

FAIL FREAKS

(Rough Draft in Progress 08/10/12)

by

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Chapter One

Frank O'Leary was born to fail, and he knew it. If he ever forgot, someone would remind him.

"Franko, might wanna try tying a shoelace. Fail."

"Hey, your mom dress you, Frank? Or you shop at Fail R Us?"

"Frankie! Why'd you microwave your ski mask, bud? Never mind, it's your epic fail. I mean your face."

Like that.

But it wasn't like Frank *never* tied a shoelace or that he wore the worst clothes or was *butt* ugly. He preferred to think of himself as Mick-Jagger ugly (the guy's like, what, a hundred and still getting babes), or ugly duckling enough that chicks would be all over him if he ever became a mega rock star. He arguably did not have the moves like Jagger, but his mostly (80%?) chiseled face and pretty decently long dark hair definitely benefited from the Magic Eye effect. You know, those books with the weird color illustrations that look like squiggle soup till you squint really hard or cross your eyes, and then a cool 3D image pops out at you while everyone else around you goes, "What? Where? I don't see it." It was like that with Frank. If you squinted just right or crossed your eyes long and hard enough, he didn't look half bad, though usually no one else around you could see it.

Maybe his problem was that he couldn't let things go. Most dudes, if you bother them enough they ignore it. The problem goes away, usually, eventually. Not Frank. He always had to have an answer.

When a guy would bug him about his shoelaces, Frank had to snap back. "Shoelaces are for morons. What, are my shoes gonna fall off?" But people always twisted his words. "If shoelaces are for morons, why are you wearing them? Moron." To comments about his clothes he'd say, like, "You're lucky I'm not naked." Which never made anyone leave him alone. And when people talked about his face, he'd say, "Or maybe you're just jealous." And it would go back and forth between them and him, on and on, like ping pong, only in real life he was a ping pong stud.

Time flies when you're having fun, is what they say. They don't ever say what it does when you're not having fun. For Frank time had broken wings and just lay there, every once

in a while pathetically trying to flap itself off the ground. His life felt like falling through a bottomless pit. Sometimes he had a sense of humor. He could laugh at the darkness and the echoes of his laughter. But it all went on forever, and he tried not to think of hitting rock bottom.

One day Prom Season befell him. Wheaton High had been chugging along as per usual: spring sports, tests, quizzes, and a few other things people mostly didn't care about; and then, bam, everybody was in a tizzy about prom.

"You goin'?"

"I dunno. You?"

"Maybe."

"With who?"

"Whatever. Anybody."

"Like Jonna French?"

"Anybody but Jonna French."

"Dude, I'm goin' with Megan Moon."

"Ha. Yeah, right. Dude. Really?"

"Maybe. No. I might ask her. Should I?"

And so on. Like that.

Except Frank only listened. He would never go. He wasn't that type of guy. Instead of going, he was gonna sit around and do nothing. Or maybe crash the prom and snag some embarrassing video footage to post on YouTube or whatever. Teach a couple people a lesson.

It was Friday night about 9:30 when Time chirped for Frank and magically unbroke its wings. He was on his bed, playing a game on his laptop when he saw Megan's name on his phone and froze. He should have been suspicious but his brain fogged up. Only two girls had ever called him. Neither was named anything remotely like Megan Moon. There was no contingency plan. A lot of things in life Frank could picture might happen to him one day, and if they did he'd have some idea of what to do and say because he'd planned ahead. Like, for example, he had a script for if he found a burglar in his house. He would plant his feet, give the evil eye, boldly point his finger and say, "I suggest you back it up, dude. My dad's a cop and he just texted me he's pulling up the street." All lies, but it might work. For Megan Moon calling, though, Frank had no script.

When he pressed the answer button, he heard himself say, in an oddly formal voice, "Yes, ma'am?"

There was a soft giggle. Then, "Uh, Frank?"

"That's right."

"Hi. It's Megan." Her voice was high and too sweet. You just knew that if you upset her, she'd make you pay. Or one of her recent boyfriends or her dad or big brother would. On the other hand, he could picture her sitting criss cross apple sauce on her bed, maybe

wearing a robe or a long t-shirt, maybe twirling her hair. Picturing her like that made it easier to forget about the dangers of talking to a girl like Megan.

"Hi," Frank replied at last.

Megan chatted about their algebra homework and then she got to business. "Hey, are you going to prom?"

