

CHAPTER

ONE

Driving along Minnehaha Parkway on my way to see Kick, I felt like Archie going over to Veronica's. Not because she lived in a massive stone house and I mowed lawns for cash. Or because I was prone to Archie-type screwups. I felt that way because our relationship was two-dimensional.

And that was the test. Could I make it to the third dimension with her?

Rudolphs was packed like always on Saturdays. The buzz ricocheted off pink plaster walls as I squeezed through the rowdy crowd swigging beer in the entry. Eddie was sitting alone in back. "Kick's not here yet?" I asked, sliding my lanky frame into the fake-leather booth.

"In the bathroom—probably stocking up on cheap dispenser condoms," he said, straight-faced.

"Yeah, right."

"Don't be so sure she's not. That girl is in heat." I gave him a look. "Your ears must have been burning," he said.

"You talking about me?"

“Mmhmm. Your sex life.”

“What!” I crunched down on an ice cube. “Who brought that up?”

“Kick wants to know why you’re so slow.”

“She said that?”

“Yeah.” Eddie turned the salt shaker on its side and spun it. “Why *are* you so slow? No, really, I want to know.”

“Shhh! She’s coming,” I said.

“There you are, David,” Kick said, sliding in next to me. “What took you so long to get here?”

“I got lost.”

“That’s pathetic.” She patted my hand like I was five. “How many times have you been downtown Minneapolis?”

“Downtown!” Eddie replied. “You call this downtown? I can’t wait for us to be in New York, Kick.”

“New York?” I asked.

Eddie nodded. “We’re applying to NYU.”

“You are? Both of you?” I looked at Kick.

She nodded and handed me a menu. “I want to go to film school.”

Oh, sure, I thought, but didn’t say it. “I’m staying here,” I said.

“Why? Cut loose a little bit,” Eddie said.

The waiter came over. Which was good. Eddie gets on this rant that I’m uptight and who needs it? I ordered the house special: slow-cooked country ribs with corn on the cob, onion rings, and buttermilk rolls.

“Just a large salad for me,” Kick said. “Dressing on the side.”

I studied her lips as she recounted her adventure to the Mall of America the night before. They were plump, freshly remoistened with gloss. She smiled at me. I sat up straight, brushing the hair out of my eyes. Did she want me to make a move? How?

“My mother is really losing it with me,” Kick told us. “I got home a half hour late. Twelve-thirty instead of midnight. Okay, maybe it was quarter to one.” She sighed. “Now I have to be home every night by ten. *Including* weekends.”

“For how long?” I asked.

“Until further notice.”

“Poor baby,” Eddie said.

“She’s trying to ruin my life. It’s envy.”

Two platters of ribs arrived, sitting in lakes of barbecue sauce and topped with mounds of golden brown rings. Eddie had both paws covered in sauce in seconds, but I tried to hold back. The waiter set Kick’s salad down, and she began poking at it, looking at our plates longingly. I speared her a perfect ring. After cutting off the breading, she ate it slowly, savoring each nibble. I don’t know why she didn’t eat more. So what if she was chubby.

As Eddie and I gorged, I let my knee brush against hers. She reached down and held it there. My heart sped up. Were we moving into a new dimension? Because you don’t hold people’s legs under the table if you’re just friends.

“You look cute tonight,” she said to me.

“I do?”

“*Please,*” Eddie interrupted, reaching for another half ear of corn. “I’m eating.”

Kick laughed and took her hand off my leg. Was I supposed to touch her knee now? I wiped my fingers on a wet-nap in preparation. Should I just drop my hand on her? Were you supposed to squeeze? As I reached for her leg, Kick’s leather bag started squawking like a chicken. “What’s that?” I asked, pulling my hand back.

She took out her cell phone and answered it. “My mother,” she mouthed. It was after 10:00.

“The depressing thing,” Kick said, standing up, “is that she thinks I’m out having sex.” She threw up her arms. “I don’t even have a boyfriend.” Kick looked at Eddie and then me. “But maybe that will change.” She dropped a ten on the table, stole an onion ring from my plate, and disappeared into the crowd.

CHAPTER

TWO

As I drove Eddie home from Rudolphs, he made me turn on the interior light to show the letter he got from Stephanie Bond, the author of *Too Hot to Sleep*. I made fun of him when he first wrote to Barbara Taylor Bradford. Until he got a reply. Now we both write letters. To the *great* romance novelists. But you can't send a fan letter unless you truly love the book. That point is sacrosanct with us.

"So what did Ms. Bond have to say?" I asked, backing out of the parking lot. The spotlight cathedral dome shone in the rear window, with the sparkling lights of downtown just beyond.

