

the **WRONG KIND** *of* **WEIRD**



JAMES RAMOS

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For all the Geeks, all the Nerds, and all the Dorks.

CHAPTER ONE

“It’s a simple, undeniable truth,” Jocelyn said matter-of-factly, “if you watch dubbed anime instead of subbed anime, you are garbage.”

She flicked her hot-pink hair as she leaned over the 3D printer, which was about two-thirds of the way through making the barrel of her buster rifle.

“Bullshit,” D’Anthony fired back from the beanbag he was lounging in. He licked his lips and pushed his glasses back into place without looking up from his Game Boy Color, the one he’d borrowed (or perhaps stolen) from one of his older brothers. He’d been on this vintage game kick for the past few months; he was working his way through *Pokémon Yellow* now. “Watching subbed anime doesn’t make you more sophisticated, it just makes you more pretentious.”

I glanced at my phone for about the eighth time since Joc-

elyn and D'Anthony had started their argument five minutes ago. Those two were always bickering about something; their tastes were what you could call diametrically opposed, especially when it came to anime. Ordinarily it was my job to end the debate by choosing a side, but right now I was too preoccupied to keep up.

Still no messages.

I set my phone down on the table in front of me, screen down, and started thumbing through my worn copy of *Trigun*, a space Western about a legendary peace-loving sharpshooter set in a semi-dystopian future. It was one of my favorite manga, but right now I couldn't even concentrate enough to read the words.

From 1:15 in the afternoon until 2:10, the third-floor tech lab belonged to G.A.N.U.—Geeks and Nerds United, Hilltop High School's one and only nerd culture club. Jocelyn, D'Anthony, and I were its founding members. The room was a makerspace, the walls lined with workbenches, the interior dotted with hexagonal workstations and multicolored stools, chairs, and beanbags. There were a pair of 3D printing machines in the back, where Jocelyn had set up shop. The wall next to the door was a projection dry-erase board.

The text I was waiting for should have come by now, and I was only growing more anxious by the minute. I closed my book and checked my phone again.

"Hey, Cam, are you alright?" asked Jocelyn. "You look like you need to take a shit."

The pink hair was new for her. Up until last week it had been cotton candy blue. Her look lately was what she called "Kawaii Wednesday Addams"—today she wore black overall

shorts and a floral print high-collared shirt. She was hardly five feet tall, but her chunky black boots gave her an extra four inches of height, not that she needed it. She had one of those personalities where she just seemed taller, somehow.

“You do seem a little keyed up,” D’Anthony added, again, without looking up from his Game Boy. He was a firm believer in the fact that high school was not a fashion show and that he wasn’t here to impress anyone, and so he usually opted for comfort, like rugby shirts and old skate shoes. Although, he always had a pick with him to maintain his immaculate afro.

“I’m fine,” I said.

I hated lying to my friends, but this wasn’t something they’d understand.

The PA system crackled, and Principal Standish’s nasally voice rattled through the speakers. “Good afternoon, Hilltop Hawks!” he proclaimed. “I want to wish everyone a safe and happy Friday. Get out there and enjoy this beautiful weather before the snow hits. And now, just a quick message from our student council president, Karla Ortega.”

I released my viselike grip on my phone. That explained that, at least.

“Hey, everyone,” Karla said in her usual chipper voice, “just a few quick reminders. Yearbook Committee starts at the end of the month. Seniors, it’s time to start thinking about your senior pictures.” She paused between sentences, and you could feel the smile she punctuated them with. “Also, if you’ve got an idea for a superlative, be ready to turn it in to any member of the committee or student council. We love to hear from you.” Another smile. “Lastly, this year’s winter production

is Jane Austen's classic, *Pride and Prejudice*. If you'd like to be considered for a role, auditions begin Monday after school in the auditorium and will be held until that Friday. Thanks, guys, and have a great weekend!"

"Ugh. *Karla*," Jocelyn muttered. "Could she be any more fake? And did you guys see what she was wearing today? Those tights, and that *skirt*? She's definitely appealing to a very specific demographic ever since she won the election."

"What, the every-allosexual-person-ever demographic?" D'Anthony laughed. "Yeah, of course I saw her. She's living, breathing fan-service, and that's *why* she won the election. Hell, I voted for her and I don't even like her. I may not care for sex, but I do understand sex appeal. Sometimes. I think."

"Guys, can we not?" I groaned. "Gross."

"Right, I forgot, Cam *hates* Karla," Jocelyn said teasingly.

"Remind me again what you have against art?" D'Anthony asked with a smirk.