"Maybe." Frank wasn't sure why he said this.

"Yeah? With who?"

"I haven't asked yet."

"And you don't want to tell," Megan said. "Okay, well, if you don't go, um, I'm not going either."

"O-kay."

Now Frank heard in the background what had to be more than one girl giggling. He was suspicious again. But girls do call with their friends in the background sometimes. At least, on tv and in movies they do. And they were also known to giggle for mysterious reasons, not all of them bad.

"C ya," Megan said.

"L8r," Frank said. The 8 was in his tone of voice.

Frank felt like he'd had a near death experience. Megan Moon wanted him to ask her to the prom. Maybe it was a setup. Probably. But maybe not. Maybe Megan had a Magic Eye, was really good at squinting and looking at guys cross eyed, could see the Mick Jagger in him. Anyway, Frank was a man of action. He had to go for it. Even if this was a setup, maybe Frank could drop a prom proposal on her that was so epic that Megan Moon would find herself swooning and saying, "No, no, no - I mean yes, yes, yes!"

Chapter Two

Taking action first meant searching the internet. He looked up prom proposals and marriage proposals. Most people, it turns out, have no imagination. They ask at a restaurant or a bar. Classy. And yet *Frank* was the one the whole world called a fail! What the heck. It was all just backwards and twisted.

He found a few intriguing ideas. He could hijack the morning announcements. "I pledge allegiance to Megan Moon, and will you go to the prom with me?" Nah. Frank didn't want to reduce himself to a disembodied voice. He wanted Megan to see his face when he popped the question, and he wanted to see her face when she answered. Though it wasn't his first thought, it did occur to him also that she'd be more likely to say yes in person. She'd feel some pressure.

And that is the reason he decided that the proposal needed to be done in public. The more public, the bigger, the more epic (and the more pressure to say yes).

Another option was to choreograph a flash mob. Maybe at lunch time have the cafeteria ladies blast Megan's favorite song ("Firework," Katy Perry, easily deduced by asking a friend to check her FaceBook profile) and then have all the other kids suddenly bust out with some killer dance moves. Frank could mouth the lyrics. "Baby you're a f-i-i-i-rework! Come on, let your c-o-o-o-lors burst! Make em go oh! oh! oh!" And at the end he could serve up some righteous pops, locks and breaks. Then his best friend Kyle could hand him a wireless mic or a megaphone and he could announce, "Megan Moon, will you attend the prom with me?" That would be sweet, and pretty hard for Megan to turn down. The problem with Option #2, though, was that Frank only had two real friends, Kyle Winters and Dave Bird; and neither they nor he himself had any clout to make other people want to participate in a flash mob.

Frank nixed four more options: skywriting and billboard, too much moolah; skydiving, too much gravity and moolah; scuba diving, too much water and danger and training and moolah.

What gave him the lightbulb moment was a little article from a wedding site, about a San Francisco man named Matt Treski who proposed to a woman named Heather Rimmey by renting a local movie theater, pretending to take her to see a short film and then watching her laugh and cry to a home video he'd put together called *The Story of Us*, complete with movie clips, music and photo slide shows. At the end, the screen turned pink and formed a heart shape. That's when Matt proposed to Heather. She said yes.

This could work, Frank thought. He would make it shorter, though. Two minutes. A movie trailer. And he would go the affordable route, because he had no choice. Anyway, no need to rent a whole theater. All Frank needed was two minutes. How much could that cost?

"Five hundred bucks!" Frank said to the guy at the ticket counter the next day before the first show. There was a glass barrier between them. The guy answered via a microphone that made it sound like he was on the far end of a long tunnel and taking Frank's burger order. What was with the glass, anyway? How much money did these places rake in? Did they have a huge safe back there, too? Were there robberies every other week, they had to protect the poor ticket takers with bulletproof glass? C'mon!

The guy clicked the microphone to reply. "Yeah," he said.

"I wanna talk to the manager," Frank demanded.

"He said he doesn't want to talk to you."

"What?! He's not even here!"

"He said it before, when I went to ask. He said tell you it's \$500 for everyone, same price as a commercial."

"But I'm not a business. I'm in high school. And it's not a commercial. It's for a girl."

"Sorry, chief."

"Seriously? Ya gotta ask again. You don't understand - it's for Megan Moon!"

"Yeah? Megan Moon? I heard of her, actually... Never heard of you."