"Dear Eddie," he read. "Ohhh, she's already calling me 'dear.' I think I'm in love."

"Keep reading."

"No, I can't. I can't share another word." He pulled the letter to his chest and held it there. "It's private between Steph and me."

"Steph?" I said, turning onto Franklin and driving under the freeway overpass. "Eddie, you need help. I'm thinking a residential program."

“You’re just jealous,” he taunted, poking me with the envelope as we cruised through the “dangerous” part of South Minneapolis.

When he moved into my neighborhood Eddie was ten. I watched him build a fort on the overgrown lot down by Rafteglers Ravine. Cutting away saplings and flattening the tall grass into a comfy bed, Eddie made a secret hideaway. We sat in there that summer reading comics, eating roasted cashews, and spying on people going by on the sidewalk. Sometimes I made loud farting noises with my armpit, until Eddie told me I was embarrassing him.

Now we’re both at Whitman. Each year they give scholarships to a few “local” students who live within walking distance of the academy. Which is the only way either of us could go, since the tuition is mucho dinero.

I turned onto Nicollet Avenue and drove past the restaurants and wine bars, with fashionably dressed smokers out front. Then the street grew residential, and I reached Eddie’s block. As I turned the corner, the headlights caught two boys TP-ing the neighbor’s house. The imps stood frozen in the high beams, then fled, dropping their rolls as they ran.

“Amateurs,” Eddie said, climbing out of the car. The headlights illuminated his small, wiry frame and jet-black hair as he picked up a roll and gave it an underhand toss. Looping high over the branches of his neighbor’s maple tree, the roll then plopped to the ground. Outside lights on the house flashed on. Racing for his backyard, Eddie disappeared into

the dark. I hit the gas, feeling the old thrill of almost getting caught.

On the way home, I detoured to Lake of the Isles. I got out of the car and walked down to the water, past the “City of Lakes” sign. Shining out the windows of the comfortable brick houses snaking along the shoreline was the yellow hue of good lighting. My warm breath escaped into the chill late-September air as I tried to imagine kissing Kick. Slowly, like they do in romance novels. I closed my eyes to conjure her image: braces-perfect smile, round cheeks, curly dark hair. Why couldn’t I feel her lips?

A cold gust of wind licked the back of my neck. Shivering, I ran to the car.

Mom was still up when I got home. She followed me into my small upstairs room, wearing the pink terry-cloth robe I got her for Christmas. I pulled off my earphones.

“So, how are Kick and Eddie? Did you have a good time?”

“Mmhmm. We went to Rudolphs.”

“Did you have enough money?”

“Yeah.” I hate when Mom worries about that. She gives me more than she should. You don’t make much money teaching English at the University of Minnesota. I set my iPod down on the dresser and she picked it up. “Who do you listen to on this?”

“Right now? The Supremes.”

“That’s funny.”

“What’s funny about it?”

“We danced to them in college.”

“Mom, stop!”

“What?”

“The thought of you . . .”

She laughed and tried to pull me into a dance. I jerked my arms away, leaving Mom to do a boogie of her own creation.

Horrible. “Mother!”

“See? I was pretty good.”

“On *American Bandstand*, circa 1950.”

“I’m not that old.” She looked out the window. “You know who was a good dancer—your father.”

“Really?” I loved hearing new things about him.

“We had dance parties at the house before you were born.”

“And he was good?” That didn’t fit my image of Dad.

“Well, I thought so.” Mom missed him. I knew that because there were pictures of him all over her room. I was only five when he died, so I hardly remember. But she never got over him.

I stood up to dance with her. She took my arm and twirled underneath it. And then she brushed my head. “You need a haircut.”

Suddenly I was twelve years old. “No, I don’t.”

“This weekend,” she said firmly, heading off to bed.

My mom can be confusing without even trying. If I tell her I *have* to do something because *everyone* is doing it, she says *just be yourself*. She says people respect that. But what if you

send fan mail to romance writers? And get teary-eyed at chick flicks? What if you still get spooked during thunderstorms? These are not things you want to share with others. Being yourself might make people reject you. People you desperately care about. Being yourself only works if you're basically cool. Which I'm not.

There's another problem with Mom's advice. How can you be yourself if you don't know who that is?

CHAPTER

THREE

We did sprints for the whole workout Monday. Coach was sadistic with his whistle. We were all dragging as we headed back to school.

I dropped onto the bench in front of my locker, breathing in the sharp smell of fresh sweat. Maybe I was too exhausted to have to worry about anything today. I could hear the clicking of combination locks. Sean and Parker, the other two juniors on cross-country, undressed on either side of me. Like gods. Sean Icelandic and Parker Grecian. I kept my eyes closed, head bent to the floor.