If there was one thing those two could agree on, it was teasing me about Karla. They liked to do this bit anytime she came up in conversation or in real life, and seeing as she was Hilltop High School's premier golden girl, she came up a lot. "I don't hate her," I explained for about the thousandth time. "I just don't see the hype. Yeah, sure, she's good-looking—"

"Understatement," Jocelyn interjected.

"*But*, people act like she walks on water when she totally doesn't. Not to mention, she's super conceited. Every year she gets more and more selective about who she deigns to speak to."

"Maybe because everybody she speaks to is trying to jump her sexy bones," Jocelyn pointed out.

I scoffed, but before I could respond the door burst open, and Mackenzie Briggs sauntered in like a cowboy stepping into a saloon. “Sorry I’m late,” she announced in a tone that made it clear she was not at all sorry. She dumped her backpack on the ground, slumped into a chair at the workstation across from mine, and kicked her feet up. “What’s up, dork?”

That part was directed specifically at me.

Mackenzie had transferred to Hilltop High from some art magnet in Minneapolis, which, if you asked me, was an egregious error on the part of her parents, her advisers, and whoever else was involved in making that decision.

“Hello, Mackenzie,” I said coolly. “I see you got dressed in the dark again.”

It could very well have been true, that or she just threw on the first thing she yanked out of her closet. Today she had on high-top red Converse, green camo pants, a black hoodie, and a weathered jean jacket. She looked like a homeless hipster.

She sat up, curling her legs underneath her, and sniffed the air. “Hey, Cameron, did you know you’re supposed to wear your deodorant, not eat it? It works better that way. Although, with all the shit you talk I guess you could do both.”

I closed my book and set it down.

Here’s the thing. I did not like Mackenzie. I didn’t like her big curly hair or her pointy nose or the way the edges of her lips were always curled just enough that she looked like she was smiling at some secret joke and you were the punch line. I didn’t like the languid, I’m-so-over-it way she walked, like she was so much cooler than everyone else, and even though she was sort of G.A.N.U.’s fourth ranger, floating in and out

of our meetups whenever she felt like it, she made no secret of the fact that she didn't like me, either.

"Wait a second," I said. "*You* know what deodorant is? That's strange—do you put yours on before or after bathing in the blood of innocent virgins?"

"If I bathed in the blood of virgins, I would have killed you for yours a long time ago."

"Goddamn," Jocelyn said under her breath.

"Flawless victory," D'Anthony added.

My phone finally buzzed. I snatched it off the table faster than I should have.

Meet at our spot? XOXO

Fucking *finally*.

I was up before I'd finished reading the text. "We're still on for movie night tonight, aren't we?" I asked as I made for the door.

"I'm busy tonight," Mackenzie said.

"No one cares. You never show up anyway."

"Where are *you* going?" Jocelyn asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"I, um, gotta take a shit."

"Gross," Mackenzie said, but I hardly heard her, because I was already halfway out the door.

The only two things you needed to know about Hilltop High School were:

1. The school was not, as its name implied, on a hill. If anything it was a knoll, and barely that.

2. From above (or on any campus map) the school, with its rectangular main building that connected to a pair of smaller, circular buildings, looked like a giant penis. It was common to hear someone say they had to get to their class in the shaft, or to meet up on the third floor of the southeast testicle—much to the consternation of our principal and the handful of teachers who didn't have a sense of humor.

The tech lab was near the base of the shaft, south of the gymnasium. I headed south, through the enclosed breezeway that connected the dick and the balls, then hit the stairwell and descended to the basement level, where the lights were dim and the air was always just a little dank, and it usually smelled like cheese and old socks. I made my way deeper into the bowels of the building. That's where the old library was. It hadn't seen much use since the new media center had been built; the stacks were covered in dust and the old reference books on them were ratty and moth-ridden. But I couldn't wait to get there. Each step I took sent a surge of electricity coursing through me, and I was drawn like a magnet toward my destination, and who was meeting me there.

I meant what I'd said about Karla. Thing is, Karla's crowd and my crowd didn't exactly mix. Her friends were the over-achievers. Student government types, theater snobs, the kids who thought they were better than everyone else because they could quote Shakespeare and had perfect 4.0 GPAs and took AP courses. It was a very exclusive club, almost like a cult, or a hive mind, where who your friends were, who you dated, and who you were seen with were all dictated by the

group. Karla wasn't mean, per se, not like some of the others, but if you weren't part of the group she was happy to pretend you didn't exist.

Which was why I still had no idea why we had been hooking up since this summer.