Frank forced a smile. "Yet," he said.

"Five hundred big ones, boss. Take it or leave it." The ticket taker glanced over Frank's shoulder at the line of customers waiting behind him.

"Fine." Frank read the guy's gold plastic name tag. "I'll be back. Greg F. You think I carry a roll of Benjamins every place I go?"

"Uh, no."

Frank needed to book that theater, needed to ask Megan to the movies, and needed to propose to her on Sunday. One day. Three weeks till prom. Who knew how many guys were planning their own Megan Moon proposals that very second? So he bit the bullet and sold a bundle of video game stuff: one old Nintendo, one old Xbox, two old Playstations, 112 games, 6 controllers, 2 memory cards, 1 headset and 1 solid owed to Dave at the time of Dave's choosing (Dave who was a bigger pushover than Kyle and lived closer, too, two blocks over and across the street).

Then Frank sent Megan a text:

ey whats ^ (Hey. What's up?)

About a minute later she answered:

o (Nothing.)

And then it went like this:

same hre (Same here.)

youat home? (You at home?)

yeh (Yeah.)

m2 (Me too.)

avoidn hmwk cnt w8 4 ~o~ (Avoiding homework. Can't wait for summer.)

yr (Yeah, right.)

doin NEfin dis w/e? (Doing anything this weekend?)

nt realy (Not really.)

u lk Mvies? (You like movies?)

hu duznt? (Who doesn't?)

wanna C 1 2moz nyt? W me? (Wanna see one tomorrow night? With me?)

When she didn't answer right away, Frank felt the need to add this:

or nt... (or not...)

But then she said:

wich moV (Which movie?)

WE u wnt (Whatever you want.)

d nu twilight? (The new *Twilight*?)

Twilight. Ugh. Frank slapped himself a couple of times and told himself to shake it off.

Then he responded:

there's nothA nu 1? K yeh (There's another new one? Okay. Yeah.)

w@ tym? (What time?)

hoas... 7:30 i cn pik u ^ @ 7 (Hold on a sec. 7:30. I can pick you up at 7:00.)

K QL CY (Okay. Cool. See ya.)

Wow. Just like that. Three minutes of texting and it was on. Frank O'Leary advances in the time trials. Going for the gold in the Hottie Prom Olympics.

Chapter Three

Megan Moon had been bored on Friday night. More bored than normal for a weekend. Bored enough to let Joel Ridelski convince her to sneak beers into her basement. She didn't like to drink too often (calories, gross beer taste, chance of getting caught, stubborn memories of being the good girl her parents still thought she was), but it was getting harder to resist her friends always wanting to get buzzed. At first she said no but then she said yes. Fifteen minutes later Joel was standing in the window well, tapping on the glass with his fingernails, creepily, like one of the killers in the slasher movies he always wanted her to watch. She had already turned up the volume on the stereo to drown out the noise. Her parents were sure to remain upstairs, plugged into their laptops and iPhones.

"What's goin' down?" Joel said as he hopped in. He acted as stupid as most guys but he was actually smart and couldn't go twenty minutes without slipping a pun into the conversation.

Megan rolled her eyes, except she did it the flirty way. She had broken up with Joel two weeks ago because a girl from Glen Ellyn whose mom knew her mom had told Megan that she'd seen Joel making out with two different girls at a party when Megan was home pretending to be sick (but really just tired). Joel swore up and down that it wasn't true, but she didn't believe him. She couldn't prove it, though. And Joel was pushy. And she had a hard time saying no. Plus he was hot. The hottest junior guy in school. He said she belonged with him. Maybe she did. He kept asking her to the prom. She kept saying no. Eventually she'd break down, but it was more fun to toy with him for as long as possible.

"Moon me," Joel said at her eye roll.

She laughed once.

"Or I'll moon you," he added.

So she blew him a kiss.

"That blows."

Joel was a huge flirt. The kind only the truly hot can be or understand. His friends, on the other hand, always ruined the flirty mood. And Joel usually had an entourage. Tonight, hopping into her basement from the window well one after the other, it was:

Jake: "Yo, Megs."

Joe: "Hey."

John: "Let's get this party started, what?!"

And Mike: small head nod.