“Who’s got shampoo?” Sean called out.

“Here,” Parker said. A bottle whizzed by my head.

“This shit’s for dandruff,” Sean said. The bottle whipped back past me. “C’mon, Dahlgren, don’t you have any?”

I opened my eyes and watched Sean tug off his running pants. My gaze strayed down before I forced it back to his face. “Hold on,” I said hoarsely, as I found shampoo and handed it to him.

He took the bottle and headed off. No way I was following. Not after what happened on the canoe trip. Starting to dress, I heard Coach McIntyre boom at me: “Get in there, Dahlgren! You smell.” Delaying as long as I could, I raced into the cream-and-black-tiled shower room, after everyone was out. Safe inside, I let the hot stream of water massage my tired body.

Towelng off, I heard Parker shout out “Tonelli’s!” I rushed to get dry, but they were gone by the time I finished. The shampoo I had given Sean was sitting in a soapy puddle on the long bench in front of my locker.

I was standing in our small grassy front yard, thinking it needed one more mow, when my cell rang. I flipped it open.

“Guess what,” Kick said. “My parents are gone next weekend.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“They made me swear I wouldn’t have anyone over.” She lowered her voice so that it was almost a whisper. “So I’m keeping it small. Mona, Eddie, you, and me. And maybe Kristy and Alicia. Can you come?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t say a word,” Kick told me before hanging up. “I’ll be in lockdown till Christmas if they find out.”

I stared at my reflection in the window, pushing my sandy-brown hair behind each ear. Was this the night Kick and I would finally kiss?

I got to the locker room first on Friday and changed for our meet against Franklin. We were the better team on paper, but their runners could surprise you. The rest of the team filtered in, chattering with nervous energy.

I stood quietly at the end of my locker row, waiting for everyone to get ready instead of going to the field to loosen up. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Sean and Parker change. I spun away from them, rushed through the door and into the school yard. God! Now I was loitering in locker rooms.

My right foot twitched like it always did as we lined up at the start of the race on the Hiawatha Golf Course. BANG! I leapt into motion. Runners from Whitman and Franklin, spaced across the whole fairway, bounded onto the lawn. My feet drove down into the thick sod harder and faster. I started to pull ahead of the pack. I couldn't believe it. Sean and Parker ran behind. Everyone was behind.

"TURTLE!" Parker shouted. Team code for "Slow and steady wins the race."

But I was not going to slow up now. I ground down on my molars and pushed harder. At 2,500 meters the course turned back on itself. As I rounded the turn, Coach shouted my time. My best ever. "Ease up!" he called.

It didn't matter what anyone said. I couldn't stop now. I would show them. Doubling back, I saw the oncoming mass of sinewy legs pumping down onto the soft earth. They would never

catch me. It felt like I could run forever. Until the last 500 meters. When my legs went mushy. John, our captain, raced by me with two runners from Franklin, followed by Parker and Sean. Push! Push! Others whizzed by. I was a 100 meters out, dying. Runners flew by. Even sophomores I always beat. I crossed the finish in eleventh, gasping. We got kicked by our big rival.

The locker room was dead. None of the usual cutting up. I stalled again, sitting in front of my locker, eyes closed. “Hey, Dahlgren,” Parker said. “Wake up.” I looked at him pulling off his sweat-stained red jersey. “What was your problem today?”

“I don’t know.”

“Didn’t you hear me yell ‘turtle?’”

I shrugged. What could I say? Parker slammed the door of his locker and headed for the shower.

“I’d hate to be you right now,” Sean said. “I really would.” He patted my shoulder as he stepped by.

Leaving school, I walked past John, the captain, hanging my head.

“Don’t worry,” he said, putting his arm around my shoulder. “You’ll do okay next time, man.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I hope so.”

At home that night, I kicked the elm tree on our boulevard so hard the bark chipped off. I knew better than to go out too fast. What was I trying to prove?

Mom saw me out there. I came in the back door and hung my jacket. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Yes, there is.”

I slumped into a chair at the kitchen table. “I lost the meet for us tonight.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I was eleventh. Worst time in a month.”

“What happened?” she asked, scraping some chopped garlic into a soup pot.

“I choked.”

“How much off were you?”

“Half a minute.”

“Well, that happens. Eleventh isn’t so bad.” She drizzled the garlic with olive oil and turned on the heat.

“That’s not what the team thinks.”

“Oh?”

“Parker yelled at me.”

“He shouldn’t do that.”

“Why? I deserve it.”

“Hasn’t Parker ever had an off day?”

“No.”

