish sixth graders had to sit in the back. He'll probably make faces at us all through the lecture."

Crystal crossed her legs and went back to searching the doorways. The most likely bet for an appearance rested on the far right, where the locker rooms were. Her eyes squinted to penetrate the lurking shadows in that area. In moments they picked out a tall, dark shape leaning against the wall.

"Gotcha," she whispered.

Or not. Her lip twisted as the school janitor, a sixty-something man whom everyone referred to (behind his back) as Shit-Shit because of the way he smelled, appeared in the corridor, scratching his balls.

“Goddammit, Shitty, what are you doing back there?”

“Huh?”

Crystal blinked at Lucy. “Oh nothing. Just muttering my thoughts.” She started to turn away but did a double-take, reaching toward the other girl’s face. “Ah, Lucy, straighten your glasses before they fall right off your nose.”

“Thanks. Yeah, the bow is bent. Are you going to ask him any questions?”

“Who?”

A wicked leer followed this. “*Who?* Shit-Shit over there. *Jarett Powell*, that’s who.”

“Oh, *him*,” Crystal replied. “Lucy, you know that I have...several questions I want to ask *him*.”

“Any of them fit for a public setting?”

Her eyebrows popped up. “Not especially.”

“Didn’t think so. Well you won’t be alone. Annette’s got a few wild ideas in her head. Kory and Brittney. Of course neither of them is sitting in the front row showing off their legs.”

“*Hey!*”

“It’s true, right?” Lucy simpered. “You look like a pack of bubble gum!”

“Shut up!”

“Know his favorite flavor yet? Is it strawberry or cherry?”

“If you don’t shut up I’m going to post pictures of your Ashlee Simpson poster all over MySpace.”

This made Lucy double over so hard laughing her glasses fell onto the floor. “You *would* do that!” she marveled. “You just would!”

“This guy doesn’t strike me as going for strawberries or cherries anyway,” Crystal replied more seriously.

“No?”

She shook her head. “Oh no. For Jarett I’m thinking more along the lines of pink lemonade.”

“Crystal,” Lucy said, sobering up, “you know you’re only eleven years old, right? And he’s what? Forty?”

But Crystal didn’t care about this. Ever since reading his first novel, *Pursuit of the Dove*, in the window seat of her bedroom a year ago, she never had.

“He’s mine,” she said, looking at the empty podium. “Believe me when I tell you, Lucy. Believe me.”

Ten minutes later the liver-spotted, bald head of Principal Arthur Dodder was hovering over the podium microphone.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen!” he honked through the gargantuan nose that took up most of his face. “As you all know, the school board has invited local author Jarett Powell to speak to you and answer questions regarding his craft.”

“Woo-hoo!” a female voice called from the back.

“It is an honor and a privilege,” Dodder grimaced, “to have him here with us. He has had several books published over the years, and is eager to discover more talent right here near his own home town. So without further ado!”

“Mine,” Crystal muttered again, as several cheers rose from the audience.

“I present to the class, Mister Jarett Powell!”

Screams now from the girls. Delirious squealing. Crystal stood up and clapped with everyone else. Her eyes raced from one corner of the gym to the other. But Powell, much to her irritation, was still playing ninja. The doorways were empty, the curtains, the bleachers. Over by the locker room Shit-Shit was still scratching his balls. So where did that leave her target?

“Oh my God oh my GOD!”

Wondering if a fire had suddenly broken out, Crystal whirled on her heel in the direction of the cry—

And stopped breathing.

Jarett Powell, dressed in blue jeans and a red dress shirt, was walking straight towards her. Idol that he was, he had decided on a sneak attack, making his approach to the group from behind. Only the maneuver seemed to have backfired. The girls were impeding his progress toward the podium, jumping up and down like groupies at a rock concert.

Their antics did not surprise Crystal in the least, and it irritated her even further to think that Powell could be so stupid. She stopped clapping as at last Jarett reached the podium. A smile—one half in pity for his failed coup—rose to her face, but then slumped when she realized the writer was not going to spare so much as a glance in her direction. Scowling, she watched him shake hands with Dodder. He hugged Miss Reingold, the English teacher—

At that moment Crystal could have cheerfully killed Miss Reingold, never mind the high marks she always gave her in class, nor the praise for writing skills she always heaped upon her mother. Miss Reingold was young and slender. She had long brown hair. And she was even now looking at Jarett Powell in much the same, dreamy way all the other girls in the auditorium were. Miss Reingold really needed to have her head twisted around backwards until it popped off.

Crystal plopped down hard in her seat.

“Oh my,” Lucy let out, tying her hair back with a rubber band. “Did you feel like that the other night when we saw him? I sure didn’t. It must be some kind of virus.”

“No,” Crystal, still angry, told her. “I didn’t feel like that then. I don’t feel like it now, either. I’m not one of his chippies, Luce.”

The other laughed. “Who said anything about being a chippie? By reading his books *we’ve* been paying *him* all this time.”

“That’s not what I meant. I—“

“Good morning, everyone.”

The audience fell dead silent at the official greeting from Jarett Powell. His hands, perhaps wishing for a pair of stress balls, squeezed the podium with white-knuckled fervor. A tight smile gleamed on his face. Based on these observations Crystal surmised that public speaking did not fall neatly under this man’s list of abilities. Good. He deserved to squirm a little for ignoring her.

“I’m very pleased to be here. Thank you for having me. As I understand it, many of you are hoping to be writers one day.”

Nervous giggles from some of the girls, coughs from the boys. Crystal crossed her legs and folded her hands in her lap. Her anger began to cool. Whether anyone in the

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