

the summer
of no regrets

katherine grace bond

For my Nana, Grace Elizabeth Willey, beyond the veil

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IS BAD BOY TRENT OUT OF CONTROL?

CELEB'
magazine

Hot teen actor Trent Yves erupted from his mangled Mini Cooper ready for a fight Saturday, after ramming a wall at the LA Equestrian Center. Asked if he'd been chug-a-lugging at the wheel, chick-magnet Trent gave reporters the one-fingered salute and threatened to smash a photographer's camera.

Trent's crazy mom Wendy Burke, a passenger in the car, was unhurt. Rumor has it that Mom's even more wacko than we thought, spending thousands on outlandish protection systems for her clothing and shoes. "Totally paranoid," said a source close to the family. "She'd drive anyone to drink."

"Trent was careening through the parking lot like he had rocket boosters," said a shaken onlooker. "Jumping curbs, horn blaring. He nearly ran over my grandma!"

Trent, who recently snagged Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival for *Rocket*, certainly doesn't need an ego boost. While Europe and Japan go Trent-crazy, gobbling up Trent films and Trent TV, the former child wonder is his own number one fan.

Celeb' caught up with him Monday to congratulate him on being voted our Readers' Choice Hot Teen Actor of the Month. Trent's reply (to a reporter twice his age)? "I'm surprised you can keep your hands off me."

Trent's manager had no comment.

chapter one

Touch him," Natalie whispered. "Go put your hands on his shoulders."

I slid my chair back into the shadows of Earl's Country Burger Arcade. "Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm not kidding, Brigitta. Boys love it when you touch them. Don't you want him back?"

Devon sat by himself playing Darkstalkers. A curl of hair fell across his cheek, and he brushed it back, revealing a constellation of freckles. "I don't do massages," I hissed. "And I didn't come here for Devon."

It hurt to look at him: Devon, who made raspberry sandwiches for me when we were five. Devon, who knew our twenty acres better than Natalie. Devon, who won us the homeschool science fair prize in third grade for our project on animal scat (*it is* what you're thinking). Devon, the first friend I let in our tree house, even though my sister Mallory said, "Girls only." Devon, who started putting his arm around me last summer and saying things like, "I'd rather be with you than anyone." Devon, who now found *Jazmina_of_the_Night* in his stupid sci-fi/fantasy forum more interesting than me.

It was Natalie's craving for French fries that had brought us into charming downtown Kwahnesum (that's Kwa-NEE-sum, rustic Washington hamlet, population 1,054). It was supposed to be a blissful stroll through the shelves of the Dusty Cover New and Used. Just books. Quiet and reliable. No drama. No friends who betray you. No Devon.

His wiry arms flexed as he punched the buttons, concentrating the way he used to when he was helping me with a physics problem. I missed that. Natalie didn't need to know how much.

The arcade was crowded. It was midsummer hot, and we were blockaded by sweaty gaming bodies. The bottom book in my stack stuck to the table. Natalie's pile of romances was topped by *Makeup Secrets: Twenty Strokes to a Great New You*. She'd been giving it a try in the restroom, so now her L'Oreal Smoldering Dark Auburn curls were caught up in a silver barrette, and she'd added extra glam liner to her eyes.

I am the complete opposite of Natalie—hair: longish, blondish, straightish; eyes: non-glam; goal: to find the meaning of life. Natalie wants to “ditch this two-cow town and make it big in LA.” Honest to God. But she was my best friend from the time we believed our Barbies came to life at night, and if I still have a best friend, I guess it would be her.

“By the way”—Natalie sneaked a peek toward the food counter—“that new guy they have scooping ice cream? Josh Hutcherson.”

On the other hand, maybe she *still* believed dolls came to life. It would be at least as weird as her “sightings.” Natalie spotted celebrity look-alikes everywhere: Nick Jonas making lattes at Starbucks, Taylor Lautner taking tickets at the Space Needle.

“Why would Josh Hutcherson take a job *here*?”

Natalie rolled her eyes. “Research,” she explained patiently. “Actors are always going undercover to explore some new role. And they come to the Northwest *all the time*.”

My Hollywood education started with Natalie—since my family doesn't own a TV. When Natalie saw my pop-culture ineptitude the year I went to Kwahnesum High School, she instituted “Media Night.” It had cured me of saying homeschoolish things like “What's *American Idol*?” and depleting her social points.

