

Preface

Kendall Township.

Someone once said that it was the biggest small town they'd ever seen. You could live there all your life and never really know anyone. It might even be true...theoretically. There is no evidence of anyone having accomplished this feat. Indeed, there is no evidence of anyone ever having attempted it. The guy who said that did not live in Kendall Township or anywhere near it. He had been passing through, and noticed the decidedly small town feel, though he knew that it was an unusually large municipality in terms of square miles. He had noticed that wherever he went, people seemed to know one another. He had noticed that even though they sometimes clearly did *not* know one another, they still seemed to share a connection. It was a connection they did not appear to share with *him* though, so he figured it only existed between residents of the Township. He was right...in a manner of speaking.

What this man had failed to notice during his brief stay in Kendall Township was the fact that there was indeed a bond between the people of the local community. But it wasn't a psychic

connection, as he had supposed. It wasn't a supernatural phenomenon that created this small town effect. It was something far more tangible, far more real. If you asked a Kendall resident what it was that connected everyone, they might give you a one word answer: Venom. Understandably, most people would look strangely at a person who answered in such a way. In fact, they might even back up several feet. It is a strange answer to a straightforward question. But if you were in Kendall Township on a Friday night in Autumn, you would require no further explanation.

It was on Friday nights, under the bright lights of the Cobra's Nest at Kendall High School, that the Kendall High Cobras played their games. It was high school football that transformed this large Township into the small town it really was. And you didn't have to be at the field to hear the chants coming from the home stands: VE-NOM! VE-NOM!

What our visitor had not noticed about all those who "knew" one another was their attire. They'd all been dressed in black, from head to toe; or they might have been wearing a Kendall Cobra T-shirt or jacket. The women might have been carrying little black and silver handbags with the word "VENOM" embroidered on it in silver. Many of the younger girls braided black and silver cords into their hair. On Fridays, the entire town turned black and silver. That's how you knew you were in Kendall.

Fanatical was one word used to describe it. Psychotic was the word many citizens in the surrounding cities chose to use. It was something not often seen in this part of the country. You could find towns like this in the south or the Midwest maybe, but Kendall was an anomaly in New Jersey. The Kendall High School varsity football players were special in this town. They were celebrities in their community. Their every move was watched, their entire lives lived in public, their every decision judged as to how it impacted the program. Their relationships were followed, especially the starters. Their girlfriends were treated like queens and princesses. They were royalty...for a little while.

This story is *not* about football, though it would be impossible to tell a Kendall High School story that didn't have *something* to do with football. Rather, this is a story about the people who play the game and those in their lives. It is about love, hate, success, failure, passion, but most of all, it is a story about confusion. Simply put, this story is about high school.

Welcome to Kendall High...

Chapter 1

Lindsey glanced out the window for the tenth time.

When would he get here? This is torture!

For the past week she had been all smiles as this day approached. With each passing moment, August 1st was getting closer and Kevin would finally be home, and she would be back in his arms. They had finished the eighth grade two months ago, together, as a steady couple. They had spent many nights making out over the weeks preceding and Lindsey was smitten and in love. But then Kevin had to leave for two months to go to Japan. They wouldn't see one another until August. This began the worst summer break in Lindsey's life. She endured eight weeks of watching everyone in the entire world run around and have fun with their boyfriends and girlfriends while she was all alone.

She didn't have many friends, or any for that matter. In fact, despite her stunning looks, Lindsey Overton was not all that popular. While the rest of the girls her age were doing everything they could think of to accentuate their bodies, Lindsey dressed to cover hers. She wasn't embarrassed. She just didn't want the attention. Too often when boys approached her,

Lindsey's quick mind and sharp wit put them off. At this age, boys tended to think that she was mean, even scary. She was okay with that. At least she didn't have to put up with their stupid jokes.

But not Kevin. No, Kevin wasn't afraid, or even the slightest bit intimidated. After three days of trying to talk to her in the halls, where she generally made a sarcastic remark and fled to class or the bathroom, he finally sat down at her table at lunch and began talking to her as if they had been friends for years. At first she was amused, and was preparing to make yet another wisecrack before pulling out a book and reading it in front of him, but then she lifted her eyes to meet his, and all of a sudden felt a change. *Wow*, she thought, *His eyes are amazing!* Kevin had green eyes, but not the usual hazel color we're used to. Kevin's eyes were a deep, but really bright, green, kind of like the green she had seen in old bottles. It took only a second and she was hypnotized. She could not take her eyes off his. At some point, she'd snapped out of it and realized that he was asking her a question. He was interested in her; really interested. He asked her questions and listened as she gave her mumbled answers. They spent that entire lunch period talking and Lindsey gradually loosened up enough to look up at Kevin as they spoke. And then the unthinkable happened. As the warning bell sounded for next period, they rose and collected their book bags, and Kevin took her hand and led her out of the cafeteria, just like all the rest of the couples. Being the most popular boy in the school, this action by Kevin drew every eye as they made their way to Lindsey's algebra class. At the door, Kevin faced her, lifted her hand to his mouth and lightly kissed it.

"Thanks for spending your lunch period with me, Miss Overton," he said in an exaggerated formal tone. "Shall we meet here in say, 40 minutes?"

She couldn't help it. She rarely smiled in public, but now her face beamed. This was too much!

Kevin grinned. "Aha!" he exclaimed. "There it is. I knew you had one in there somewhere."

"What are you talking about?"

"A smile, of course. I knew you were able to smile. Just wanted to see it."

He turned to go to class. "I'll see you right after class."

It all began there. He met her right after class like he said and they spent every moment after that together.

...that is, of course, until he left for stupid Japan. *Who does that?* she wondered. Who flees the country after starting a relationship? Thank God for Skype. At least she got to talk to him once in a while, though it wasn't the same. No matter what she did to the color settings on her monitor, she couldn't get his eyes to look right. They were always too dark, hidden in the shadows because of the angle of light when he looked at his screen. She had thought of asking him to move a light so that she could better see his gorgeous eyes, but he might think that a bit too weird. She definitely didn't want to make things weird. No, better to wait it out and then spend as much time as possible staring into his eyes when he got back...*which should have been five minutes ago! Arrrrggh!* She grabbed for her cell phone. One more text couldn't hurt, could it?

"No!"

A hand snatched the phone away just as she reached for it. It was her sister, Tracey. She stood there, frowning at Lindsey and shaking her head disapprovingly.

"What the..? Give it back!"

Tracey raised her eyebrows and shook her head once again.

"I don't think so, Lindz. You're gonna make this guy think you're a stalker."

"He's not going to think I'm stalking him. He's going to realize that I'm worried about him and he should let me know he's okay."

Tracey smirked, "Yeah, right. That's not how guys think, Lindz."

"And you would know how guys think? How many boyfriends have you had, Trace?"

That was mean. Lindsey knew it right away. Tracey's face fell slightly. It wasn't that she wasn't used to it. It wasn't even that she wasn't expecting it. Four or five years ago, when the boys began looking differently at the girls in her class, she realized that she wasn't getting much attention from them. She didn't really understand it at the time and was afraid to ask anyone about it. However, it didn't take her long to realize that it had everything to do with the way she looked. While not terribly overweight, she *was* a bit heavy. But worse than that, she was tall for her age, standing three or four inches taller than the tallest boys in her class. At that age, it can be an awkward thing for a girl to be taller than boys. But that wasn't even the worst of it. She had bright red hair as well. So she was this super-tall hulky beast with glowing red hair at an age where you definitely don't want to stand out in a freakish way. To make matters worse, Tracey suffered from a condition that made her skin somewhat splotchy in patches, so she looked even

weirder. It didn't help that she was also terribly shy. She wasn't picked on all that much, just ignored. She actually knew kids who got picked on all the time and often found herself envying their situation because at least people paid attention to them.

By the end of her eighth grade year, the boys and girls in her class were all dating and the high school social scene loomed. By this time Tracey had gotten over some of her shyness and was in her fifth year of dance and gymnastics classes. She had loved these classes until the moment she realized she wasn't pleasant to look at. Then she wanted nothing more than to quit. Her mother would have none of it. In this family, you were not allowed to quit something in the middle of the year. Now, Tracey was thankful that she had been made to continue the dance season, because over the course of the year, it was only dance and gymnastics that took her mind off her social discomfort. She worked harder and harder at it, and spent all of her spare time dancing and practicing her gymnastic techniques. She was even invited to join the competition dance team. It meant that even in the summer, when the rest of the dancers were off, she would continue to train and dance with the best dancers in the school. It was dance that got her through Jr. High and freshman year.