Mike was the biggest, the quietest and the lowest ranking of Joel's friends. His job was to bring up the rear and carry anything, like beers. A full case this time. Megan did the math. Joel plus Jake plus Joe plus John plus Mike plus her barely drinking was less than or equal to a long night. She should have invited a couple of her girlfriends. But then it might become a songfest and get outta control. The volume on the stereo was 23. That was pushing it. Any louder and her parents might actually open the door and call down. And if they'd had any wine, one of them might descend halfway to take a peek. It would be hard to hide that many loud, buzzed, horny teenagers that fast. So for tonight she'd have to put up with the testosterone club.

It was 9:00. By 9:15 the guys were talking about who they thought were the biggest losers in school, and then they were talking about prank calls, and then they were talking about prom pranks.

"Oh, by the way, Megs," Joel said, "Frank O'Leary wants to take you."

She felt nauseous for a second at the thought of that. Nightmare. Then she laughed with the guys for a little. They seemed to think it was the funniest thing ever.

Eventually, John said, "You should have seen his face the other day. A bunch of us were talking about prom. Someone brought up your name, Megs - and Franko just about

popped his cork. He didn't say a word, but you can read that kid like a bad book. He is all over Megan Moon."

Jake said, "Like you're not, Joel. Not anymore!"

Joel stared daggers at Jake for two seconds, which Megan thought was cute. Then he said, "We need to give Franko a call."

"No, no, no," Megan said. She was already feeling bad for Frank O'Leary, because she knew that she would say yes in the end.

Chapter Four

Jonna French closed her parents' bedroom door, listened a minute for footsteps in the hallway, and then locked it behind her. In the "master bath" - ooh - was there a *mistress bath*, too?- she pulled her mop of hair away from her face enough to see her horribly ugly nose, disgusting bushy eyebrows and matchstick-thin lips. Jonna had always been a quiet girl, nice on the outside. Nobody knew what to do with her, and she didn't blame them. She was a born freak. Puberty only made the situation hairier.

Most of the time she hid. From trouble. Danger. People, with their microscope eyes, and their damning thoughts that lit up their faces like dark neon. In high school you could make a career of hiding behind your hair and bunching your shoulders. You could lower your head and look away. Stick close by the walls in the school hallways. When you had to talk,

you could mumble, shrug, make an excuse. Jonna had perfected all this. Most people forgot about her. Some were creeped out. Either way, they kept their distance, making it harder to hear their whispers. She would never understand why people had to be mean. Avoiding the whispers was the best way to keep from thinking about it.

Jonna let her hair fall back over her face. She opened her mom's makeup cabinet, which was to her like a toolbox left by ancient aliens. The third drawer, she discovered, was the lipstick drawer. Jonna hadn't tried on lipstick in three years, not since her mom had made her do it for eighth grade graduation. That was her second time. Her first was in the summer before fourth grade, during a family reunion, when her girl cousins decided to put on a fashion show that the adults insisted just had to include every girl. Ugh.

Maybe the third time would be the charm. This weekend was already shaping up to be as freakish as Jonna's hideous face - so why not?

She chose a bright red color. She pulled the cap off and twisted the tube. The lipstick itself, Jonna knew, was meant to enhance a gal's sexual allure by means of a suggestively glistening paint made from, at various times in history: crushed gemstones, insects, beeswax, pig fat, silicone, titanium oxide and fish scales. Lovely. I'll take ten of those in different colors, please.

Jonna began to apply the lipstick, tentatively. She colored too far inside the lines, afraid to make herself look like a clown. It was bad enough already, puckering her lips, to feel like a red-lipped fish face. But the time had come, she thought. She needed to impress.

Megan Moon had invited her to go to the new *Twilight* movie. Jonna's sensible side didn't believe Megan's story for a second.

ik we dnt hng ot + i avent Xactly bn d nicest TU

... is what Megan had texted - which Jonna read as, *we both know I hate you and I'm a stuck-up bitch...*

bt wen u txted me bout Frank O'Relly, I really appreci8td dat. u didn't av 2

The only reason she'd done that - texted Megan - was because her brother Greg had told her to do it. He'd come home from work yesterday and said, "Get Megan Moon's number. You need to text her something." (Which was not that easy to do, get Megan's number through friends of people she knew well enough to bother.)

Then he told her what to text:

Hi Megan. It's Jonna from Spanish. Just thought you should know Frank O'Reilly is renting out a movie theater to ask you to the prom with a video he made. By the way, my brother thinks you're hot. See you later.

