

Chapter

The lanky teenager glanced in the mirror, checking out his hair to make sure it was still neatly in place. *Hey, No need to tamper with perfection.* He, who if captured by the enemy, would have revealed the following: name: Jeremy Dillon; rank: senior in high school; serial number: 13 in football, 42 in basketball, and 19 in baseball.

Suddenly his attention was hijacked by a flash of blue. The small mirror in his school locker was not sufficient for satisfying his curiosity so Jeremy whirled around to determine the origin of the blue streak.

Across the hallway, attempting to open a locker, was a girl he didn't recognize. Beautiful long brown hair flowed almost to the waist of the blue dress. It was not often Jeremy saw someone his age in a dress, so this, in itself, would have captured his attention. The figure contained within that garment was the kind that caused car accidents. He gazed for a moment and a woeful thought struck him. *She probably has a face only a parent could love.*

Jeremy was conscious his mouth was hanging open. As he

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dwelt on that thought, the object of his contemplation succeeded in opening her locker, placed several books in the inner chamber and twirled with the grace of a ballerina in Jeremy's direction. He felt blood rush to his face as he turned to his locker. He felt totally embarrassed for staring.

He fumbled for the target of the mission to his locker, a book. There was not much time to examine the thoughts speeding through his brain like — how did I avoid flies entering my mouth when my tongue was in jeopardy of being branded with the imprint of a size 11 Adidas running shoe. His game of twenty questions was cut short by a melodious soprano voice cutting through the fog of his mind like a laser beam.

“Excuse me.”

Jeremy turned to the source of the music masquerading as a voice. Replaying the whole scenario, Jeremy couldn't remember what he noticed first. Was it the perfect pearl white teeth or the delicate nose or the peaches and cream complexion? He only knew for sure the pair of chocolate brown eyes that met his were the most beautiful he had ever seen. A flow of electricity shot through his body from the bottoms of his Adidas to the top of the hair, which, after all that voltage, was probably standing straight up now.

“Can you tell me how to get to room 222?”

Jeremy swallowed hard to prepare for speech. “Room 222. Sure. Go down to end of the hall, hang a right and it's three doors down on your left.”

“Thank you!” she flashed him a smile he swore he would never forget, even if he lived to be a zillion years old. She was dancing down the hallway before he could say another word.

Jeremy watched the retreating figure with audio visions of two songs going through his head. *I'd walk a million miles for one of your smiles'. A wave out on the ocean could never move that way.*

Suddenly he felt like kicking his locker. *I didn't ask her name or introduce myself! How lame is that?*

Another voice interrupted his self-lashing party. “Hey, JD. Mr. Burns was wondering how long it takes to get a book out of a locker. He wanted me to remind you a hall pass is not a three day

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furlough. I guess study hall isn't the same wonderful place without your presence."

"I'm on my way back right now. I hope my picture won't be featured on the milk cartons in the lunchroom today!"

"That makes two of us. Imagine all the people vomiting."

"Cute! NOT!"

I told Mr. Burns you probably had a major emergency – like your comb got stuck in your hair."

"Not today. I'd have to say I've been twitterpated."

"You've been what?"

"I've been twitterpated. Why don't you go look that up in your Funk and Wagnall's?" The vision of Bambi having his heart stolen from him by a young female deer played itself in Jeremy's internal theater.

Jeremy slammed his locker and headed to study hall. His thoughts continued to be dominated by the mystery girl *Does she have a boyfriend? What name would a girl like that have? It would have to be something regal to match the owner.* Possible names filed through his brain as he walked up to the study hall teacher and returned his hall pass.

"Well, Mr. Dillon. Nice to see the lost has been found. For a minute I thought I misunderstood your purpose in going to your locker. I thought perhaps you said you went to read a book. Or maybe even write one."

Jeremy didn't respond to Mr. Burn's playful banter except to grin. He was thinking the lost had not been found. *But, I know where her locker is, and I will find her.*

He sat down and opened his book to the bookmark. For a half hour his eyes skimmed over words, but the ideas they conveyed couldn't compete with the thought stream dominating him since his encounter with Miss Perfect. When the bell sounded, sending young bodies scurrying in all directions, Jeremy realized he didn't remember one thing he had read.

Study hall was succeeded by math class. The teacher was talking about cosines today, but Jeremy was on a different chapter, coeds. He kept replaying the locker scene in his head, like the

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instant replay in a televised football game. He had fumbled.