As she began her training over the summer heading into her sophomore year of high school, Tracey noticed for the first time that something had changed. Actually, a lot had changed. First of all, as she stood in front of the huge mirrors in the dance studio, she saw that her body did not look quite how she remembered it. The person she saw in the mirror was a stranger to her. She recalled a tall, heavy, splotchy kid. She had somehow stopped paying attention to her looks and focused completely on her dance technique. How long had it been since she had really looked at herself in the mirror? She was slim and lithe, her muscles toned and firm. She had no discernible fat. Her red hair had grown in past her shoulders and now fell midway down her back. It was a bit shaggy and in need of a trim, but it was really quite beautiful. What was amazing more than anything else was her skin was perfect. The splotchiness was gone. She vaguely recalled a nutritionist telling her that exercise and a healthy diet often was all that was needed to correct some of our bodies' problems. As the rest of the dance team began to filter into the studio she also realized that the boys were all taller and bigger than she was. Somehow, without her noticing, they had all grown past her. Even the girls had begun to catch up to Tracey. She was still rather tall and her build was still more broad, but she looked more or less like everyone else.

With new found confidence in her appearance and talent, Tracey was prepared to make the most of her high school experience, though she hadn't the first clue how to begin. She was a bit envious of Lindsey's relationship with Kevin. Lindsey's looks came so easily to her. Tracey was always amazed at how Lindsey so nonchalantly discarded those boys, and even girls, who attempted to strike up conversations with her. It was one thing, at age fourteen, not to care about having boyfriends, but no friends at all? While Tracey had always craved attention, Lindsey had it in spades and couldn't care less. Until Kevin came along. Tracey had seen the change instantly. Lindsey came home one day with stars in her eyes. She'd tried to hide it behind her usual cynicism and sarcasm, but you can't keep that up for long. Lindsey was never a smiler. She would rather hide any joy or pleasure behind a facade of indifference, but Kevin caused that facade to crumble. He didn't change her personality, but Lindsey was unable to keep her feelings completely hidden. It was actually nice to see, and Tracey felt protective of that. As the older sister, she felt it was her responsibility to keep Lindsey from screwing it up if possible.

"I might not have experience with boys, but that doesn't mean I'm stupid. If you don't stop crowding him, he might push you away. Just find a way to kill time and wait for him to get here."

"Fine." Lindsey fell back onto the sofa and closed her eyes. *When was he going to get here?*

And then, suddenly, he *was* there. She glimpsed him walking up the driveway. Though she couldn't see his face through the stupid gigantic weeping willow tree, she knew instantly that it was him. He had a way of moving. It was a silent steady glide, similar to the way some of the better dancers at onStage moved, only Kevin was far more effortless. There was a power about his gait that made him stand out to Lindsey. Though she wasn't a very outgoing type, she noticed everything about people. She was a watcher, a studier.

She couldn't contain her excitement and jumped off the couch, running to the downstairs powder room to check her appearance. Tracey couldn't help but smile. She wished she had thought to record this on her cell phone. *No way Lindsey will ever admit to this later.*

"Get the door, Trace." Lindsey called out from the powder room.

Trace? So, now we're buddy, buddy? "He's your boyfriend."

"Seriously? You're gonna play that card on me *now*?"

The doorbell rang. "Ughhh! Come on, Tracey!"

Tracey chuckled, getting up and heading for the door. "Calm down. Your face gets really red when you're stressed."

"Really?" Lindsey peered more closely at her image in the mirror. "No I'm not. Just get the door. I don't want him to think I was sitting here waiting for him."

"But you *were* sitting here waiting for him. You know, lies like this have a way of coming back and biting you."

"Shut up and get the door. Then disappear."

Tracey opened the door, peeked out, and actually had to catch herself. She had forgotten about those green eyes. "Hi Kevin," she managed, opening the door all the way. "Come on in."

"How are you, Tracey?" He walked in, holding a big bouquet of roses. Tracey looked at them in amusement.

"I'm okay. Nice flowers. They for Lindsey?"

Kevin grinned. "Yep. Think she'll like em?"

Tracey nodded ultra solemnly. "Oooh yes. Lindsey is all about roses. I see you have red ones, pink ones, white ones, yellow ones, and even lavender ones."

Kevin snickered. This was a running joke. Lindsey hated romantic overtures. He loved to do the most ridiculously stereotypical dating things just to aggravate Lindsey. He brought her chocolates and flowers, stuffed animals and cutesy figurines. He took her on a chariot ride just before going off to Japan. He'd actually liked doing that and thought she did too. One time he even rented a limousine and had the driver take them all over the area while Kevin pointed out every single moment he and Lindsey had shared together, every restaurant they had gone to, every mall they had shopped in, even the local WaWa, where they usually bought meatball subs on the way home to watch a movie. She was an easy mark because she was very clear about not being interested in that sort of thing. Giving Kevin that kind of information was like telling a kid where the cookies were and then telling him not to eat any.

Tracey grinned knowingly. "You know her so well."

"I like to think so."

"By the way," Tracey said a little too loudly. "She's been sitting here all day waiting for you and getting pissed that you didn't return her texts."

"Tracey!" Lindsey was coming down the hall. "I will hurt you."

"Hey, Lindz," Kevin grinned from behind three dozen brightly colored roses.

Lindsey didn't smile. She should never have mentioned her abhorrence of typical dating type stuff. He was never going to stop. Who cared about flowers anyway?

"You think you're pretty funny, don't you?" she said. Kevin was now unable to keep from laughing. "Well, you're really pretty stupid. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know," Kevin handed the roses to Tracey. "Could you take these before she pitches a fit?"

Tracey took the bouquet. "Sure. I'll just go ahead and put them in water. I know just where to put them so Lindsey can see them when she gets home."

Lindsey turned to her sister who was walking down the hall toward the kitchen. "Stay out of my room."

"These will look so pretty on your dresser..."

"Tracey."

"...but you'll have to make sure to open the curtains and let in some sunlight so they last longer."

"Tracey! I will *cut* you! I'll cut that..." She turned to Kevin. "What's that ligament right behind your knee?"

"The posterior cruciate..."

"Your posterior cruciate ligament! I'll cut it right in half! You hear me, Tracey?"

Kevin grabbed both of her hands and pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her and bringing his lips to hers. They kissed for several moments, Lindsey barely able to stand because she was so relieved to be in his arms again. She couldn't explain why she was feeling relief, but she was. She let him hold her up, and laid her head on his shoulder.

"I really missed you," she said softly. "Don't ever go away again."

Kevin held her closely and stroked her hair, softly. "I'm here for a little while, I think."

"This is a perfect time for a ham and Swiss cheese sandwich. Are you hungry?"

Kevin thought for a minute. "Hmm. I could eat. Spicy brown mustard?"

Lindsey made a face. "Uhh...yeah? Is there another kind?"

Kevin replied, "Sure there is. What about yellow mustard?"

"That's not mustard."

"It says mustard on the label."

"So what? Labels don't tell the whole story. Yellow mustard is mustard *paste*. It's not genuine mustard."

"Paste? Really? It still tastes pretty good."

"I didn't say it tasted bad, just that it is not mustard. And it is not acceptable on a sandwich. Mustard paste is for soft pretzels."

"That's it? Just soft pretzels? Actually I like spicy brown mustard on soft pretzels."

She led him down the hall toward the kitchen. "That's because you're an idiot."

They sat together on an outdoor style couch on the back deck, he with his feet up on the table, and she reclined with her legs across him. His head was tilted all the way back, looking straight up except his eyes were closed. He gently stroked her legs and feet. This was the type of thing Lindsey had missed all summer. Kevin, though he was a football player who was known for violent hits and hard play, who was expected to bring that toughness to his high school football career, was actually very gentle when it came to Lindsey. She knew he liked her. She knew that he liked to touch her. She also knew that he was very conscious about where he put his hands. When they kissed, his hands never slid too far down her back. They never strayed too far up her leg. She would often sit on his lap, watching TV, cuddled against his chest or sprawled across him like he was a mattress. Kevin would wrap his arms around her, but would keep them firmly in place around her stomach, never moving up or down, never causing her any discomfort. Somehow, that made it feel even more intimate for Lindsey.

It really was a comforting thing to her. While the rest of the girls had to deal with boyfriends that couldn't keep their hands off them, Lindsey felt completely at ease whenever Kevin touched her. He had once told her that being raised by a single mom made him particularly sensitive to things that hurt women. He was referring to things like cheating, harsh criticism, and violence, but he seemed to have an instinct for making a girl feel safe and secure. She also knew that he had a softness instilled in him that he reserved for those females he cared for. She had seen that gentleness in how he interacted with his mother, and had felt it herself in times like these. Sex was a topic that was constantly in the faces of everyone in school. Boys talked about it crudely, like they knew all about it, and often made poorly thought-out advances on the girls in class. She was even pretty sure that one or two of the girls had actually gone through with the act

during last school year. The pressure was immense on the girls in her class, and going into high school would probably not reduce it any. Part of her relief was the knowledge that Kevin would be by her side through it all. She would not feel any pressure from him...she hoped.

“Are you glad to be back?” she asked, her eyes closed in the bright sunlight.

He was half dozing off. “Sure,” he mumbled. “I missed this.”

Lindsey smiled. “Me too. Are you ready for football?”