So maybe Megan was really glad to be warned. Maybe she had one nice bone in her body. Jonna's sensible side said nope. It was too fishy. She would regret going, because something bad was bound to happen. But her lonely side was dumb and crazy enough to try to scribble her hideous clownfishy lips with a tube of her mom's fishy red paint tube and hope for the best.

Chapter Five

Megan had expected Frank's text. Guys were so easy, like coiled springs. You gave them a little touch, a little hint that you were ready for them to make a move, and, boing, off they went. Bounce, bounce, bounce. All she had to say to Frank O'Reilly was the word "prom" and he was panting like a dog for her. It was almost depressing, really.

At first Joel's prank plan seemed like a bad idea, but it'd grown on her. She was a competitive girl. She'd led the cheer squad to the regional title - twice. She got A's in all the classes that mattered. Someday she might start a business, if she felt like it. It could happen. Megan definitely liked to make things happen. You saw something in your mind, then you wanted it, then you got it.

Now this Franko prank thing was real and so Megan was gonna do it right.

The thing that did surprise her was the text from Jonna French. Perfect! The more the merrier. Love, love, love. This news was so fabulous that she Skyped Joel, because now, Megan decided, she was in charge of this operation and Joel was her sidekick; and she told him to round up the minions cuz this thing was jumping to a whole new level. Megan felt herself turning into an evil genius. In honor of this she rubbed her hands together and knitted her eyebrows and said to her cat Mango: mwa-ha-ha.

Ever since the Jonna text, Megan had kept her eyes peeled for signs of Frankenstein lurking somewhere with a phone or video camera. Part of her expected to see him behind the towels when she was going to the bathroom. She felt a little let down when she did spot him. It was 8:15. Dark outside. She opened the kitchen blinds, just in case, and sat in full view, pouring a bowl of her little brother's Fruit Loops. That would be funniest, she thought. Is there any cereal funnier than Fruit Loops? When from the corner of her eye she caught a flicker of light from by the street, right by the mailbox, Megan knew Franko had made an appearance at last.

Camera, action!

A born starlet, Megan immediately switched into actress mode. It was juicy fun, especially because her director didn't know she was acting. In her mind she was now the babe in a music video. Katy Perry. Part of Me. She heard the music thumping through her blood.

And now...

The slow motion spoon raise.

The luscious tongue.

The swallow of ecstasy.

The hair flip.

The eyelash flutter.

The suggestive waist bend pose while cleaning up.

The sexy yawn in the window.

The pirouette and runway strut out of the kitchen.

When she was off camera, Megan grinned to herself and reflexively did a sign of the cross, though she didn't actually thank God. She was pleased with her performance. If only it could land her an agent.

Chapter Six

When Frank clicked return on the keyboard of his MacBook Air laptop to initiate the export to DVD, he shed two tears, one in each eye. Though he was not ashamed to cry - the video he'd put together was phenomenal and he knew it - still, he pinched the two tears away. There would be time for crying when the deal was done. Only four hours to go now. Again he pictured Megan's reaction. She would appear slightly confused when the trailer of the next Marvel comics movie (or whatever) gave way to the trailer for... *Megan Moon: A Prom Story*. She would blink repeatedly, then it would dawn on her what was happening.

At that point, she'd turn to Frank, hand on heart, puppy-dog faced, moved beyond words. She'd take his hand but look back at the screen, not wanting to miss another moment. When it was over, she'd hug him big time. He would rub her back softly. Then she

would pull away to gaze deep into his eyes. She'd plant a kiss that'd blow his mind. It would be the beginning of who-knows-what. A whole new life. Extreme makeover.

Finally, to make it official, Megan Moon would say to Frank O'Reilly: "Yes. I would love to go to the prom with you."

Or it might not happen that way. But he was putting the doubts aside.

When the DVD was ready (burned or burnt?), Frank gave it a smooch right in the center ring thingie and placed it in a slim jewel case, which he carefully set on his desk. Then he showered, sprayed himself in all strategic locations with Axe Dark Temptation body spray, neatly combed his thick hair back, then up in front, and dressed in his favorite outfit: Mossimo Castleberry jeans, black leather belt, white Ralph Lauren rugby shirt that had been his dad's for just barely two weeks and one wear only (it'd shrunk in the first wash), black Doc Marten boots and genuine shark tooth necklace. Twice he brushed his teeth with his Oral B high-speed rechargeable electric toothbrush, painstakingly scouring every curve and ridge and crevice, as if renovating the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican, and he took care to pocket his Spearmint Binaca breath spray plus, just in case, his emergency Albuterol inhaler.