CHAPTER TWO

A little bit about Karla.

When she was six years old she'd been voted cutest toddler at the Hennepin County Fair. At fourteen she'd been crowned Junior Ms. Robbinsdale at Whiz Bang Days. She was a varsity cheerleader, she ran cross-country track, and had set a state record in the pole vault last year. She had never had a bad hair day (it was a long-standing rumor that she woke up at three in the morning each and every day just to style it). It had once been rumored that a kiss from Karla was enough to induce a seizure, and that this was allegedly what had sent Scott Foreman, the guy she'd been dating up until the second week of freshman year, to the hospital after he'd had a grand mal seizure in the front foyer.

These were all things I'd heard about her before I'd ever even seen her.

I first met Karla in the ninth grade, when by sheer coin-

cidence Ms. Lola assigned me to sit behind her in English class. After about ten minutes of staring at the back of her head she had suddenly turned around, flashed one of her ultrabright you're-going-to-remember-this-for-the-rest-of-your-life smiles, and said, "Hi, I'm Karla, what's your name?"

"Cameron," I'd said, completely and truly starstruck.

"Nice to meet you, Cameron."

Those eleven words were the first and only words Karla said to me that year. I still couldn't recall much else about that day, and she, being Karla Ortega, probably forgot about the whole exchange the second class let out. But I never did.

She was what one might call "sun-kissed." Like, if Kryptonians were real, and they drew their power and vitality from the sun, they would probably look like she did. She just had this glow, this indiscernible *something* that drew people to her. She was hot, as D'Anthony would and frequently did say, but there was a warmth to her, too. She really was the star around which the entire student body orbited, and she was a hyper-velocity star, always moving faster than anyone else around her. Her campaign blitzkrieg had earned her the position of senior class president in what had to have been the most lopsided election in the history of democracy, and it was common now to see her flitting through the halls, smiling and waving at people as she blew past. It was a fitting role, since like most politicians she was ridiculously charismatic. When she spoke to you, she made you feel like you were the center of the universe, but just like she could crank the charm up to eleven, she could switch it off just as quickly, leaving you to fade back into obscurity. Many a poor soul had lost their way chasing her glow, but I liked to think I wasn't that stu-

pid. If she was the star we all orbited, I might as well have been Pluto. A happy, contented Pluto who didn't mind his cold, lonely corner of the solar system.

The library was tucked away so that you could only get to it if you were looking for it, like a cursed temple, and making a trip to the library was like visiting a tomb, or some other ancient location that could be a set piece in an Indiana Jones movie. *Cameron Carson and the Cave of Relics*, a B movie made on a shoestring budget, premiering on the SYFY channel right after the latest *Sharknado* sequel. And just like a cursed temple or a tomb, very few people wanted to be there, which made it the perfect place to be when you didn't want to be seen.

Karla was already waiting for me next to a stack of outdated textbooks and dusty encyclopedias, casually flipping through a copy of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and looking for all the world like the galaxy's sexiest librarian in her gray pencil skirt and dark nylons. That had become something of a uniform for her these days, now that she was president, instead of her usual rotation of assorted leggings and hoodie combo (on cheer practice days), her oversize sweaters and jeans (my personal favorite), or the time-tested flannel. Not that I paid attention to those sorts of things. At least, I hadn't used to. This past summer had changed all that.

I understood now what Jocelyn and D'Anthony had been talking about.

I still couldn't figure out why we did this, why it had happened that first time. Maybe she'd been bored. Maybe she lost a bet. Whatever the reason was, it didn't matter.

She marked her place and closed the book when she saw me, and wordlessly crashed into me like a rogue wave, like a force of nature, one who smelled like Victoria's most secret secret and tasted like cotton candy lip gloss. I may not have understood the why, but I very clearly understood that we weren't here to talk, we weren't here as friends, and we definitely weren't here for questions. To anyone else at this school, Karla and I were oil and water—we didn't mix. My friends couldn't stand her crowd, and her crowd pretended my friends and I didn't exist—but right here, right now, none of that mattered. This time was ours and ours alone, and there was no thought, only the heat of her breath and the taste of her tongue dancing with mine. The pinprick pressure of her fingers kneading my shoulder blades. The weight of her body as she rolled and rocked against me. Buttons coming undone, clasps unhooking, we found each other beneath our clothes. She trailed her fingers down my chest, and I felt the smile on her lips when I shuddered. My right hand slid beneath her bra and cupped the warm mound of her breast, and she sucked in a sharp breath and sighed with her lips at my ear.

“Wait.”