“Can’t wait.” She could hear the smile in his voice. When he had spoken of football before, it always seemed so far away. They had met well after last year's championship season. Now, it was here, looming like a giant shadow over the whole town. Kevin all of a sudden had a certain urgency in his voice. He was excited. Lindsey had never seen him play. She had only heard the stories. They were hard to imagine based solely upon her personal experiences with this kind and gentle, if not completely ridiculously romantic guy, who had these green eyes you just couldn’t stop thinking about. But with just two words, *Can't wait*, she began to get a feel for it.

“Really? Why not? What’s so special about a game that this whole town goes completely out of its mind?”

He never even opened his eyes, but the slight smile on his face hinted at his reaction. “It’s the greatest game ever created. It’s the ultimate team game.”

“It’s still just a game.”

“Yeah, it’s just a game.”

“So, why the hysteria over winning and losing? We’re not talking about life and death here.”

Kevin finally opened his green eyes and looked at her quizzically. “It’s because football is much more serious than life and death.” He leaned back and closed his eyes again. Lindsey stared at him for several seconds, looking for the smile to crack or any other sign that he was joking. It never came.

He spoke again after several moments of silence. “You’ll see in a few weeks, Lindz.”

“I guess.”

He smiled, his eyes still closed. “You know, you have to wear my jersey to the games.”

“What? You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. The girlfriends all wear their boyfriend’s alternate jersey at the games.”

“Alternate jersey?”

“If we play at our field, I’ll have my black jersey, so you’ll wear the white one. For away games, it’s reversed. You’ve seen the girls wearing the football jerseys to school on game day.”

Lindsey was well aware of the tradition. She had always thought it was kind of silly, girls wearing the boys’ jerseys, and she was definitely not excited about it. Those things were huge, meant to be worn by big guys with even bigger pads on. The girls who wore them all looked like they’d put on judges robes tucked into their jeans. Plus, she hated to stand out. If people saw her with Kevin’s number on, they would surely want to talk to her about him. There was no questioning his popularity. He was already a hero of sorts in this town. His name was being bandied about as a potential superstar in the making. Everyone connected with football and anyone who paid any attention at all knew who Kevin Sinclaire was. That meant before long, they would probably know who *she* was as well.

“Do I *have* to wear it?”

“Yep. I think it’s a city ordinance.”

“Really? Like, I’ll get a ticket if they catch me at home with a tank top on?”

“Well, you won’t be at home. You’ll be at the game.”

“I have to go to the games too?”

“Absolutely. Girlfriends are not permitted to miss games. I’m pretty sure they take attendance.”

“And I have to wear your stupid shirt while I’m there?”

“Yes. Actually, you have to wear it all day, everywhere you go.”

“What if I go to the beach?”

“It’s probably best if you go to the beach on Thursdays.”

“I don’t think this is going to work out between us...”

He had enough. He quickly grabbed both of her arms, and pulled her quickly up to him, wrapping his arms even more quickly around her back so that she was now sitting on his lap. She immediately shut up and kissed him, running her hand up through his short, dark hair, feeling it slide out of her grasp as she tried to grab it. They spent the next hour in this very spot, doing this very thing.

Chapter 2

The first Monday in August is always a special day in Kendall Township. It's not a holiday. It's not a celebration. Everyone goes to work. Everything is open for business. Nothing appears different from any other day of any other week. It's not really even a day that impacts anyone in the township. That is, unless you want to play football for the Kendall Township Cobras. If you *do* choose to play football in Kendall, then the first Monday in August is the beginning of the two most grueling weeks of the year. It's always hot. The sun is always blazing down relentlessly. There's never a breeze. You get there by 7:00am or you don't come at all. You're there until 5:00pm. You run and run and run. Then you do up-downs, push-ups, sit-ups, six-inch drills, crab-walks up and down the length of the field, and every other torturous exercise the coaching staff can come up with. Then you run some more. And that's just the first two hours. Next come the hitting drills. Players line up and smash into each other over and over again. By lunchtime, most guys can barely move. Then the real work begins. Offense; Defense; Passing; Catching; Rushing; Tackling; Receiving; and God forbid you drop a pass, miss a block, or fumble the ball. You might *never* get to stop running. The coaches yell, curse, swear, scream, and drive the squad relentlessly. And all the while, the sweat pours out of every single player. Every muscle screams for rest. And then you get to do it all over again tomorrow. That first week, many

players simply quit. The first Monday in August is the start of Summer Camp. The players and coaches refer to that first week as Hell Week.

Kevin arrived ten minutes early and saw about a hundred guys already there. Being on time was Rule #1 in the Player's Handbook, which he was given in the previous spring when the Booster Committee came to him for the umpteenth time to make sure he still planned to attend Kendall and not some parochial school like Holy Trinity or St. Augustine's. Those schools generally recruited all the good players to their private academies, which tended to set those schools up for success and leaving the public schools to live with whichever players they could muster together. This was why Holy Trinity hadn't been beaten in league play in over two seasons and had won last year's parochial state championship.

As he strode through the gate and onto the field, Kevin noticed the three men from the booster committee sitting in the bleacher seats, watching the boys intently. When they saw Kevin one of them waved. It was Leo Forsythe, the chairman of the committee. Leo was possibly the richest man in Kendall Township. He owned a chain of those self-storage places where people rented lockers. He had real estate all over the country. Jerry Hoffinger, the bald one, is a partner in Waldman, Hoffinger and Smote Law Firm, and the other guy, Kevin Murphy owns the Murphy Group, a large real estate ownership group, with a few other minor partners, mostly contractors who do the work to restore homes which they then resell for a profit. These three sat at the head of an unofficial committee, but their influence was felt all the way at the top of the local government. Money, like what these three men had, was not something politicians ignored. Kendall Township listens to these three men, and what these three men care most about is Kendall High School Football.

"Guess this is it." Kevin turned to see who was speaking, and nodded to Scott Webber, his quarterback for the past three years since he moved to the Township.

"Guess so."

"Awwwwwyeaaaahhhh!" came the shout from the blue Ford Pathfinder, just pulling up to the curb alongside Kevin and Scott. Neither of them needed to look to know it was Tony Yavastrenko, or "Yavo", as everyone except his mother called him. He jumped from the car before it came to a halt as his mother yelled at him in Russian to be careful. He smiled, waved, and blew her a kiss. His demeanor always bordered on the obnoxious, but he was one of those characters who seemed to always pull it off. He got away with saying things, especially to girls,

that would normally get a guy slapped. Yet he always managed to avoid trouble. He had played football all his life, and was one of the few who could play with an intensity and ferocity to rival Kevin's. He had charisma and good looks. He was also crazy, but in a good way. His particular brand of lunacy was fun and often adorable to the girls, who were steadily becoming the major focus of his attention.

That lunacy translated a bit differently to the football field, where he and Kevin both were generally considered to be borderline psychotics by more than one frightened parent. It was a bad idea to be on Tony's bad side, and even worse to be on the bad side of one of his friends. He was loyal and unconditional in his friendship. He'd back up his friends in any situation, right or wrong. The saying "one guy lies and the other swears to it", came about precisely because of people like Antonin Yavastrenko. He was Kevin's best friend. Kevin would probably tell you that Tony was his only *real* friend.

Tony and Scott, along with Kevin, had been heavily recruited by Holy Trinity, the nearest parochial school, and last year's parochial state champions, but none of them really wanted to go there. You have to go to mass or something like that, and part of the curriculum included religious classes. No, thank you. Kevin had enough of that every weekend when he attended church with his mom and step-dad. Not that he minded all that much. He wasn't against religion, but he knew he wouldn't be able to handle catholic classes. Tony had summed it all up for both of them last spring.

"No way I'm going to any fruitcake Amazing Grace academy."

And with that, they had committed themselves to playing football for the silver and black; way cooler colors than the Crusade's sissy gold and blue, according to Tony.

He was in rare form for a Monday morning. "Who's ready to crack some skulls? Kendall football in the houuuusssse! What do ya say, Six?"

He generally called football players by their numbers. Scott had worn the number 6 all through Pop Warner. Though Kevin wore number 27, Tony only rarely called him by it, opting instead for some variation of his name. Kevin never bothered to ask him why. He doubted Tony even knew.

Scott and Kevin both grinned. Tony was an old-school type football player who thought the game was basically about hurting the other guy. What he liked to do most was hit people. Between Kevin and Tony, last year's team was so intimidating on defense that there wasn't a

receiver in the league that was really eager to take them on. Add to that, Scott's cannon of an arm and it was no wonder the boosters had agonized over keeping these players in the Township system. Tony didn't really pay them all that much attention. He thought they were idiots anyway and ignored them, mainly because he never intended to go to a private school, especially if Kevin stayed in Kendall. In fact, he had decided to play football at Kendall High School strictly because he thought it would expand his opportunities with certain girls he knew would be attending Kendall High. Now he was looking around with a frown.

"Hey, I thought the cheerleaders would be here too. Don't they have camp over the summer?"

Scott grinned. "Nope. Not for another week, Yav. Looks like you'll have to play just for the fun of it."