Then from downstairs his mom called for him, loudly, "Frankie!"

Frank cringed and waited a moment. "What?!"

"Did you do your homework?!"

"Yeah!"

"Already?!"

"Yeah!" He could tell by the unusual pause that she was confused. "Remember? - I have a date tonight!"

"Oh! Yeah?! That's still on?! That's wonderful, Frankie!"

He sort of loved that she called him Frankie. He used to love it. Now he mostly hated it. He wasn't ten anymore. Frank loved his mom, though. He didn't want to tell her he'd changed his mind about being called Frankie. He used to beam and squeal whenever she said that, especially the way she said it. Now he shuddered and tried not to let her see. It could be worse. She was a good mom. He was lucky to have her.

Later, after a quick pep talk to his reflection in the mirror, pulling on his white Oakley windbreaker and slipping the DVD into one of the front pockets, he called to his parents: "Going! Taking the car!"

"All right, bud," his dad said.

"Have fun, Frankie!" his mom cried. "Be good!"

Frank would definitely have fun. Whether he would be good or not, that remained to be seen.

Chapter Seven

Joel Dubois was no techie geek, but his little brother Brian, a curly-haired, eighth grade waste of 92 pounds, was. And at times like this Joel temporarily didn't wish him dead.

"We have like 30 minutes, dude," Joel said, gesturing to the monitor of his brother's laptop. "You gotta roll."

Brian was pathetically slow. He could lose a race to a drip of paint. If Joel hadn't needed him tonight, he would have donkey kicked both Brian's shins to teach him a lesson in speed management, for shuffling merrily along on the way from the exchange - when their inside ticket dude, Greg French, took Joel's twenty bucks and handed over Franko's DVD prom fail - to the movie theater's projector room where the final edit, *Joel's* edit, was now to commence. He would have left Brian up here in advance, duh, but at home the kid was

dragging his ass out of the shower like he'd been cursed to a childhood of slow motion. Probably he had.

The Franko prank was currently all that mattered to Joel. Since he'd hatched the idea and then gotten Megan on board, it was all he could think about. He knew the thing had the potential to blow up on YouTube. Easily. What he really wanted was for it to break a million hits. Then maybe he could get enough followers to watch other videos he (and Brian) would make after. More prank videos, probably. Then free money would pour in like from a liquid gold IV. Even if that didn't happen, though, the whole school would totally snarf up his Franko torture video - like a side of bacon, extra crispy. That alone would be worth the weekend effort.

But the clock was ticking. Frankenstein had not made it easy on them. He'd dropped the DVD off ten minutes later than Joel had expected. Not that it would have made any difference at this point, since Joel was leashed up to Brian the Snail Boy, who was also ten minutes late.

On the laptop screen now was Franko's title sequence: last year's school photo of Megan; then the backdrop falls away and is replaced by a cartoon version of a night scene in a park; then the camera pulls back, leaving her alone and dwarfed by the dark, framed by silhouetted trees on both sides and, above, by stars and the moon; then the camera pans up diagonal right and zooms full frame on the moon. Finally, the white of the moon is painted with a title in red - *Megan Moon: A Prom Story*.

"Not 30 minutes," Brian said, slow on the draw. Good thing he was fast at one (only one) thing in life... computers. "I'm guessing 27, but if I do it in 20 we're good for sure. As long as I have five minutes for the burn."

"The main thing is the title and the end part." Joel wanted as many changes as possible, but he was also a realist when he had to be.

"Take me two minutes for the title. What do you want me to change it to?"

"Okay, check it out. Change it to *Frank O'Leary: A Porn Fail*."

"You mean prom."

"I mean porn. P-O-R-N."

Brian turned his snail head for a double take. Joel gave him an I'm-in-charge rooster head strut.

Brian said, "Is this X-rated, cuz I don't know-"

"Dude, relax," Joel said. "It's TV PG with S for some Sexual Situations. You're fine."

Chapter Eight

A few minutes after Frank had opened the passenger side door, bowed low and gallantly executed a welcoming sweep of the arm to usher Megan into the BMW, doubts crept back into the corners of his mind. He had a name for the doubting voice. The Hater. The Hater had left him pretty much alone since Megan's phone call. Now, suddenly, it was barking like a dog at a squirrel on the other side of a window pane.