“Well, he will. And I hope you’ll be loyal to him.”

Mom poured three cans of tomato sauce into the pot.

“What are you cooking?” I asked. The cooking garlic made the kitchen smell sweet.

“Spaghetti sauce. Should I throw in some browned sausage?”

“Yes. I’m starving.” At least there was food. And Mom. To make me feel better when things went south.

CHAPTER

FOUR

I stalled as long as I could, inspecting disposable razors, shaving cream, cologne. “You buy them,” I whispered to Kick. Condoms.

She slipped her arm through mine and tugged me to the counter. The beehive-hairdo lady was there. The kabuki makeup on her face traveled down her neck to the cleavage you *really* didn’t want to think about, let alone see.

“Whaddya need, kiddo?” she asked. Cheerfully intense.

“Uh . . . a box of condoms,” I mumbled.

“What kind ya want?” She waved at the glass shelves behind her.

“Trojans,” I said.

“Ribbed, Ultra Thin, lubricated or non?” she asked. It was like ordering a burger. With fries.

Lord, I wanted to get out of there. “Ribbed, non—”

“Get me some Ultra Thins,” Kick whispered, pulling a ten out of her jeans and stuffing it in my hand. Great, make it sneaky and even more incriminating.

I gave her a sideways glance. “And a box of Ultra Thins,” I told the lady. My voice, all on its own, decided to jump an octave on the word “thins.”

“Hey, Dahlgren!” I turned. Sean! He and Parker were coming toward us with a six-pack of Mountain Dew and a jumbo bag of cashews. Sean looked so handsome, tall and lanky, his blond hair spilling over the collar of a suede jacket. His face had cleared up a lot lately.

After the squeaked-out “thins” I was afraid to talk. I tried to sneak the condoms into my jacket pocket, but they flopped out and hit the floor. Parker nudged Sean and they laughed. I bent down, grabbed the box, and jammed it into my jeans.

“See you,” I said, grabbing my change. As we rushed away, I looked over my shoulder. Sean winked and licked his lips in a very sexy way. I suddenly wanted to linger.

Back at Kick’s, revenge time. We sprawled on the floor of the den, dim in candlelight, the sound system cranking. My turn to deal. Who would the Queen of Hearts victimize next? I prayed for Eddie. My dare was all ready. Send a letter to Stephanie Bond telling her not that he loved her book, but that he loved *her*. Madly. The deck grew smaller as the cards went round and round. Kick, Mona, Eddie, Alicia, and Kristy. And then it landed. The momentous queen. On Eddie. Yes! “Truth,” I demanded, “or dare?”

Eddie played up the drama all he could, one hand on his chest. “Truth,” he declared with bravado.

“You always take that,” I cried.

“So? I have no secrets.”

“So, you’re chicken.”

Mona’s face lit up and she laughed. “I’ve got one for him. If you *had* to pick someone in this room to make love with, who would it be?”

“That’s not fair.”

“Here’s your dare, then,” I jumped in.

“All right, fine,” he said. “But I’m not going to lie.” He looked slowly around the circle at Kick, Mona, Kristy, Alicia, and then back at each of them again.

“We’re waiting,” Mona said.

“David,” he announced.

“What!” Alicia and Kristy exclaimed at the same time.

Kick and Mona exchanged a glance, and everyone grew quiet. I didn’t know what to think.

“Oh my God!” Kick screamed, jumping up. “The garage door. My parents are home.” She started throwing our coats at us. “Out the back,” she whispered. “Hurry.” As if that could ever work. Our cars were in front of the house. She fumbled for her bag and then pressed the box of condoms into my hand. “Take them!” We fled out the kitchen door as Kick stuffed pop cans and half-eaten bags of chips into the trash.

Her parents were waiting for us out front. They checked if we’d been drinking and let us go. Kick, on the other hand . . .

I was nervous driving home that night through the ritzy neighborhood of Kenwood, where Kick lived. Eddie sat next to me, unusually quiet.

“Why did you say *me*?” I finally asked him.

“I wasn’t going to say a girl. You were the only guy there.”

“Huh?”

“That’s right. I’m gay. Surprised?”

I looked over at him. “Why are you telling me?”

“I’m telling everyone.”

“Well, leave me out of it.”

Eddie turned the radio down. “Is that all you can say? You’re my best friend.”

“We’re friends, Eddie, not best friends.”

“Right, I remember. You don’t believe in ‘best friends.’” Eddie made little quote marks with his fingers. I reached his house and pulled over.

“So? . . .” He looked at me intently. I shrugged. “Oh, man.” He opened the door and climbed out. “I hate you.”