Tony winced. "Really?" He thought about it for a second then grinned widely. "Then I guess it's all about cracking some skulls! Right, Six?"

"That's right."

Tony wouldn't be disappointed for long. The girls would show up. The girls always showed up. They usually came in groups to watch the boys during Hell Week. They never showed up early because the players pretty much just ran and did exercises for the first half of the day. But after lunch, the practice fields were usually surrounded by spectators, many of whom were female high school students at Kendall High. One particular group of girls that never failed to show up was the Brette Girls. The Brette Girls is an unofficial booster club of sorts made up of only juniors and seniors. It is financed by the Booster Committee and originally intended to be the conduit between the committee and the players.

Originally, they were to be called the Cobrettes, a not-so original name Leo Forsythe came up with, but that name got voted out by the original group of girls in favor of dropping the C and the O in Cobrettes, and just calling themselves the Brette Girls, which, incidentally made for an obscure and accidental double entendre. Those who are old enough often mistake their name for *Breck* Girls, and wonder why these girls are named after a shampoo company that no longer exists. In any case, the Brette Girls were originally formed to help elevate the Kendall players and make them feel special. Each Brette Girl would be assigned a specific player for the season and her job was to provide a small snack or treat on game day for her player. It could be

cookies or brownies, or whatever. Usually, the girls would just ask their player what he liked. They would do things like decorate the player's locker on game day, collect newspaper articles about the team and the player and send them to the parents of the player. Often, the Brette Girls would even create a giant scrapbook made up of all the materials they collected throughout the year and publish it for sale in the school store. It was about doing little things that would help to inspire the players and give them a sense of status.

It didn't take long for this group to become controversial. The Brette Girls would often escort the players as they came off the team bus at away games. They were expected to be available to be their dates at parties or school events if called upon. Even though the concept was perfectly innocent, this didn't sit well with many in the community. To them it felt as though the school was promoting a sexist mindset and these girls were being used as servants for the pleasure of the boys. Interestingly enough, as is often the case, these complaints never once arose from a parent of a Brette girl. But to be fair, the Brette girls soon achieved for themselves a reputation for being willing to cross the line of good taste and good sense in their "support" of their football team.

Of course, as with any rumor, there was some truth to what was being said about the Brette girls. It wasn't all of them, but it was enough that there was often an expectation from the football players that their Brette Girl would be available for more than just the cookies and locker decorations. The complaints often got loud, but the Brette Girls were not an official Kendall High School program. It was a volunteer club that met off school grounds and raised their own funds, so there was little to be done about it. Aside from that, everyone knows that football players get the girls, and often the girls are more willing to compromise themselves physically for the status of being with a football player. It didn't take an organized group for this phenomenon to occur, but the idea of forming a group for this purpose was distasteful to some. What many in the community failed to understand was that the Brette Girls didn't really care what anyone thought.

If the Brette Girls were seen as being a little bit dirty to some people in the community, they were all but worshiped by the rest of it. For one thing, it was an exclusive club. It was really run like an exclusive sorority. You didn't sign up. You had to be selected. Freshmen and sophomore girls at Kendall High often had no idea that they were being evaluated by the Brette Girls. They were evaluated for their looks, their personalities, and their spirit. A Brette Girl had

to be a real fan of the Cobras. The group's existence revolved around the team. They were the closest thing Kendall Township had to a local sorority. They were essentially a sorority of the hottest girls in the school. They had their own clothes, logo, website, rules, *and* they were self sufficient. They supported all of their activities by raising their own money.

One thing they had started doing to raise money was designing Kendall Cobra apparel and accessories. It used to be a joke in Kendall that the school store sold the *official* stuff, but the Brette Girls had the *real* Cobra gear. Over the years, the Brette Girls began supplying the school store and now were the *only* supplier of Kendall Cobra items. They even had a booth at home games where they sold their merchandise.

When the Brette Girls showed up, you knew it. They always arrived in their Brette Girl shirts, jackets, even skirts and sun dresses for the warmer months. The boys of Kendall High could only gawk at them because they pretty much belonged to the football team. There was no record of a Brette Girl dating a non football player during football season.

Week two of high school football camp marked the beginning of preseason camp for the various support squads. The cheerleaders, the drill team, and even the Brette Girls kicked into gear in preparation for game 1, which always happened the first Friday of the school year. In a region that was dominated by professional football and baseball, Kendall Township had found its hope in its local boys. In a region dominated by politically correct, big-city thinking, the Township had drifted to more of a small-town mentality. For such a huge area this was no mean feat. The diversity of race, financial status, religion, and culture in the area was vast. However, as summer was in full swing, and the upcoming school year loomed in the distance, the whole town began to shrink. After Hell Week on the football field, the whole town descended on the high school. In this school, if you weren't involved in the football season in some way, you were missing out on the social scene. The boys played on the team, worked the games in some way, or at least showed up every week to cheer the team on. The girls cheered, drilled, joined the Brette Girls, worked the refreshment stands, or showed up to root for the team. If you weren't involved with the Cobras in some way, you might as well be invisible at Kendall High.

Tracey was invisible virtually everywhere she went. She had never been popular, but likewise had never really been on the receiving end of ridicule. She danced. She kept her head down and went about her business. She was polite and kind. She was friendly whenever people did speak to her, which was rare. She was never one to initiate a conversation, so most kids left her alone. She just danced. The other dancers were nice enough, even encouraging. Some of them even expressed their admiration for her skills and technique. But until very recently, she had never connected their words to her own feelings. Their compliments were received with grace and dignity, but it always ended there. The words never impacted her in such a way as to give her any additional confidence or to make her feel particularly good about herself. She just danced. She danced for herself mostly. She wasn't looking for compliments, though it was nice to get them. She wasn't particularly interested in the recitals, though it was nice to perform. The applause never impacted her. The response of others never really inspired her, mostly because she never connected their response to anything she did.

Right around the time she had begun to notice the wonderful changes that had taken place in her body and appearance, Tracey had also begun to notice the attention that was being paid to her by others. It was like coming out of a fog. She was a self-conscious individual who really didn't want attention. Her mind had somehow turned off that portion of her personality when she danced so that she was completely unaware of anything but dancing. Now, that switch was back on and she was terrified. And that was when she met Kelly Presidian, Director of Cheer Leading for Kendall High School.

Kelly oversaw not only cheer leading, but also the drill squad. She had taken a position teaching modern dance at onStage during the spring session because she wanted to be there while her young girls learned to dance. She spotted a pretty red-head on her first day and saw her spectacular abilities immediately. She saw the raw talent underneath the exquisite grace and technique. She also saw that this young lady had no real social interaction with the other dancers in her classes. She wasn't mean or standoffish. She just kept to herself. She said "hello" and "goodbye" whenever someone initiated the exchange, and even managed to smile when someone paid her a compliment. But she was an outsider. Though she stood head and shoulders above even the best dancers in the school, she was not one of them. Tracey Overton was a true artist. She danced for the pure pleasure of it. Kelly could see the joy in her every expression as Tracey soared through technique after technique. But Kelly could also see what was hidden behind those

expressions of joy. Tracey was hiding a deep pain. Dance pushed that pain down deep, but it could never wipe it away. Tracey was a tortured soul, and Kelly felt for her. She felt an immediate kinship with the shy Tracey. She knew that Tracey was on a path to greatness. Kelly could spot that sort of thing a mile away.

Tracey always arrived at least a half hour early for her classes and warmed up by herself. Kelly came in early one day and walked into the studio where Tracey was stretching.

"Hi, there," Kelly said brightly, in her Texas accent.

"Hello," Tracey replied, continuing to stretch.

Kelly came over to her and put out her hand. "Ah'm Miss Kelly. Ah've been teachin' modern dance for a couple a weeks now. Ah don't believe we've met."

Tracey stopped stretching and shook Kelly's hand shyly. "I'm Tracey."

Kelly smiled. "It's nice to meet you, Tracey. Ah've seen you dance a little bit. You're a wonderful dancer."

"Thank you." Tracey went back to stretching.

Kelly nodded silently. "Do you mind if I warm up with you a bit?"

"Sure." The reply was quick and noncommittal. Tracey was obviously someone who was used to minding her own business.

They stretched in silence together. Tracey then began running through her warm-up routine. She had worked out a series of steps that increased in difficulty as she ran through them. Kelly observed as she went through it with flawless execution. Tracey was truly an inspiring dancer.

"You know," Kelly said, after Tracey had completed her two minute routine. "I don't think Ah've ever seen someone with such raw talent as you on a dance floor."

Tracey continued warming up, running through some freestyle combinations. "I doubt that."

Kelly chuckled. "Course you do. But it's true. Ah've seen better dancers, let me be clear. But you have a talent that has nothing to do with what you been taught. You got the "It" and that means sky's the limit for you."

Tracey stopped in the middle of a combination, and faced Kelly for the first time.

"What does that mean?"