Could a girl like this ever be interested in me? He took a mental inventory of his assets. *Average looks but with great hair. Clean cut. Athletic build at 6 foot 2 inches and 190 pounds. He was starting quarterback on the football team, the leading pitcher on the baseball team, and probably a starting guard on the basketball team. Smart. Witty, but not a smart aleck. Friendly. Polite.*

Now there was a word that was not very popular in high schools in the 21st century. In an era where “in your face” is much more popular with my peers than courtesy, maybe I have to include that in the liabilities column. Jeremy objected to himself at this point and put polite back in the asset column. He was not interested in a girl who didn't consider politeness to be a virtue.

His thoughts wandered back to some of the many conversations he and his father had shared in regard to relationships and sex. Jeremy had never known his mother, who died from complications after his birth. He did know very well how much his father adored her. His dad had made it quite clear to Jeremy that waiting to find the right girl was not easy, but it would be worth all the effort it would take. Jeremy had been raised with the idea a female was a very special life form and something to be cherished.

He had taken the lessons to heart, not surprisingly, since his father was the hero of his life and his best friend. Jeremy had been Paul Dillon's entire world after his wife died. He poured himself into bringing up Jeremy to be a special young man, one his mother would have been proud of. Jeremy was truly a chip off the old block. He even preferred the music and movies of his father's era to the current offerings from the entertainment world.

What will I tell Dad about the Lady of the Locker? What is there to tell? She was extremely attractive, but how many different ways had he learned a book can't be judged by its cover. Before there was any reason to tell his father anything, he needed to find out what this mystery girl was made of. If she was like most of the pretty girls at his school, Jeremy would not be interested. But there was one encouraging sign. She was wearing a dress — to school.

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What kind of girl did that in the 21st century? Maybe she is as old fashioned as I am! God, please let that be the case. He paused in his thinking. *Why did I include the G word?* Another lesson Jeremy's father had taught him well was that God does not exist.

Jeremy fell back to wondering about the name of wonder girl. Another song came on his internal jukebox. "Ba Ba Ba Ba Barbara Ann" was going through his head when he became aware there was dead silence in the room. He turned and saw everyone looking at him, most with jack o'lantern grins. With a sinking feeling he'd just been busted by the attention police, he turned toward his teacher.

She was staring right at him. "And your answer, Mr. Dillon?"

Crap! What class is this? Oh, yeah, math. There was only one answer in his head and Jeremy was quite sure Barbara Ann wasn't correct. "I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Krantz, but my mind was elsewhere, and I don't have a clue what the question was." He couldn't help but notice a few guffaws and duhs being uttered. *I hate it when this happens.*

"Well just in case you'd like to get on the same page we are on, literally and figuratively, we are on problem number four on page seventeen. And Mr. Dillon, the football game is not until Friday. Perhaps you could focus some of your thoughts on math until then. Ruthie, can you bail Mr. Dillon out?"

As the focus of attention switched from Jeremy to Ruthie, his thoughts wandered away immediately. *Football? I almost wish it was football that was monopolizing my thoughts. Having agile, hostile and mobile athletes trying to take off my head every Friday night is certainly a lot less scary than dealing with a female relationship.*

Jeremy thought of the electricity that had passed through his body upon having his eyes momentarily lock onto those magnificent coffee colored orbs possessed by the girl without a name. *Argggghh. I can't stop thinking about her, but I don't even know her name. That is a problem I need to fix, ASAP.* He did his best to divert his thoughts to the textbook in front of him. After what seemed like eternity, the bell finally sounded, dismissing Jeremy from the world of ciphers to the gym and PE class.

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Jeremy walked into the locker room past several boys in various stages of undress. He was just about to turn the corner when one of the boys posed a question to the rest of the group. "Have you seen that new babe yet?" Jeremy slammed on the brakes and turned to face the group.

"Oh yeah! Talk about your summer sizzlers!"

"I wouldn't kick her out of bed for eating graham crackers!"

"You wouldn't kick any girl out of bed for any reason!" The rest of the boys roared.

Brian Witt, another boy who was not in the group stepped into the circle, causing them all to concentrate on donning their gym clothes. "There's a new girl in school?" The geeks, as Brian usually referred to them, nodded their heads and looked away.

"What's her name?" Brian asked. Jeremy's ears perked up to hear the answer.

They all shook their heads and one mumbled, "Don't know."

"Figures. No biggie. I'll know that by lunch, and I'll have our first date lined up by the end of school today and will probably be buying the graham crackers by the weekend." He left them to go back to his locker.