Out in the yard that night, the air felt mild. I dropped down on my back in the dewy grass and stared up. The stars were scattered through the sky like spilled salt. What did Eddie mean by picking me tonight? More important, why did Sean look at me the way he did?

I thought back to those early-morning runs along Minnehaha Parkway with the team. The only sounds were the robins, the creek gurgling, and, when I was lucky, Sean’s steady breathing moving alongside me. As I stared upward, I pretended that I was beside him now, our heads close, his silky hair brushing my face. I’d slide my fingers into his, feeling the solidness of his hand.

CHAPTER

FIVE

Next morning, I woke to the sound of the garage door lifting. I flung the covers back and leapt out of bed. Mom was on her way to church. She was picking up Grandma! Where were the condoms?

I ran to my dresser. Yanked out the drawers. Not there. I brought them in from the car, didn't I? The backyard. I had been lying in the grass last night. I bounded down the stairs and raced out the kitchen door in my boxers. Mrs. Timothy peered at me from her garden. I didn't care. I dove onto the lawn and groped the grass.

I rushed out to the garage. Retraced every step I took. I tore my bed apart. Looked in all my pants pockets. Nowhere.

I tried Eddie's cell but got his recording. So I called his landline. His mother answered and gave him the phone.

"Is your mom standing right there?" I asked.

"Uh-huh."

"You know the . . . ah . . . the . . . items I purchased last night?"

“Uh-huh.”

“Did you take them? Please say you did.”

“No.”

“You left them in the car?”

“On the front seat,” he said. He laughed and hung up on me.

I stood holding the phone. Maybe they were hidden by the seat belt. But Grandma always wore her seat belt! I fell onto my bed. If I told Mom the truth when she asked (and I knew she’d ask!), it would look like I was lying. I should make Kick call my mother and explain the whole thing.

I was eating Tostitos with raisins and milk when Mom got back from church. “Hi,” I managed to say, half-standing up. She opened her purse, took out the red box of Trojans, and tossed it on the kitchen table. “I believe these are yours,” she said pointedly.

I gulped. “Don’t jump to conclusions.”

“What do you expect me to think?” She sat down next to me at the gray Formica table. “You should have gone to church with me today.” I could feel my ears turning red. “David . . .”

“What?”

“Why do you have these?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

She gave me a firm look. “I want to know. Are you having sex?”
God, I was dying. “It’s none of your business.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Mom, drop it.”

“I will. As soon as you talk to me.”

“No, we’re done.” I grabbed the condoms and bounded up the stairs, mortified.

“DAVID!” she called after me.

Up in my room, I lay down on the floor, put on my headphones, and cranked the music. After a few minutes I felt her presence. What did she want now? I lifted the headphone from one ear.

“I’m glad you’re using protection,” she said quietly and then disappeared from my room.

I had just finished changing on Monday when Sean and Parker strolled into the locker room. “Hey, hey, how was it?” Parker called to me. He came over and started boxing my shoulder. “What a man.”

I smiled sheepishly and leaned down over my shoes. They were already tied, but I undid them and started over.

Parker bent his face near my ear. “How many times did you nail her?” he asked.

“Get lost,” I said, pushing him away. He and Sean both laughed.

The team did speed work in Lake Nokomis, basking in the warm September sun as our feet froze in the icy water. We must have been a sight to the joggers on the grassy boulevard around the lake, sweeping our legs through the knee-deep water to strengthen our quads.

Coach McIntyre was ready with towels on the beach as the team splashed out of the lake. We sat in the sand, getting our socks and shoes back on, but no resting was allowed. As Coach sent everyone off for distance work, he grabbed my shoulder. “You’re running timed miles,” he growled. “Until you feel the right pace.”

When we were done, I got a ride back to school in Coach's car. "Everything all right at home?" he asked as we drove past rows of pointed stucco houses.

I nodded. "Yeah, fine."

"Good." He cracked his window. "Can I give you a piece of advice?"

"Okay."

"Get to know yourself better."

I looked surprised.

"That's the most important part of high school," he said. "For all of you."

I contemplated that for the rest of the drive. Reaching the school parking lot, we unloaded the towels and went inside.

No one had returned by the time I'd showered and dressed.

As I cut across the grass on my way home, I ran into Sean jogging back toward school, the first of the team to return. He stopped. "Hey, Dahlgren."

He was smiling at me. "When did you get to be such a stud?"

I rolled my eyes. He reached for my stomach and started tickling.

"Stop!" I said, grabbing his arm.

He started on me with the other hand. I grabbed that arm and pulled him. He fell against me. And then he jumped away when the rest of the team came jogging around the corner.

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone about you," he said, heading for the shower.

Won't tell anyone what?