I jerked both hands away, holding them up, palms out. “Sorry! Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” she breathed. Her face was flushed, and the look in her eyes made me dizzy. She took a few more deep breaths and licked her lips. “I just...” She sighed and ran her hands through her messy hair. “I think it's time.”

I shook my head. “Time for what?”

She smiled and bit her lip. “You know what.”

I did. In the animal part of my brain. The logical part was having trouble accepting it.

“Wait, you *are* a virgin, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I mean, *no*,” I blurted, too quickly. “I mean, yeah, totally a virgin. Are *you* a virgin?”

She laughed. “Does that surprise you? I think I might be offended.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just...” I stopped short of telling her how often her ex bragged about all the ridiculous sex they had when they were together. I should’ve known it was bullshit—a lot of what he described sounded like a play-by-play of some porno, and some of it wasn’t even physically possible. I guess I just assumed they’d done it at some point along the way.

Here’s the thing.

My mom was an RN, and a firm believer in health awareness, whether it was mental, physical, or sexual health. *Especially* sexual health. *I’ve met too many grown folks too timid to say the word penis or vagina*, she liked to remind my older sister and me. “Too many pregnant young women who didn’t think they could get pregnant if they did it standing up, or on a full moon, or some other nonsense. That kind of ignorance is dangerous, and I won’t abide by it in my home.” Which was why she’d given me my first birds and bees talk when I was twelve—complete with photos and diagrams—and a refresher course just before I started high school. Those lessons held the top number one and two spots on my all-time most cringeworthy experiences list. But I knew how sex worked, probably better than a lot of people. How to properly put on a condom, the anatomy of a vagina, consent... Mom was

very thorough. And my family wasn't religious, so I didn't have any moral compunctions about having sex before marriage. I just never in a million years would have thought that my first time would be with Karla of all people. That had to be the dream of at least 80 percent of the population at this school, and yet...

"Can I get back to you on that?" I asked.

A look of surprise flashed across her face, but she smoothed it over with a grin. "I'm not used to being told no. Not that I want to pressure you, or anything. I just figured..."

"Figured what?" That I'd jump on this one-in-a-million chance like some sort of horny kangaroo? "I mean, what are we doing? This whole thing? Where is this going?"

"Come on, Cameron," she said quietly. "You know how it is. You know how this works."

Yeah. I did. There were rules, after all. And we were breaking them.

We stood there, at the impasse, until her phone went off, *conveniently*, the chorus of Billie Eilish's "You Should See Me in a Crown" reverberating through the tomb-like silence that had enveloped us.

"Shit! Thought I put that on vibrate." She snatched her purse off the ground and rummaged through it until she found and silenced her phone. She stared at the screen, brows puckered in a cute little frown.

"Everything okay?" I asked carefully, cautiously, as if my words might ruin the fragile magic we'd woven here. But that spell had already been broken.

"I have to go—we have a pre-production meeting tonight."

I forgot Karla was involved with the play. She was the assis-

tant director, “putting out the fires Mrs. Vernon doesn’t have time to address,” as she put it. She shook her forty-dollar lip gloss from her purse. I only knew it cost forty dollars because Jocelyn had gone on a ten-minute rant about it. “That shit’s Yves Saint Laurent! Who the fuck needs Yves Saint Laurent *lip gloss*? And it’s *nude*! Gratuitous, is what that is.” I still didn’t quite grasp the significance of any of that, but I knew enough to know that Karla was low-key extra.

She used the mirror on her phone to apply the gloss, rearrange her hair, and button up her blouse. Somehow, in seconds she’d done away with the hookup hair and was back to the prim and proper librarian aesthetic. “Look,” she said as she slung her purse over her shoulder. “I’ll... We’ll... I’ll see you.” She paused just long enough to smooth out her skirt one last time, and then she was gone.

“No, you won’t,” I said to no one in particular. She never saw me. Not out there.

“*These violent delights have violent ends.*” Shakespeare wrote that. *Romeo and Juliet*. Not a huge fan. I only knew that because we’d spent an entire semester of English lit analyzing that stupid play. He had a point, though.

Whatever this thing was between Karla and me, it was weird. And it was wrong, probably, on at least three different levels. I shouldn’t have gone along with it, but it was Karla Ortega, and no sane person would turn down something like this. Someone like her. And she knew it.

At first the secrecy of it had been part of the rush, but that had ended right around the first time we’d crossed paths in the hallway, her surrounded by the entire Caravan, me with

the G.A.N.U. crew, and she'd straight up blown right past me without so much as a sidelong glance my way. After that it just felt dirty. What we did was a secret, true enough, but it was one she was obviously ashamed of, and if I was honest, I was, too, just a little.