Kelly nodded. "I'm talkin bout the way your whole being comes out when you dance. Who you are is completely wide open when you hit this floor. You can't teach that kind of...vulnerability, I guess is the word. You can't teach it. You got to *have* it. That's the "It" I'm talkin bout."

Tracey shrugged. "I don't know about that. I just dance."

Kelly raised her eyebrows and nodded. "Exactly. It's not something you can control. You just *do* it. That is what makes you special."

Tracey almost burst out laughing. "Special? Sure. Okay." She went back to her combinations.

Kelly frowned. "You don't think you're special?"

Tracey continued dancing. "I suppose everybody's special in some way." She continued through a complicated series of leaps and spins before landing in a perfect finishing pose. "But I've never thought of myself as particularly special."

Kelly nodded. "That's a shame."

Tracey quickly added, "Look, I know why you're here. I'm the shy girl who has no friends. I just dance and I go home. I don't hang out with anyone and I don't have a boyfriend. People wonder what my problem is, why I'm so weird. I don't care about any of that."

Kelly sat down on the floor. "You don't care? How is that? Do you like things the way they are?"

Tracey spun a couple more times and then stopped. "Actually, I've never really thought about it like that. Do I like things like this?" She considered for a moment. "I guess I don't really *like* it. It just is. I just accept it and go from there."

"Why not change it?"

"Change it? Just like that?"

Kelly shrugged. "Change like that only can happen if you take a step. My guess is that you've shut yourself off from everyone else. Most kids will usually leave you alone if you really don't want to be bothered and you make that perfectly clear. I bet that if you took a step and tried to connect with them, they'd be happy to have you around."

Tracey doubted that. "I've always been the weird one. Bright red hair. Bright red cheeks. Did you know that I was almost a foot taller than the tallest boy back in the fifth grade?"

Kelly understood. "But, Tracey, you're what, fifteen? Have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately?"

Tracey glanced at herself in the wall-to-ceiling mirrors lining the studio. "I don't really pay much attention to be honest."

Kelly's mouth dropped open. "Well, sweetheart, you are missing out. You are drop dead gorgeous and the boys can't take their eyes off of you."

Tracey shook her head. "They're just watching me dance. I'm pretty good. All the instructors say so. I also teach some classes for the beginners and kids."

Kelly laughed out loud. She couldn't contain herself. "Oh, really? Honey, you couldn't be more wrong. Boys don't watch girls dance to see them dance. They watch girls dance because we wear tight outfits and they like watching pretty girls in tight outfits. End of story. The boys are not watching a dancer. They are watching *you* dance. They are watching *you*."

Tracey's face reddened slightly, but she shook her head again. "Look, Miss Kelly. Boys have never looked at me. I have always been strange to them. They don't think about me that way."

Kelly nodded. "Look, girl. I'm a little bit older'n you, and I can tell you a thing or two about boys." She paused. "I can also tell you a thing or two about *you*."

Tracey stared blankly. "About me? What can you possibly tell me about me?"

"I can tell you everything. I used to *be* you."

Tracey looked at Kelly skeptically. "You used to *be* me? You must be kidding."

Kelly shook her head. Taking the hair band out of her hair, she shook it out, letting it fall to her shoulders. "See anything familiar?"

Tracey shrugged. "You have red hair. So? That doesn't make you like me."

Kelly nodded. "True, but back in high school I weighed about a hundred seventy pounds. That wouldn't have been so bad, but I also had a streak of shyness that makes *you* look like an extrovert. I couldn't even talk when my teacher called on me. It was the most embarrassing time of my life. But then I started dancing. Sound familiar at all?"

Tracey was silent. She knew no one who understood.

Kelly saw it on her face. "Oh yeah. I understand. I *get* it. That isolation from the world gave me plenty of time to work out and dance and excel. Then it kind of just became easier to ignore all of them, the people who ignored me. Before long, I was at the top of my dance class.

But I still had no friends because I had no idea how to interact with people. I figured they didn't want me, so I withdrew. Know anyone like that?"

Tracey nodded silently, her heart in her throat, unable to speak. Kelly stood up and came over to her. She took Tracey's hand and held it. After a moment, Tracey lost her composure somewhat and began crying. Kelly took her in her arms and held her until Tracey's sobbing stopped.

"Feel any better?"

Tracey nodded. "A little."

Kelly looked in her eyes. "You are not alone, sweetie. You can talk to me and I will always understand."

Tracey nodded again. "I will. I promise."

Chapter 3

Hell Week is about shocking their bodies. It is about jump starting the conditioning process. For most of the players trying out, it is pure torture because they most likely hadn't spent much time over the summer preparing for the upcoming season. Those who chose to continue on after the first day or two would likely end up playing on the JV or Freshman squad. The ones who came into camp ready and in shape, had a shot at earning a coveted spot on the varsity team. That is the show. That is where everyone wants to be. It is the varsity players who get the prettiest girls. It is the varsity players who receive special treatment in school and even in the local community. It is the varsity players who are celebrities in the Township of Kendall.

Prior to the summer break, Kevin and Tony had committed themselves to being in the best possible shape when they walked onto the field for Hell Week. Tony spent his summer running and working out, doing push-ups sit-ups by the hundreds, and lifting weights. Kevin went to Japan. His trip was not a sightseeing adventure. It was no vacation. Kevin had been a martial arts student from the time he was five. His Teacher, Sensei Cenzo Tanaka was so proud of his young student that he got permission from Kevin's mother to take him to Japan for the summer to train with *his* old sensei. The intensity of the training had been like nothing Kevin

could have ever imagined, but he poured everything he had into every moment and came home faster and stronger than he'd ever dreamed. His mental state was also different. Any fear that might have resided in him previously was gone. Most of the players on the field were typical high school athletes. Kevin Sinclaire was more like a trained killer. It didn't take the coaching staff very long to see that they had something special on their hands.

Following that first grueling week, the players were split up into their initial teams: Varsity, Junior Varsity (JV), and Freshmen. The varsity got to take the best players and the JV and Freshmen were left with the remaining groups. At that point, freshmen were on the freshmen team and the rest of the players were on JV. Kevin, Tony, Scott, and a couple other freshmen got selected to practice with the varsity. This was the first step toward getting a position on the final varsity roster.

"Have a good practice."

Kevin nodded and hopped from the car. His mother was used to this silent intensity. Kevin always got this way before practices. Games were another level entirely. She often wondered how he managed this change so consistently. Karen used to blow it off as though he were faking it so that people would think he was scary and intense. But now she realized that it is far more than that. Something changed inside him every time he prepared himself for football. She wasn't sure it was healthy, but he was so good at the game. He really only had three things that he truly seemed to love: Martial Arts, Woodworking, and Football.

She knew that he had little or no interest in what was most important to *her*, which was God. But she prayed every day for him to come to faith. He was so smart, but his intellect, which had served him so well in school seemed to constantly get in the way of his faith. He had an anger inside of him. At least it seemed that way. He wasn't what you'd call a sullen teenager. Kevin was a bit introverted, to be sure, but he was not downcast and miserable all the time. In fact, more often than not, he was actually quite pleasant. But when it came to football, a switch seemed to flip on and whatever was deep down inside of him came out all at once. It truly scared her. She could barely watch sometimes.

"Looks like you got 'Quan."

Kevin was in line, awaiting his turn in the latest tackling drill. The other players were counting the other line, determining who they would all be matched up against when their turn came up. They were referring to Anquan Griffin, the starting halfback. He was the kind of runner who liked to slam into people and get the hard yards. He had the size to do that. But he was also deceptively quick. Anquan Griffin was hard to stop and no one really wanted to have to try to bring him down one on one in these tackling drills. Kevin looked over and saw some shuffling going on. Number 88, Matt Kildare, a senior, and easily the best player on the team for the past two years, was switching places with Griffin. They were both grinning, gesturing, and looking over at Kevin, who quickly put his head down and stayed loose. He had embarrassed Matt earlier by outrunning him and now it looked as though this would be Matt's payback for the indignity. The difference now was that there were about a hundred girls standing around watching.

When his turn came up, he got into his three point stance and waited for the whistle. Then he sprang forward and met Kildare one step after he took the handoff. He got there so fast that Kildare never even saw him coming. The ball went flying backwards as Kevin put his helmet right on it. He wrapped both his arms around Kildare's upper thighs, driving his shoulder pad full force into his gut. Kildare's feet shot out from under him and he went down hard, Kevin slamming down on top of him, then rolling right to his feet and running to the back of the line. The players let out a series of cheers.

The girls watching turned to one another asking who number 27 was. The black and silver-clad Brette girls began taking closer notice. Matt Kildare was not just the starting receiver. He was more than the Kendall Cobra's top player. He was also the most popular boy at Kendall High. His reputation was such that when the girls came out to watch the Cobra's practicing, most of them were focused on him. Matt was known as Kendall's Golden Boy. It had even been written about in the papers all last year.

Coach Shultz was right in Kildare's face, grabbing him by the facemask. "Kildare, what in God's name are you doing? This is football! You can't take a hit? Good God, Son! If a freshman can take the ball away from you what good are you to me?"