Everything was too perfect.

Megan looked hot as always, with extra makeup and super-model hair, but she was acting weirdly jazzed.

When, greeting her at her door, Frank had said, "You look beautiful," Megan had answered, without pausing at all, "Why, thank you, sir."

And when he had scratched her cat and it had lifted its butt high in appreciation and then circled his leg, Megan had said, "Aww, he likes you."

Her behavior seemed idealized, like in the movies when a girl goes into a photo booth with her best friend and out spits a sheet with four pics snapped right in a row, and every photo shows a girl having the time of her life. Megan giggled even at Frank's weak jokes. She smiled big, non-stop. It felt to Frank like he had wandered on stage in a high school play, and the lead actress, Megan, seemed to think he was one of the characters.

"I'm so excited!" Megan said, bouncing in her seat, the neon from the passing road signs highlighting her chin and nose in a kaleidoscopic way that made her seem fairy-like.

"I can see that," Frank said. He heard the nasal sound of The Hater creeping into his voice. Usually it drove him crazy when this happened. It made him feel out of control. The Hater was a rebel who could interrupt any thing at any time. It was not his friend. And yet in a way Frank felt like Megan needed to hear from The Hater. The shadow of worry was returning. Was this date with Megan a setup after all?

Megan's lips tightened ever so slightly. Then she said, "It's *Twilight*, right? You're not into *Twilight*."

Frank shrugged. The car filled with an awkward silence.

Megan tried again. "I know it's not really a guy thing. You're so sweet to take me anyway."

"Yeah, I know, right?" Frank said. "I'm so sweet."

His sarcasm hung heavy in the air. Megan clammed up. Again Frank thought, "If she's upset, I'm gonna pay." He pictured the this-means-war GI Joe face of Joel Dubois - were they still dating?; didn't matter: it would either be Joel or some other Incredible Hulk clone - in the instant of deciding to destroy Frank with his fists. But Joel wasn't here. Only Frank and Megan. And The Hater.

It didn't help that the same ticket dude from last time was manning the booth at the movie theater.

"How may I help you?" the guy said, trying and failing to act normal.

"Two for *Twilight*," Frank mumbled.

"You got it, chief," said Greg F. Then, with way too much enthusiasm, "Enjoy the show!"

That's when Frank knew for sure that this night was not going to go according to script. He would have to improvise.

Chapter Nine

Sometimes you can feel the presence of evil in a place. Feeling it is like engaging a sixth sense, stumbling upon an alternate reality and unlocking a spiritual fourth dimension (or fifth dimension, if you're counting time).

What Frank felt - as he walked behind Megan in the dark of the movie theater to whichever row struck her fancy, since she'd asked to pick their seats - was not evil but the expectation of fear and the thrilling foreshadow of a train wreck. So long as he wasn't wrecked in the train wreck, he would at least have some fun with it. Because if you can't have fun during a train wreck, your life will mostly suck.

Megan strode for the back of the theater. From the second to last row someone waved at them. Megan waved back.

"Hey," Megan said as they got close enough to see faces.

"Hey!" said a girl hiding behind her mop of hair.

It was Jonna French. She was doing a public service by hiding her face. Frank had to give her that. Otherwise, the only thing to be glad about was that the dim theater lighting softened the sharp edges of her repulsiveness. Still, Frank felt a creepy crawly tingle race down his back and then cascade along the skin of his arms and legs. He convulsed in a whole-body shiver.

"Hope you don't mind that I invited Jonna," Megan said. She might as well have said: *hope you don't mind that I stab people with forks for a hobby.*

"Uh, hi," Frank said.

"Hi, Frank," Jonna answered awkwardly, as if constantly aware that her voice might incite mass hysteria and gagging.

Frank had been trying to hold back the Fifth Grade Jonna French Square Dancing (FGJFSD) memories, but it wasn't working. The memories were charging nobly forth along the neural pathways of his brain, breaking down the synaptic gates with battering ram force. The whole FGJFSD episode replayed quickly in full 3D HD glory on the movie screen of his mind.

It should be pointed out at this point (haha) that in Illinois for some reason the almighty gods of Physical Education (those who P.E. from above) - for throughout the state

gym class is a daily requirement until ninth grade - long ago decreed that it is necessary for Kids to get Culture through Square Dancing.