At the Darkstalkers' console, Devon leaned toward the screen, where a nearly topless succubus was fighting a pharaoh in a giant headdress.

I shifted my body away from him. Couldn't Natalie just finish her fries?

“You should totally let me do your makeup.” Natalie opened her bag.

I shook my head. “My face wouldn't know what to do with makeup.”

She rummaged in her lipsticks and brushes. “Just maybe a little bronzer? I could so bring out your cheekbones.”

It would be so completely Natalie to try to make me over and then present me to Devon like her 4-H project. I shook my head again. “They test that stuff on defenseless bunnies—doesn't that bother you?”

Had I heard him turn? Was he staring at my back?

Natalie poked at my books. “What did you get?” She scrutinized the top title with one of her upside-down smiles. “*The Complete Poems of John Donne*? You're hopeless, Brigitta.” She offered me a fry.

“Donne was the greatest of the metaphysical poets.”

“Ooh! How exciting!” She touched the second book. “And what's that? *Sound the Shofar: A High Holy Days Handbook*? You're going Jewish now?”

“Mom and Dad have a kosher group staying with us at The Center. They're biking for a sustainable planet. We're one of their stops.”

“Wasn't it the alien abduction victims last weekend? Why weren't you studying them?”

“‘Abductees.’ And I don't consider them a religion.”

For Natalie, religion is something that runs in your family—or not. If I asked her whether she likes being Jewish, she'd say it was the same as asking whether she likes having brown eyes. I can't talk to her about how I want the Great Cosmic Mystery to let me climb on its back.

I slid the books into my lap before Natalie could look closer. Fortunately, she hadn't noticed the item folded between them: the

literary equivalent of fried pork rinds. Poetry and religion were not enough to redeem it. And I'd die if Devon saw it.

"You can't just *become* Jewish, Brigitta." Natalie licked some ketchup off her thumb. "You have to either be born Jewish or convert."

I took another French fry. (I hoped they weren't cooked in animal fat.) "I'm only reading up, okay?"

"Whatever," said Natalie. "I like it better than your Baptist phase." She peered over my head. "He's still heeere," she singsonged.

"What's he doing?" I whispered, hating myself for giving in.

Natalie patted my hand. "Sweet Brigitta." She stood up. "You'll just have to turn around, won't you?" She wiggled her eyebrows. "Do you want some ice cream?"

I shook my head. Natalie headed for Josh Hutcherson. I would so *not* turn around.

Devon's parents stopped homeschooling and stuck him in Kwahnesum High School in ninth grade because it had a chess club. A *chess club*. Why my parents decided Kwahnesum High School was a good idea after they'd carefully cultivated counterculture children, I'll never know. Mallory begged to go when she was a freshman and stayed through graduation. I lasted (barely) through one awe-inspiring year. Then I went back to the woods.

In September Devon was back at KHS and I wasn't. In October he quit chess club. And as fall moved into winter we were (I think) a couple. On Valentine's Day he gave me a card, but it didn't say "I love you" or anything. It didn't even have hearts on it. It had a picture of Arthur Schopenhauer with a quote that said, "Religion is the masterpiece of the art of animal training."

He never did get around to kissing me.

I shifted, ever so slightly, in my chair.

Did his head whip back to the screen? I peeked furtively. The pharaoh turned the succubus into a mummy. Had Devon fumbled the joystick?

I had a rush of sympathy. I could make it easier on him. I could walk over there. I'd smile and in that smile would be Divine Forgiveness. He wouldn't have to speak. He'd take my hand, and...

Devon's cell phone rang. "Hey!" His face broke into a grin. "Nothing much." He laughed a goofy, unDevonlike laugh and leaned back in his seat. Beneath the pharaoh flashed the words, "You misbegotten spawn of a jackal! Crawl back to your hole."

"I've got all the time in the world," said Devon. "For you."

Thoughts of saintliness vanished.

Natalie zipped over with a bowl of Cherry Garcia. "I gave Josh my phone number." She shivered. "God, he's beautiful. I have a good feeling about this."

Devon closed his phone like he'd just been named Beefcake of the Year. Natalie glanced at him. "So," she said, still flushed with her own victory, "why are you still huddled over your books, Brigitta?"