Before Kildare could respond, Shultz pushed him toward the line. In front of so many people he knew, Matt couldn't have been more embarrassed. He silently jogged to the back, steaming mad and resolving to get Kevin on this next turn. He counted and then got into position

to face Kevin again. When their turn came, Kildare was fired up and ready to lay it on Kevin. He quickly got into his stance. Kevin knew exactly what Kildare was going to do. In this drill the ball carrier was not allowed to spin, or jump out of the way. The drill was about getting hit and winning the one-on-one battle. Just by looking at Kildare's urgency, Kevin knew that he was coming in high, looking for a big hit to restore his bruised pride.

As they lined up, Kildare no longer had that big, arrogant grin on his face. He was all business. Kevin stared straight ahead. The crowd around the field sensed the tension between them. Something was about to happen. The whistle came and Kevin took the ball and accelerated. As Kildare approached, Kevin sped up and then Matt launched himself right at Kevin's chest.

Too soon, idiot. Kevin immediately lowered his shoulders, got beneath Kildare's pads, simply letting Kildare glide onto Kevin's back, then flipping over onto the ground as Kevin straightened and continued forward. Kildare hit the ground with a thud and an, "Ooomph!" Kevin flipped the ball to the coach and trotted to the back of the line as everyone around reacted to the play. Though he didn't really care, he could tell he was getting the attention of the young ladies around the field. They were shouting to him, but he didn't react to any of it.

Coach Shultz shook his head, watching Matt as he struggled to his feet. He was shaking his head in amusement. "You know, Kildare, this is just not your day."

For a girl whose father was barely in the picture, and whose mother was so focused on her work, and whose sister was also a social disaster, Tracey had never had a person who could understand her. She had never felt as though anyone was truly interested in her and how she felt. Kelly Presidian listened to her and gave her advice whenever she asked for it. She was not judgmental and never made Tracey feel bad about herself. But she was also tough. She didn't allow Tracey to dwell on her failures. She was not going to sit by and allow Tracey to be alone. She was encouraging about having Tracey explore her social options at school.

Tracey finally settled on the drill squad. There were positions on the squad specifically designed for dancers. At least she would be able to participate without the potential for

embarrassment that would surely accompany something new, like cheerleading. Can you imagine screaming and yelling in front of a few thousand strangers?

No, thank you. Dancing will do just fine for now.

And today was the day. Tracey was dressed in shorts and a tank top, hand-picked by Miss Kelly, who had broken the news to her about how these girls dressed only two days ago. Tracey generally dressed in baggy clothing. She was in this habit because she had always wanted to hide her heavy body. Miss Kelly squashed this attitude.

"First of all, Honey, you don't have any fat on you, so get off that. You don't need to show it all off, but there is no reason on God's green earth for you to hide from everyone."

They had gone to the beach together over the past several weeks, so her embarrassing pure white skin had at least gotten a little color. She had pulled her hair back tightly into a pony tail, and then twisted it up into a bun to keep it from bouncing around. It was still dancing. You kept your hair out of the way. She splashed some water on her face, wiped it dry, and then looked at her appearance in the mirror. She wondered if the football team practiced close to where the drill team would be today. She wasn't sure she could handle it if Matt Kildare was watching on her first day.

Oh God, this is a mistake. What if you fall on your face?

"Oh, my..." Tracey snapped out of her daydream. Lindsey was standing in the doorway, nodding, with a half smile on her face. "Very different."

Tracey turned to her. "Don't start with me today, okay? I'm nervous enough as it is."

Lindsey shook her head. "Not at all. I'm just interested. You're really going through with this, aren't you?"

Tracey took a deep breath. "Of course. I promised Miss Kelly I would try out, and I am going to try out." She took another deep breath. "Look, it's just dancing, right?"

Lindsey nodded solemnly. "Sure. It is *whatever* you make it."

Tracey frowned. "What?"

Lindsey replied, "Look. Just go for it. I think it's great that you're putting yourself out there. Good luck with it."

Tracey smiled. "Thanks, Lindz."

Lindsey smiled sweetly. "No problem." She headed off to her room. "Maybe Matt Kildare will be watching and fall in love today..."

Oh God.

When Tracey arrived at the school, she was surprised to see just how many people were already there. She had known that today was the day that many different squads, teams, and clubs would begin their training, but she was unprepared for the reality of how many students would actually be involved. It felt as though the whole school was there. And here she was with her bare legs and arms showing. This could get really embarrassing.

Okay, here you go. Deep breaths now. Try not to make a fool of yourself.

She made her way to the gym and signed her name under the drill squad sign-in sheet and listed "dance" as her skill. This was getting more and more real. Vaguely she wondered why she felt so nervous when she had been performing on stage for years now. For some reason this was just different. She felt sick.

Just hold it together. You're going to be dancing. It's no big deal.

"Tracey?" The shout came from behind her, snapping her out of her fog. She turned to see the smiling face of Brittany Morgan. Brittany was possibly the most perfect person ever. She was pretty. She was a straight A student. She never got into trouble. She was always smiling. The teachers all loved her from grade school right up to high school. She was involved in many different activities in school and out. Everybody knew her. Everybody loved her. Other than the good grades and staying out of trouble, Tracey had nothing in common with Brittany, but Brittany always greeted her like they were best friends. Tracey didn't think much of it because she knew Brittany greeted everyone like that. It was just how she was.

Tracey managed a tight smile. "Hi, Brittany."

Brittany was beaming. "I'm so glad you came out. Miss Kelly just told me that you had decided to try out for drill squad. I think you'll be awesome."

Tracey shrugged, looking around at the mass of students, her heart in her throat. "I don't know. I guess we'll see."

A little confidence maybe...just sayin...

Brittany leaned in close. "You know something? I get really nervous on the first day too. It's like I'm starting all over and have to relearn everything."

Tracey nodded. "For me, this really *is* the first day. I've never done anything like this before."

Brittany replied, "Sure, you have. I've seen you dance in plenty of recitals. You're great."

"But this is different."

"How's that?"

Tracey shrugged. "I was already dancing when they asked me to be in a recital. By the time anyone really saw me perform, I had been dancing the routines for weeks. I really don't think I can do this."

Brittany grabbed her by the shoulders. "You can't think like that."

Tracey pulled away. "Look, I'm not like you."

Brittany frowned. "Like what? How am I?"

Tracey leaned against the wall. "I'm not pretty. I'm not popular. No one likes me."

Brittany glanced around the room. "Is that what's bothering you? You think you're still invisible?"

Still? How does she know...

Brittany saw it in her eyes. "Yes, Tracey, I remember what you said back when you came to my church a few years back. You told Miss Linda that you were invisible and no one ever noticed you. Remember? You and I played checkers for nearly the whole time because you didn't want to play dodge ball with the others?"

Geez. Remember that? Tracey had completely forgotten that day. She actually remembered thinking that she had made a friend. But then for whatever reason, she had decided she didn't want to go back to Sunday School.

Brittany was snapping her fingers in front of Tracey's eyes. "The only problem now is that you won't *let* anyone talk to you." She pointed her thumb over her shoulder. "See those guys over there? They're in the marching band. See the guy in the grey T-shirt? He can't take his eyes off you." Tracey quickly began to deny it. "Nope. He's not looking at me," Brittany said. "He watched you walk in and has been staring at you ever since. And he's not the only one. Are you telling me that you never noticed *any* of the guys looking at you all last year?"

Tracey shook her head. "They weren't looking at me. Not like that."

"You're crazy," Brittany laughed. She grabbed Tracey's hand. "Come with me. We have a few minutes. I have an idea."

She practically dragged Tracey out of the gym and through the halls of the high school to a bathroom several sections away where no one else was. They went in and Brittany brought Tracey to the center of the room and faced her towards the mirror.

"Now, close your eyes."

Tracey closed her eyes, wondering what this was all about.

"Okay. Tell me one thing that you think boys like."

Like you would have any clue.

"I have no idea."

"About girls in general then. Come on. One thing that you *think* boys like. What do you *think*."

Tracey sighed. "I don't know. Big boobs."

Brittany giggled. "How did I know you were going to say that? But you're right. Something else. Keep your eyes closed."

Tracey shrugged. "Um. I guess they like girls with nice bodies."

Brittany nodded. "So girls that are maybe athletic, thin, with nice curves and skin?"

Tracey nodded. "Sure."

"Okay. Now open your eyes."

Brittany stood right next to Tracey so that they were side by side in the mirror.

"Now you tell me. Which one of us looks more like the description we just came up with?"

Tracey looked at the two girls in the mirror skeptically.

This is stupid. It's not that simple.

Brittany prompted her. "Well? You know the answer. You won't offend me. Tell me who the more desirable girl is based on the description we just agreed on?"

Tracey shook her head. "This is ridiculous."