The small group of intellectually inclined but brawn challenged youths silently heaved a sigh of relief. Witt had not slugged any of them in the arm muscle or put on a Vulcan death grip or slapped them in the groin. They almost relaxed.

Jeremy resumed his journey to his locker. He had his own pet names for Brian Witt. He couldn't determine which one he liked better: Halfwit, Nitwit, or Dimwit. He fantasized hitting Witt on the top of the head so hard he needed holes in his socks to stick his tongue out. *Or would it be more effective to deliver a knuckle sandwich which rerouted his nose through Albuquerque.*

He felt a little remorse at such thoughts. His father taught him long ago that violence was no answer to personal conflicts, at least offensively. It was OK to defend yourself, but to physically attack a weaker person was not a manly thing to do.

If only Brian would give me the need to defend myself. Brian confined his aggressive activity to those individuals who were not in a position to stand up for themselves. The thought of Brian with

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the new girl was almost too much for him to bear. Witt was notorious for his 'love them and leave them' attitude. Women were merely toys to him, something to be used and abused.

He was striving to find a loophole in the anti-violence clause. *Would protecting a nice girl from Witt be a form of self defense?*

Mr. Jenkins, the PE teacher, was also the basketball coach. He loved his boys to get in preseason practice in the fall. On the menu for PE class today was a series of half court games. The coach divided them into teams of three. Brian Witt was one of Jeremy's teammates.

Darn! If Witt and I were not on the same team, I might be able to accidentally elbow him in fighting for a rebound. Maybe I'll get chance to collide with him on the football field in the near future.

As usual after PE class, Jeremy had to hurry to make it to his next class, English Literature, on time. That meant that his normally perfectly coiffed hair had to receive a hasty comb job and then dry during class in whatever position the individual hairs decided to wander. At lunch time he would return to the bathroom and make the necessary repairs. Today was no exception, and Jeremy stepped across the threshold of his classroom just seconds before the bell rang.

Both of his feet had entered the room before he noticed the blue dress that had captured his attention earlier that morning. Mystery Girl was sitting in the second column of desks and in the very front row. Jeremy's hand instinctively flew up to his wet hair and made a pass through it with his fingernails to smooth the misbehaving little rascals. His efforts, as well as his journey to his desk in the back of the room, seemed to go unnoticed by the new girl, who was reading a book.

He plopped down in the chair and sighed. The nice thing was he had an unimpeded view of the desk where Miss Wonderful sat. He could appreciate that view for the whole fifty-five minutes of class without danger of the object of his adoration being aware. Maybe this class was not going to be as boring as he thought after the first week.

Ms. Parks pushed a cart toward the first column of desks. She reached for a stack of books and passed them to the boy in the

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front seat. She then moved to the new girl's desk. As she was handing a stack of books to Wonder Woman, she cleared her throat. "Class, I'd like to introduce to you a new student at Sumner High. This is Maria Masterson. Maria, where did you move here from?"

"Madison, South Dakota."

Maria turned to pass the stack of novels back to the girl behind her. Jeremy could see the white of her smile clearly even from the back of the room.

Maria. He finally had a name, and a beautiful and appropriate name it was. The song of the same name from West Side story started playing in his head. Maria, the most wonderful sound I've ever heard. Suddenly that name will never be the same.

Jeremy thought about that smile again. *If only it was beaming upon me. Would I need sunscreen to be exposed to that light for an extended period of time?*

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of his copy of the novel they were reading for the class. A quick glance at the cover revealed the title, Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens. *It's like that new Garfield movie Tale of Two Kitties. Obviously the producers of that movie had been playing a little word game. He looked back to the front of the room at Maria. How about A Tale of Two Pretties?*

A literary trip to Merry Old England was not on Jeremy's list of dream vacations. On the bright side, Maria would be reading it at the same time. It would give them something to complain about together.

Before I can talk to her, I have to meet her. How is that going to happen? He started visualizing the different scenarios that could play out. Only a fraction of his attention was given to the teacher in the front of the room. The words, "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times" filtered through his cranial interference. The thought that these words described high school perfectly flashed in and out of his consciousness.

In addition to thinking about Maria, he ran an old movie of conversations with his father about Miss Right. The young man's parent had loved his wife very much and had not married again

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after her death. A frequent discussion between them was the importance of finding his complement, someone who made him whole and one whom he could make complete. He knew he didn't understand this concept completely, but he did grasp enough of it to know none of the girls he had met so far had the right stuff.