Stray far from timid, only make moves when your heart's in it.

That was the Notorious B.I.G. He had a point, too.

I needed to end this. I wasn't sure my heart was in it, and I was definitely sure Karla's wasn't, and besides, sooner or later it was going to blow up in our faces, and I had the feeling I was the only one who would end up covered in shit when it hit the fan.

I pulled my Jansport out of my locker and swung it over my shoulder before slamming my locker with finality. I'd made up my mind. I had to end it, if not for both our sakes, for mine at the very least. But even as the decision solidified in my mind, my head was awash with fantasies of a very sexy, very naked Karla, and all the things we could do. All the things she might *want* to do.

And then an all-too-familiar voice barked my name, and it struck me like a thunderclap, turning all those thoughts to ash. I wheeled around to face Lucas Briggs, Karla's sometime-boyfriend and Mackenzie's twin brother. I groaned. I disliked Lucas even more than I did his sister, and I didn't really feel like dealing with any more of the Briggs brand of bullshit, especially when I almost definitely smelled like his now-ex-girlfriend's perfume, and I couldn't shake the sinking suspicion that he knew something I really didn't want him to know.

“What’s up?” I asked innocently, planting my feet and squaring my shoulders in case this got real.

He crossed his arms, but he didn’t swing, which was promising. “We need to talk. Now.”

That part was not promising at all.

Violent delights. Violent ends.

Fuck.

CHAPTER THREE

They say you should keep your friends close and your enemies closer, which probably went a long way toward explaining why no matter where I went I was always running into one of the Briggs siblings. It was like their parents had birthed them for the express purpose of making my life miserable. Maybe I was cursed, like, one of my ancestors had pissed off one of their ancestors who happened to be some sort of witch, and this was all some sort of generations-spanning vengeance.

I first met Lucas—or, first encountered him—on the second day of the second semester in the ninth grade, in third period Physical Science. I'd fumbled my way through an entire semester, and I was finally beginning to feel like I was getting the hang of this whole high school thing. By the time Lucas had come sauntering through the door, twenty minutes late, we were already into our lesson, talking about the earth's layers. "Got lost," was the only explanation he offered

our teacher, Mrs. Clark, as to his tardiness. I'd heard of him, seen him in the hallways, usually with the other meatheads, but the only real thought I had as he made his way down my aisle and slid into the desk behind was, "He's tall."

"As I was saying," Mrs. Clark said exasperatedly, "we have the inner core, the outer core, and what's next? The..."

"Lower mantle," we all mumbled in unison, like we were at a concert and this was the worst call-and-response in the history of live performance.

"Good. Next we have the..."

"Upper mantle," we chanted, somehow even less enthusiastically than the first time.

"Great, and the uppermost layer is called the—"

"Crust!" Lucas shouted from behind me. "Like what this guy's head is covered in."

The entire class turned around to see who the dandruffy dingus was, and when I shifted in my desk to look upon the poor soul who was about to become the laughingstock of the class, I found myself staring into a pointed finger, and I realized to my horror that the dingus was me.

That's when the laughing started.

Lucas lived like he was aggressively trying to tick every box in the "stupid jock" checklist, and he was doing a beautiful job of it until last year, because ironically enough, getting into fights, not giving a shit about grades, chronic delinquency—all staples in the Lucas repertoire—were the exact things that would get you kicked off the football team, which meant he wasn't a stupid jock anymore, he was just stupid.

And now all six feet three inches of that stupid was staring at me with a look that was somewhere between agitation

and constipation. For a lot of guys, being cut from the team would've meant a steady sink into the chasm of social irrelevance and obscurity, but Lucas had remained just as popular as ever, a reminder of how unfair the world was when people thought you were gorgeous, and how fickle puberty could be. I had to admit that the planes of his face, like those of his sister's, were remarkably, annoyingly chiseled. Jawlines that could cut glass and flawless, sandy-brown skin obviously ran in the family. Even now, with his neatly trimmed goatee and his immaculately tapered fade and impeccable wave pattern, I was a little jealous.

"Look, man," he said grimly, "I've been thinking—"

"How'd that feel?"

Lucas may have been built like a football player and still carried himself like he'd just scored a winning touchdown, but I was older now. Wiser. I didn't take his shit lying down anymore. I knew that the best way to head off Lucas's idiocy was to get the jump on him, fight fire with fire, snark with snark.