And all the Kids said: No-o-o-o-o!!!

Except sometimes you got to dance with a girl you liked. Like Megan Moon. But almost never. They made you rotate from girl to girl, to ALL the girls.

And it's at this detail that Frank's memory commenced. Frank, like every other boy, dreaded dancing with certain girls but especially with Jonna. It was bad enough to be close to her and have to smell her, but Mr. Hanke also actually made you touch the girl. Her hands were always sweaty and sticky and just weirdly gross. Like a whole new planet of gross.

And, to add insult to injury, while struggling to barely touch and not smell her you had to hear Mr. Hanke call out ridiculous square dancing directions like:

Swing your partner round and round!

and

Allemande left!

and

Do-si-do!

and

Promenade!

It got to the point that a lot of the boys would tease their friends by chanting (as loudly as they could without getting caught) whenever a friend was next up with Jonna.

FRENCH HER! FRENCH HER! FRENCH HER!

Jonna heard it. Everybody did. Mr. Hanke probably did, too, and pretended to be deaf. No doubt it was awful for Jonna, but what Frank remembered was the excruciating embarrassment that he felt when Jonna was on deck and Matt and Kyle were **CHANTing, CHANTing, CHANTing**.

So, one fine Thursday morning, near the end of the spring Square Dancing unit, Frank decided to take matters into his own hands. He tripped Jonna. Not to hurt her, just to maybe get her freaked out and asking to sit on the sidelines. A normal girl might have done that. Not Jonna.

"Hey, what'd you trip me for?!" she cried from the gym floor, still on all fours, taking the opportunity to wipe the corners of her mouth on the sleeve of the Hefty-size Briarcliffe Blackhawks blue hoodie she hid beneath twice a week.

Frank just held his hands up and played dumb. A crowd began to gather. Mr. Hanke cruised over to put a damper on the commotion.

"What's going on here?" the towering P.E. teacher said, and slapped his beer belly. He was young for a teacher, probably thirty; even sported a faux hawk; but he had the short fuse temper of a grumpy old man. All the kids knew that the belly slap meant Mr. Hanke was in no mood for antics.

"Nothing," said Frank.

"He tripped me," Jonna said. "But it's okay."

"Did you push the girl, Frank?" Mr. Hanke intoned, stone solid and unblinking.

"No, we were just dancing. She bumped into my feet."

"You. Hannah Coleman." She was the nearest available goodie goodie teacher's pet type. "What did you see?"

Nervously Hannah nodded and softly answered, "He tripped her."

For the next ten minutes Frank was banished to a rarely used mini classroom just off of the gym, beside the ball storage room. He had to write an apology letter. *I'm so sorry I tripped you. I am a bad boy. You are a blameless child of God. If there is any justice in this world, a bully will hunt me down and hang me by my toenails in a sauna and I will die the slow death of a raisined grape.* Or something like that. Frank couldn't remember the exact words.

"Now I'm bringing Jonna in here," Mr. Hanke said. "And we three are going to have a seat. And you are going to read Miss French that letter like your life depended on it. Otherwise you will be here tonight with your parents and her parents for a do over. Got me?"

When he read the letter, haltingly, as quietly as he dared, he did not look up and, Frank was pretty sure, neither did Jonna. But the whole time he could hear faint whispered chants coming from the crack under the door. **FRENCH HER! FRENCH HER! FRENCH HER!**

That night, he awoke screaming in terror. He came to his senses with his parents at his bedside, hovering over him, looking like they saw in his eyes some Horrible Secret of the Universe. His mom was trembling. His dad clutched at his hip the Tazer that he had evidently brought with him in case of an intruder.

"What, Frank?"

"What was it?"

"Are you okay? You look awful."

Frank coughed. He wiped the sweat from his brow. He closed his eyes. He opened them.

"I forgot," he said. Because it would have been bad enough to tell anyone that he had dreamed of Jonna French, but to say that he had dreamed he was locked in the ball storage room with Jonna, and that she had cornered him and pressed him against the wall and forced his mouth open with a french kiss, and that, in his sleep, of course, this had excited him - NO NO NO NO NO NO....

... no no no no...

Frank remembered all this as he sat in the plush theater seat beside Megan who sat beside Jonna. And it was good to sit because Frank had been in imminent danger of toppling from flashback vertigo.