Maybe no one did. Maybe I have set up such a lofty goal that I never can attain it. I'll always be comparing real females to this perfect image, and they will never stack up. His dad had reminded him he certainly didn't need to be compromising his desires at this point in life. He had suggested Jeremy not marry until he found someone he couldn't live without. *Maria seems to be stacking up in all the right places, so far.*

Another old song ran through his head. "Love Makes the World Go Round." Somewhere he had read a quote that love didn't make the world go around, but it makes the ride worthwhile. It had been three hours since he first saw Maria. The twitterpation reading was still measuring on the Richter scale. He realized his world was going around at a faster pace.

At the end of his thought detour, Jeremy realized his high academic marks would be seriously jeopardized, if he didn't get his mind off Maria. He was not worried about flunking, but he was competitive in everything he put his hand to. Academics were no exception. *I need to get my butt back in gear, if I am going to challenge for valedictorian of my class.*

With competition on his mind, he couldn't help but think of Brian Witt and his comments in the locker room. Would Jeremy have to compete to win the love of his life? The sober realization that this could be the most competitive event in his life hit him like a ton of concrete Legos. The bell sounded, signaling it was now lunchtime.

Normally food was foremost in the lanky teenager's mind, but not today. Jeremy hoped to be able to somehow work up the courage to start a conversation with Maria on the way to the lunchroom. Unfortunately she was surrounded by a group of girls who wanted to check out the new kid on the block. *A princess and her entourage.*

On to Plan B. Wait, there is no plan B. I better come up with

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one, quickly. He decided the best idea was to sit as close as possible in order to hear any conversation.

The table where Maria and her admirers sat was full. Jeremy detected an opening at the table behind Maria. He slid his tray onto the table and his rear into the seat. He glanced around him to see who was sharing his dining quarters. He glanced around him to see who was sharing his dining quarters. *Looks like I am having a sophomore moment today.* He grinned at the thought, and the sophomores at his table, thinking he was smiling at them, grinned back.

I going to get grief about this from my fellow seniors. His attention suddenly was riveted on the events occurring behind him. He recognized Brian Witt's voice, and the vulgar claim Witt had made that morning in the locker room echoed in Jeremy's ears. *It appears the clown has gotten his cue and is now coming onto the stage.*

Witt started off his move by striking up a conversation with the girl next to Maria. After some small talk, Brian got down to the nitty-gritty. "What do we have here? This must be the beautiful new girl I've been hearing about." He moved over to stand next to Maria. "I'm Brian Witt, the shining star of the Sumner senior class."

Jeremy thought he was going to puke. *Come on Maria, put Witt in his place.* It would be unbearable to see her fall for Witt's line of BS. *Go ahead, Maria, make my day.*

Maria continued to chew the bite of food she had already forked into her mouth as she sized up the male beside her.

She finally replied in a tone that would be civil but not enthusiastic, "Maria Masterson. Nice to meet you." She turned back to her plate and fished out another forkful of hotdish.

"Perhaps I could take you on a tour of the town and help you get familiar with everything?"

"I'm sorry. I'm busy then."

"Busy then? I didn't even mention a day or time?"

I guess you might say I'm *always* busy!"

Jeremy wanted to shout for joy.

Brian realized he had just been politely told to buzz off. "OK,"

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was all he uttered as he started to slink back to his own table. On the way he threw an insult at Jeremy, but not loud enough for Jeremy to hear over the giggling of the girls at the table behind him, “Hey, Dillon, you get demoted to sophomore?”

Meantime, back at the ranch dressing, Jeremy was continuing to monitor the conversation behind him. He was a little frustrated because he found out little about the new girl. She seemed to ask lots of questions and get the other girls to do most of the talking. They were invited to talk about their favorite topic, themselves. He wondered if perhaps this conversational technique revealed something about her.

Jeremy went fishing for another bite of food and discovered to his surprise he had cleaned his plate. He didn’t remember eating all that food. At first he suspected that someone might have been scoring from his plate. Then he realized that he had been on autopilot.

What was going on with him? Another song from his Dad’s collection popped into his head. *It’s only love trying to get through.*

Love? Could it be? Nah. I don’t believe in love at first sight. “Twitterpation is in your imagination” was his mantra as he trudged to his next class. He tried not to hope Maria would be in his American Government class. He didn’t succeed, however, on either count.

Spanish class was his next class. Maria was a Spanish name. *Tal vez*, maybe, she would occupy a desk in that classroom? But again, no luck. *I have only one chance left.*