"Come on, man," he groaned, "I'm being for real. I've been thinking, and..." He frowned and made a face like he was trying to speak a different, unfamiliar language. "I know we've had our differences."

"That's an understatement."

He drew in a sharp breath through his teeth. "Alright. Fine. Yes, I've been kind of a dick to you. I realize that. I admit it. I just think it's time we called it quits. You know. Put down the hatchet."

"Bury."

"What?"

“It’s ‘bury’ the hatchet, and what are you doing, like, seriously? Is this your version of a senior prank, because you can’t play those on another senior.”

“No, Cameron! I mean it. Goddamn. It’s just...” He scrunched his face up, then relaxed it. “Look, I’ve been a jackass to a lot of people for a long time, but there’s only so far that can carry a person. It gets old. I think I’m better than that now. I *know* I’m better than that.”

I shouldered my backpack again, shifting on my feet and relaxing my posture. This obviously wasn’t going to be a fight. “That was almost a Star Wars quote. You know, after Anakin killed the sand people and he confessed it to Padmé and he went all emo...”

“You’re a fucking nerd.”

“There’s the charm.”

“Am I wrong? I’m sorry. My bad. There’s nothing wrong with being a nerd, I guess.”

I had to give him props. This was a train wreck of a conversation, but by god was he powering through it. I looked at him, scrutinizing his face for any of that pre-I’m-about-to-do-something-stupid twinkle in his eyes. It wasn’t there. I pursed my lips. “You’re for real?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.”

“No bullshit?”

He groaned. “No. No bullshit. I’m having a party tomorrow night. You should come through.”

I crossed my arms. This felt like a trap. Like a setup. I didn’t like it. “This is because of your breakup with Karla, isn’t it?” Shit. That was probably saying too much. I could only hope Lucas wasn’t smart enough to read into it.

His eyes lit up. “No. Of course not. What’s this got to do with her?”

I narrowed my eyes. He was a horrible liar, and the timing was incriminating. They break up and all of a sudden he was Mr. Nice Guy? Yeah, this was her doing. I knew all too well how the power of Karla could change a person.

“I might make an appearance,” I said, even though I had precisely no intention of showing up to a party where the guest list could probably double as the list of people I hated most in this world.

“Cool,” Lucas said. He sounded relieved. “Hit me up on Facebook for the location.”

“We’re not friends on Facebook.”

He scrunched up his nose. “Take my number.”

“Now?”

“No, tomorrow. Come on, man.”

“Oh okay.” I still wasn’t convinced he was for real until he’d rattled off his number and I’d saved it in my phone under “Numb Nuts.”

I couldn’t wait to tell Jocelyn and D’Anthony.

I didn’t have long to wait. Friday nights were G.A.N.U.’s unofficial movie nights. For the past few weeks we’d been working our way through the collected works of Studio Ghibli, starting with *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, which had caused something of a disagreement between D’Anthony, who felt that since the film was released in Japan in 1984, a year before Ghibli was founded, it shouldn’t technically be included in the studio’s works, and Jocelyn, who maintained that since the success of the film led directly to the founding

of the studio it definitely belonged. I'd ended the debate by siding with Jocelyn, mostly because I loved the movie.

Since then we'd watched *Castle in the Sky*, another of my favorites, and *Grave of the Fireflies*, which made us all cry, as always. Tonight we were watching *My Neighbor Totoro*, which was not just one of the greatest Japanese animated films of all time, but one of the greatest films ever made, period.

The three of us didn't live far from each other, so we took turns hosting movie night. Tonight it was Jocelyn's turn, and D'Anthony and I had gathered at her place, assorted snacks in hand, and descended to the basement, where I immediately cracked my head on a carved wooden loon that was dangling from the ceiling.

Jocelyn shoved past me and steadied it. "Come on, man! This thing is delicate."

"And my head isn't?"

"Nobody told you to smack your head into my duck."

"My bad."

"I know."

"Loons aren't ducks," D'Anthony so helpfully pointed out.

"Yeah, because you're an ornithologist," Jocelyn replied.

To be fair, I knew better than to let my guard down here. We called Jocelyn's basement the cosplay dungeon because it was what you'd get if Willy Wonka had been a cosplayer instead of a candymaker. Bolts of multicolored fabric, plastic tubs full of god knows what, and at least a dozen bare wig heads were strewn across the basement. Scattered amid the chaos, like it had crashed through the roof and exploded on impact, were pieces of what would be her magnum opus: a Gundam suit, a giant, weaponized mecha that looked like a

futuristic samurai. MangaMinneapolis, Minnesota's biggest anime convention, was "only" three months away, and Jocelyn had made it her life's pursuit to place at this year's costume contest.