"It's *not* ridiculous. You and I just agreed that boys like girls with nice trim athletic bodies and big boobs. I'm thin and I'm athletic enough, I guess, but I don't have big boobs. You, on the other hand, have an amazing body with much bigger boobs than me. Now, why is that so hard to accept?"

Tracey nearly lost it. "Because boys don't *like* me, okay? They like *you*. They like your blonde hair and big blue eyes."

Brittany was having none of it. "Look at yourself in the mirror. Look! What color did you say your eyes were?"

Tracey turned back to the mirror. "I know I have blue eyes too, but..."

"But what? Blonde hair? That's the big winning difference? Please. Some guys like blonde hair. Some don't. Trust me. Look at Vivian Parker. Red hair, just like you and she is captain of the cheerleaders *and* dating Mike Doyer, okay? QB1. Red hair, *brown* eyes, not even blue, and dating QB1. End of discussion. Look in the mirror. Now I want you to tell me one thing about the appearance of that girl in the mirror that you don't like."

Tracey looked closely. She hated her hair, but Brittany would just tell her how easy it would be to change it. She had always hated the redness of her cheeks, but that had gone away some time ago so she couldn't complain about her skin. She began to shift around to look at her features more closely. Brittany stepped back. Tracey's facial expressions changed as she seemed to go through each and every body part, looking for blemishes or ugliness. Her face softened somewhat as she did this. The girl in the mirror was not ugly. It really was just that simple. In fact, the girl in the mirror was actually kind of pretty, horrible red hair and all. Brittany placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Well? Do you see it?"

Tracey was near tears. She couldn't speak. She just nodded, unable to express what she was feeling.

Brittany smiled. "Trust me. You go out there and do your thing. Smile and hold your head up. The guys will fall all over themselves to get to you."

Tracey laughed through her tears.

Brittany continued as they left the bathroom and headed back down the hall. "So, is there anyone in particular we should be targeting?"

Tracey laughed again. "I wouldn't know where to begin."

Brittany laughed. "Well, what kind of guys do you like?"

"I have no idea."

Brittany stopped and made a face expressing disbelief. "Seriously? No idea? You expect me to believe that all this time you have absolutely no idea what kind of guy attracts you?"

"It's not that. It's just that it's embarrassing to talk about."

Brittany feigned offense. "It's embarrassing to talk about these things with your best friend?"

Best friend? You're best friends now?

Brittany saw the confusion in Tracey's eyes. "What? We're not friends?"

Tracey smiled. "We are. It's just...well...I've never really had friends."

Brittany looped her arm through Tracey's. "Well, you have one now. And I guarantee you you'll have more in a few weeks. And guys will be drooling all over your brand new school shoes. You might want to wear an older pair at first."

Chapter 4

After practice, Kevin was showered, and nearly dressed when Tony nudged him.

"Heads up. Eights is headin' this way."

Kevin glanced up and saw Kildare making his way toward them. Everyone in the locker room sensed a confrontation about to happen, and cleared away. Tony didn't move. Kevin didn't even look up as he finished tying his shoes. He pulled his bag out of the locker and filled it with his dirty uniform. Kildare yanked it from his hands and threw it down. Tony stood up. Kevin shook his head and waved him back.

Kildare put his finger in Kevin's face. "If you ever pull that crap on me again out there, I'll beat your little freshman butt in front of everyone."

Kevin looked at him quizzically. "What crap, running faster, or knocking you on your butt?"

Matt stepped closer. "You think you're funny? You're nothing but a little punk freshman. Watch your attitude or I'll have to knock some of your teeth out."

Kevin nodded thoughtfully. "Really?"

Kildare nodded. "Really."

Kevin closed his locker, making sure the lock was engaged. Turning back to Kildare, he locked his green eyes on him and said, "Try it. You might not find it so easy."

Kildare took a step back, and then got right in Kevin's face, grabbing for his throat. It was over in less than three seconds. As Matt lunged forward, Kevin simply leaned back slightly, twisting his body out of the way and letting Kildare fly by, helped along by Kevin's left hand in the small of his back, propelling him forward even faster. He slammed face first into the lockers causing a nasty gash on his forehead. Blood immediately came pouring out. Kevin then grabbed him by both shoulders and threw him backwards to the ground. It was a toss-up between who was more stunned, Matt Kildare or the rest of the team, who thought Kevin had been on the way to getting his butt kicked.

For his part, Kevin calmly picked up his bag and put his dirty laundry back into it. Kildare was struggling to get back to his feet, determined to get back at Sinclair. He shrugged off those who were trying to help him up, and lunged again at Kevin, who side stepped a couple of times, before finally deciding that enough was enough, rolling his eyes and tossing his bag aside.

"Uh oh." Tony saw the look in Kevin's eyes before anyone else and tried to get there in time. He also saw that this time Kevin had set his feet. Now when Kildare moved in with a punch toward Kevin's face, he did not side step. Kevin easily blocked the poorly thrown head shot and landed a vicious front snap kick to Kildare's mid-section, doubling Kildare over. He drew back his hand to deliver the fight-ending strike when Tony grabbed him from behind and stopped him.

"No, no, no, brother," he said softly. "This one's over." He pulled Kevin back as Kildare dropped to the floor, the wind knocked out of him. "Get your stuff."

Kevin went over to where he had thrown his bag and picked it up. When he passed the still out of breath and bleeding Kildare on the way out, he leaned over him. "Hey, Kildare, why don't you sit there and bleed a while before you taste some *real* pain."

Tony pulled him out of the locker room before anyone else decided to get in his face.

Tracey burst through the door at home and quickly ran upstairs to her room. She had already texted her mom not to pick her up from the school after practice because Brittany had invited her to sleep over and give her a ride in the morning. Mrs. Morgan drove her home to pick up some things. The plan was to swim in the Morgan's pool all day, have a barbecue, and talk about boys all night.

Just like real girlfriends!

She blew past Lindsey in the upstairs hall and ran into her room, leaving the door open and a shocked looking Lindsey standing in the hall. She quickly grabbed her onStage bag and threw in the clothes she would need for camp the next day. She then found a pajama top and bottom and some underwear and threw it all in the bag. Next she went into the bathroom and gathered her shampoo, conditioner, and body wash, as well as her toothbrush, and put it all into the bag. Lindsey watched her sister go back and begin ransacking her drawers, in search of something. She stood silently as the frantic search went on for a few moments.

"What are you looking for? Why are you packing clothes?" she finally asked.

Tracey continued searching. "My bathing suit. I need my bathing suit. I'm sleeping over Brittany's and we're going to swim in her pool."

Lindsey raised her eyebrows. "Brittanyyyyy....?"

Tracey looked up. "Morgan. Brittany Morgan. You know her."

Lindsey stared at her. "The church girl?"

"Yes. The church girl. Where's my bathing suit?"

"It's not like you ever use it."

"I need it now."

"Why are you sleeping over Brittany Morgan's house?"

"Because we're friends and she invited me. My bathing suit?"

"You're friends? You and Brittany?...from church."

Tracey shrugged. "What difference does it make? We talked earlier in the week and she asked me to sleep over tonight."

"There has to be more to the story than that. How are tryouts going?"

Tracey sighed. This could take all day. Lindsey didn't do well with change. Neither did she for that matter. "Tryouts are going fine. Brittany and I are friends now. She asked me to sleep over. I need my bathing suit so I can swim in her pool. Where is it?"

"Are you a Born-Again now?"

"What?"

"A Christian; A Born-Again; That's what Brittany Morgan is. Are you one too?"

Tracey couldn't resist. "Are you one too? No, I'm two, three."

"Very funny. Are you a Born-Again now?"

"What is *wrong* with you? I need my bathing suit. They're waiting for me."

"Who's waiting for you?"

"Are you kidding me? Brittany and her mom are waiting for me."

"Why are they waiting for you?"

Tracey was completely exasperated. "Because I'm sleeping over! They're waiting for me to get my things so we can go to their house and have dinner! WHERE IS MY BATHING SUIT?"

"Don't you think this is kind of weird?"

"What, Lindsey? What's weird?"

"Well, just that you wake up one morning and you have no friends, and no life, and all in one week you join the drill squad, make a brand new friend, and start having sleepovers? It's just a little weird, that's all."

"Why is it weird?"

"Why do you want to start hanging out with a bunch of Born-Agains all of a sudden?"

"*One* Christian! I'm hanging out with *one* Christian! And who cares anyway?"

"Tracey?" The call came from downstairs. "You all right?"

Tracey ran to the top of the steps. "Up here, Brit. Come on up." To Lindsey she said, "Don't start."

"Tracey? Brit? Oh, my God. You're *besties* aren't you?" Lindsey asked, following Tracey back into her room.

"Oh, my God! You're an idiot! Stop making fun of me. Have you seen my bathing suit or not?"

Brittany came to the door. "Everything okay?"

"Sorry," Tracey said. "I can't find my bathing suit."

"Oh, that's okay," Brittany replied. "You can just use..."

"So, why are you friends with my sister all of a sudden?" Lindsey interrupted.

Brittany was taken aback. "What?"