D'Anthony and I stepped gingerly into the clear space between the TV and entertainment center against the far wall and the IKEA futon in front of it. We settled on opposite ends of the futon, the only safe place to sit because the love seat beside it was occupied by a pair of massive arms.

Jocelyn cradled the gun she'd printed earlier like an infant and propped it delicately against the workbench behind the futon. It was actually two workbenches pushed together, and even then there was barely enough space to hold the piles of craft foam, PVC pipe, and corrugated plastic that were amassed around the giant helmet. On either side of the bench stood two dress forms (which, despite the fact that they looked exactly like headless, limbless mannequins, apparently were not, in fact, mannequins), one of which held the Gundam's body, the other its winged shoulders.

I told them about Lucas's invite while Jocelyn set up the DVD and D'Anthony started in on a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos. I was still shook by the whole thing; for once it was me who needed their advice.

"It's a trap," Jocelyn announced from behind the workbench, where she was loading a stick of glue into one of her glue guns. "An obvious one, too."

"For once, I agree with Jocelyn," said D'Anthony. "Lucas just stops being a dick just because he broke up with Karla for the millionth time? I call bullshit. Leopards can't change their spots."

“Actually, they can and do,” said Jocelyn. “He’s right, though, Cam. It’s sketch as hell.”

“It’s just a party.”

“Until they’re drawing and quartering you.”

I couldn’t fault them for their pessimism. The summer of sophomore year, right before school started, my barber fucked up my hairline (he claimed I moved my head, I contended that he had tried to hold in a sneeze and lost control of the clippers). I was faced with the horrible choice of either starting the school year looking like I’d lost a fight to a pair of gardening shears or going bald and starting over. I chose the latter, assuming it would lead to less grief. No one could tease you about your hairline if it was gone, right? Lucas, of course, proved that theory to be incredibly flawed when, during PE, in the middle of the gym and with the eyes of god and both of the combined fourth period classes watching us, he’d pointed at me and shouted, “Bro, why does your head look like a giant penis?”

That was the day I found out what it was like to be laughed at by fifty-eight people at once, and later on that same day, when he’d rushed up behind me, yanked my hood over my head and shouted, “Wrap it up, Condom-Head!” I’d also found out what it was like to have at least a hundred people laughing at me at once. To add insult to injury, the nickname—Condom-Head Cameron—stuck with me until nearly the end of the semester, long after my hair had grown back. Jocelyn and D’Anthony were only looking out for me. They didn’t understand the power Karla had, or what it was like to dance at the end of her strings.

Because that’s who this was about. It wasn’t like I was super

into parties, and I couldn't care less about Lucas or his friends. But for some reason, Lucas and a few of his core group of bozos had found favor with the Caravan. Lucas existed in the overlap part of the Venn diagram of meatheads and theater snobs, and if I could find my way into his group, maybe I could find my way into that overlap, and from there, maybe, just maybe, I could find my way to Karla.

"I'm going," I said definitively. "It's just a party. Besides, it's what Goku would do."

D'Anthony shook his head, chuckling. "Here we go again."

Goku was one of the most recognizable anime characters of all time, and my personal hero. He was the protagonist of the Dragon Ball franchise, one of the most successful Shonen anime series of all time. *Dragon Ball* was, essentially, the story of Goku, a boy with a monkey tail and extraordinary powers, who had no memory of who he was or where he came from. He soon met Bulma Briefs, a brilliant inventor and heir to the Capsule Corporation, who was on a quest for the seven mythical Dragon Balls that, when collected together, summoned the great dragon Shenron, who would grant a single wish. As Goku grew older, he encountered dozens of enemies, each more powerful than the last, in his quest to become the strongest fighter on the planet. The next entry in the series, *Dragon Ball Z*, followed Goku's adult adventures, beginning when he learned that he was one of the last of the Saiyans, a ruthless warrior race that sent him to Earth in order to wipe out the population. *Dragon Ball Z* was *Dragon Ball* on steroids. The stakes were higher, the enemies were more powerful, and the battles were more epic.

I'd loved the series since I was eight.

Jocelyn looked up and dramatically rolled her eyes again. “Why Goku? He’s not even a real hero.”

“He’s the best,” I stated simply.

“In what way? Piccolo is a better father, Krillin is a better friend, Vegeta is a better Saiyan *and* husband. What is Goku actually good for?”

“He’s saved the planet multiple times.” She had fair points, true enough, but Goku was my hero, and I would go to the grave defending him and his actions.

Jocelyn huffed. “How many villains has he actually defeated? Raditz? No. Frieza? Nope. Cell? Hell, no. He almost died fighting fucking *Androids*, for god’s sake.”

“Regardless, Goku never backs down. Neither will I.”

“Not true, but whatever,” Jocelyn muttered.

“I’m down to go with you,” D’Anthony said with a shrug. “Gotta explore the whole map if you want to beat the game. I’ve never been to one of these infamous house parties, so at the very least I’ll get some wild stories out of it.”

That was reassuring. And he was right. The three of us historically didn’t do parties or dances, even the ones hosted by the school. The one dance we’d gone to was last year’s homecoming, which we’d only done out of boredom, and even then we’d gone as a group.

“You in, Jocelyn?” I asked hopefully.

“Hell, no,” she said resolutely. She waved her hands around the basement. “Do you not see this shit? Con-crunch is in full effect. It’s all hands on deck. Now can we please watch this damn movie?”

I couldn’t argue with that. “Fair enough.”

Two of us wasn’t as good as three, but it sure as hell was better than one.



D'Anthony agreeing to come with me didn't mean I was out of the woods yet. I'd made up my mind about going to the party, but I still had one more hurdle to cross, and in retrospect I should've crossed this one first.

"Do you know who all is going to be there?" Mom asked. She was in her purple scrubs, feeding carrots, apples, and celery into her juicer at the sink. It was one of those fancy, stainless steel ones with adjustable pressure settings and an automatic pulp ejection system. My sister, Cassie, and I had saved up for a whole month to surprise her with it on Mother's Day last year.

"Not too many people. D'Anthony would come with me," I added. My mom loved D'Anthony.

"Who's the girl you're chasing after?" Cassie asked with a snicker as she slathered mayonnaise on a ham sandwich at the table. "She better be cute."

"Shouldn't you be focusing on finals instead of my business?" I clapped back at her. Cassie was five years older than me, but I swear sometimes she acted like she was five years younger. "For the record, I'm not going to chase girls."

"Oh, of course not, because there are so many other reasons for someone as aggressively introverted as you are to want to go to a party all of a sudden."

"I won't be out too late," I told Mom, ignoring Cassie's remark. I couldn't do this now, not when the stakes were this high. I *was* being honest, in a matter of speaking. I was supremely certain that Karla would not be making an appearance at her ex-boyfriend's house party, so there really wouldn't be any girls there I was interested in.

Mom took a second to fix me with one of her scrutinizing looks. “Have you talked to your father?”

I scowled. She did this sometimes. It had nothing to do with getting his permission. She used times like these as leverage to get me to keep in contact with Dad because she knew I wouldn’t otherwise.

“I’ll call him.”

She narrowed her eyes, but she accepted my answer. She quickly poured her juice into a bottle and screwed on the lid. “How are your grades? Thank you, sweetie.” She planted a quick kiss on Cassie’s head before shoving the sandwiches she’d made into her lunch bag along with her juice.

“As and Bs, as always.”

“How are you getting there and back?” She threw on her coat and slipped into her shoes at the back door.

“D’Anthony’s borrowing his brother’s minivan.”

“Hmm.” Mom deliberated for a few seconds. My mom was not one to suffer fools lightly. Straight talk and straight answers, that was her rule. None of us had the time for anything else, she liked to say. It didn’t help that she was headed to a twelve-hour shift tonight. I wouldn’t ordinarily have dumped this on her as she was on her way out, but if I didn’t ask now I wouldn’t have another chance until it was too late.

“Go ahead, sweetie,” she said as she snatched her keys off the hook. “Have fun. Don’t do anything you wouldn’t want me to know about.”

“I won’t.”

“There are leftovers in the fridge.” She flashed us a quick smile before rushing out the door. Cassie and I lingered, listening for the familiar sounds of the garage door creaking

open, the car door shutting, the engine starting, and the tires crunching as Mom backed out. I hit the button to close the door when she'd gone.

"Hold up," said Cassie. "Was Mom wearing makeup?"

I frowned at her. "I dunno. Maybe. So what?"

"*So what?*" She looked at me like I'd asked the silliest question in the history of silly questions. "Mom never wears makeup to work, or her hair in anything other than a ponytail."

"I still don't see your point."

Cassie rolled her eyes. "You're so oblivious. Girls love that," she said sarcastically.

"Kick rocks," I said as I made my retreat to the refuge of my room, pausing in the kitchen doorway just long enough to flip her the bird.