Lindsey pressed. "My sister leaves the other morning all normal and comes back with friends, having a sleepover, and swimming. Are you trying to make her a Born-Again?"

"Lindsey..."

"Am I tr...?" Brittany started.

"Because she's not interested in all that, you know. We don't believe in God."

Tracey was turning red. "Will you leave, please? No one cares what you believe."

Lindsey turned to Tracey. "Don't go joining up with any cults, okay?"

Brittany shook her head. "I don't belong to a cult, Lindsey."

"Sure you do. All religions are cults. Don't try to make my sister join."

"It's really not like that."

Lindsey pulled out her phone and held it up, facing Tracey. "Here; just look here for a minute."

Tracey looked at her. "What are you doing?"

Lindsey touched the screen and waited a second. "Got it." She showed Tracey the picture she took of her. "This is for the police when you disappear with the cult, so we can give them a recent picture of you."

"Are you being serious right now?"

Brittany shook her head. "Listen. We don't belong to a cult. Nothing is going to happen to Tracey at my house. You can come too if you like."

Tracey quickly added, "No, you can't. She's just being nice."

Lindsey shrugged. "No way I'm coming over there. Are you going to chant and light candles and things like that?"

Brittany started to reply but Tracey waved her off. "Don't bother. She's an idiot. Where's my bathing suit? I know you have it."

"Do you even know how to swim?"

"Have you seen it anywhere?"

"You know, a person can drown in less than six inches of water."

"I'm not going to drown. I'm a better swimmer than *you* are anyway."

"How would you know? You don't even have a bathing suit."

"I have one. I just can't find it because you hid it from me."

Lindsey smirked. "Yeah. That's right. I hid your bathing suit from you. I knew you'd come home today with your very first friend ever and that you'd be looking for your bathing suit so you could go on a cult sleepover pool party. So I hid your bathing suit. You caught me."

Brittany broke in. "Don't worry about it. You can just use one of mine."

Lindsey continued. "Like I care about your stupid bathing suit."

Tracey shrugged and looked at Brittany. "Fine. Let's get out of here before I kill her."

As they got to the bottom of the stairs, Lindsey dropped something down from the second floor onto the floor next to Tracey. It was her brown and pink bathing suit.

"Hey, Trace," she said sweetly. "Don't forget your bathing suit."

Tracey looked up at in silent frustration, ready to say something about immature little sisters, but Lindsey had already disappeared from sight.

Word of the incident between Matt and Kevin somehow didn't make it out into the community, which was kind of unusual in this town. The players took their cues from the seniors, who didn't want their friend and teammate any more embarrassed than he already was. Plus, there was no telling what coach might do if he found out about the fight. It was best to keep this quiet. The only wildcard in the matter were the freshmen involved: Kevin Sinclair, and Antonin Yavastrenko. As team captains, Mike Doyer and Anquan Griffin decided to be proactive. They drove over to Alder Ave. to see Kevin. They knocked on the door and met Kevin's mom, Karen.

"Can I help you boys?"

Mike Doyer responded, "Yes, Ma'am. Is Kevin home? We're from the football team and just need a few minutes, if he's available."

Karen Timmons pursed her lips. "Is this about whatever happened at camp today?"

Mike nodded. "Yes, Ma'am."

She studied them for a second. "If you're here to continue that nonsense, you can turn around and leave right now."

Mike shook his head. "Oh, no, no. We're not here to cause trouble. We just want to make sure that whatever this is, is over before camp tomorrow."

They were directed to a building about 20 yards back behind the garage. It was about 30' x 30' in size, with a 20' garage door opened in the front. They could see Kevin in the back of the room, leaning over something. His back was to them.

Mike banged on the side of the door frame.

"Hey, man. Can we talk to you for a minute?"

Kevin's head rose, though he still didn't turn around. "Sure. Come on in."

He stopped whatever it was he was doing and walked over to a refrigerator in the back corner and opened it, pulling out three water bottles and tossing one to each of them. He looked at them as they opened their bottles and took a drink.

"I really don't know why you're here. I didn't pick that fight. I haven't done anything to anyone. He's pissed because he thinks I showed him up in practice. You should go talk to your receiver."

Mike nodded. "Don't worry. He's my best friend. I'll get on him. That's my job. But I also need to be sure it's over. Tomorrow, Coach will know about this and I need to be able to tell him that it's handled. Otherwise, the whole team'll end up doing up-downs for an hour."

Kevin shook his head and shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned our account is settled."

Doyer nodded. "That's what I was hoping."

Kevin picked up his work again. "He comes at me again though..." He looked Mike right in the eye, his green eyes ablaze. Then he blinked and looked back down at the wood in his hands. "Just make sure he doesn't." He went back to work.

Mike and Anquan exchanged glances. Anquan raised his eyebrows and shook his head. They boys headed back to the car. "See you tomorrow, dude."

The next stop for the two team captains was the Kildare residence. This was going to be a different conversation. Mike had to let his best friend know that what happened today was his own fault and that he had to stop the nonsense immediately. This is what a captain had to do. He had to be able to lead, and that included leading his friends who are on the team. This meant talking to his best friend as the captain and not as a best friend. He hoped Matt would be in a receptive mood tonight. He glanced over at Anquan as they pulled to a stop in front of Kildare's

house. Though they had both been there many times before, this was different. They got out and went up to the door, ringing the doorbell. Matt answered the door himself.

"Hey guys," he said. The gash on his forehead had stopped bleeding, but still looked pretty nasty. "Come on in."

Doyer and Griffin followed him into the den. Matt started before either Anquan or Mike could open their mouths.

"Look, don't even get in my face about Sinclair. I don't want to hear it."

Mike shrugged. "No choice, dude. We have to protect the team. You guys can't be fighting in the locker room every time he knocks you on your butt."

Matt's eyes flashed in anger. "Nice, Mike. You're a real friend. Thanks for the backup, by the way."

"You expected me to help you beat up a *freshman*? You're lucky *his* friend stepped in when he did. Otherwise you'd be in the hospital right now."

"Yeah, right. That little punk got a lucky shot in, that's all."

Anquan shook his head. "Look, bro. I'm on yo side, but this team needs to think about winning ball games. Dis my last year in this school. Next year I'll be sitting on the bench hopin I get some reps on the practice squad somewhere. I don't wanna spend this year pulling you and that kid apart after every practice. 'Specially since it looks like you gonna be the one gettin whooped up on."

Matt turned toward Anquan and pointed at his face. "*Screw you*, Quan! You think you're some kind of tough guy? Why don't you take your best shot right now?"

Anquan got in his face and poked his finger in Matt's chest. "Boy, you ain want none a dis. Best watch yo mouth, fore someone knocks dem pretty white teeth out."

"Let's see you try," Matt spread his arms, challenging the all-star running back.

Mike Doyer quickly got between the two teammates. "Knock it off, you two."

Matt and Anquan stared each other down for a few seconds, before Matt finally shook his head and backed away, turning his eyes on Mike. "Oh, now it matters if we fight? Earlier you didn't seem to care. What's that all about?"

Mike shook his head. "Earlier it seemed like a little freshman hazing, but you picked the wrong guy and it got out of control. This is different. We're all best friends. You're making a jerk of yourself and we're all paying the price for it."

"Are you serious? You guys are still pissed you had to run a little extra?" After Kevin had beaten them in the two mile run, the coach had punished them by making them run the whole two miles over again. When Matt protested, they ended up running triple that.

"Man, you a piece o work, you know dat?" Anquan stepped to him again. Matt didn't back down, spreading his arms again, welcoming the challenge. Mike pushed both of them back apart.

"Matt, sit down. Quan, go sit in the car or something."

Anquan, stepped back, shaking his head, his dark eyes still leveled at Matt's. "Man, whatever." He left the room.

Mike turned to Matt, who shook his head and waved him away. "Don't even bother, dude. Not interested."

Mike stood there in disbelief. "Really? You're not interested in anything your best friend has to say?"

"Not right now."

"Well get ready anyway because you're gonna sit there and shut up and listen to what your *captain* says."

"You're really trying to pull that card on me right now? I'm a captain too."

"Yeah? Well I'm the *team* captain. This team is mine. And I'm telling you right now that this crap is over..."

When he came out, Anquan was sitting in the car, listing to his iPod. He had calmed down considerably and was now nodding his head to whatever rap song was playing. When Mike opened the driver's side door, though, he quickly pulled the ear buds out and looked at him expectantly.

Mike nodded. "That was not pretty, dude."

"He on board?"

"Yeah, pretty much, I think, no thanks to you."

Anquan raised his eye brows. "Why? What'd I do?"

"Are you serious? Why'd you have to go in there and pick a fight?"

Anquan shook his head. "Man, He got ta get over hisself."

Mike wasn't totally in disagreement. "Yeah? Well what about you? Huh? Matt's just worried about his position. He thinks he'll end up as the number two if Sinclaire is as good as everyone thinks."

"Well, then he got to deal wit it."