Before I could run, she was beside him. "Devon!" she trilled. "Guess who's here?"

There was no way to hide.

"Brigitta Schopenhauer," he said as if I was a distant acquaintance.

"Hey." I felt wobbly. Did I have big wet spots under my arms? Why did I care?

Devon slid his phone into his pocket. "I meant to come by," he said. Was that, just maybe, regret in his eyes?

Natalie seized her matchmaking opportunity. "You should come by. Tonight. We're getting together in the tree house, and you haven't been in forever."

His irises had little gold flecks in them. He'd said he meant to come by. "Coming by" had meaning for him: it meant—

"I left my jacket the last time," he said.

I imagined strangling him with said jacket.

"There'll be pizza," said Natalie while I stood there like an idiot.

“Um, okay,” said Devon. He looked caught. He pulled on his hoodie. “See you around.” He beat it fast out the door.

“Huh.” Natalie frowned. “Don’t worry, Brigitta. He’s just nervous around you. It’s obvious he still likes you. We just need to—”

I didn’t stick around to hear what “we” needed to do. I made for the cave in the back. No one played the ’80s games. Space Invaders faced the wall, making a phone booth–sized hidey-hole. I threw myself in.

I landed, hard, in someone’s lap. “Hey!” he yelled.

I jumped off him as my books hit his feet and his third life dematerialized on the screen. He sprang up, his hands in fists. “What the hell?” Clearly, I’d invaded *his* space.

He looked a little older than me—dark hair, scowling eyebrows. And better looking than I wanted to notice. Maybe *I* could dematerialize.

He bent and began gathering my books. He smelled good. He had very broad shoulders. He handed me the Donne, the Jewish festivals...

Too late, I dove for the floor. I groped for the rest in a last-ditch attempt to save my dignity, but it was useless. The boy reached under the console and retrieved the last item: the *National Enquirer*, flopped open to shout, “Pamela’s New Boy Toy Needs Penis Implants.” He slapped it on my stack with an expression of pure disgust.

He offered me a hand, but I ignored it. Fake gallantry I could do without. I straightened as loftily as possible and pitched the *Enquirer* into a garbage can.

The boy’s scorn melted into amusement. “Who are you?”

“Never mind,” I said as Natalie sailed in calling,

“Brigitta!”

She stopped as soon as she saw him. “God,” she said, “you look just like Trent Yves.”

Maybe a hole would open up in the floor.

The boy shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’m Luke,” he said.

“Did you see Trent in *Rocket*?” Natalie babbled. “He should win a Golden Globe, I think.”

“I don’t follow movies,” said Luke.

“Really?” Natalie flashed her pearly whites at him. “What are you into? Music? Football?”

He smirked and looked at me. “Tabloids,” he said. “Love those tabloids.”

I wanted to brain him with my Donne.

He glanced at the clock. “I have to go,” he said. He edged past the still-chattering Natalie.

I squeezed my books tight so my arms wouldn’t shake. Natalie didn’t notice. “What was that about?” she said when he was gone.

“Let’s just leave.” I scanned tables for my purse. Mom wanted me home. Mallory was coming back from college so she could help us with The Center for the rest of the summer.

“He’s so hot,” said Natalie. “God, those muscles. And the long lashes? Didn’t you think he looked like Trent Yves?”

I shrugged. Trent Yves was definitely not a star I kept track of.

“What is wrong with you?” said Natalie. “Did you look at that face?

That gorgeous, gorgeous face?”

I had looked at that face, and it had looked back at me, and seen—what? Poet-and-violinist Brigitta? Seeker-after-truth Brigitta? Brigitta- who-knows-the-origins-of-hundreds-of-words? No. He’d seen vapid Brigitta. Easily entertained Brigitta. Sellout Brigitta.



Celebrities Find Their Deep Space Hollywood's Hidden Spiritual Quest

June 30

Why Am I Writing About Trent Yves?

Trent Yves (Pronounced "Eve." I still hear people saying the s sometimes.)

Real name: Michael Boeglin

Film: *A Capella, Quitclaim, Sparrowtree, Imlandria, Le Petit Chose, Rocket*

Television: *Laser Boy, Presto!*

(see full list on [IMDB](#))

Birthday: October 7

Age: 17

Born in: Trent, England

Spirituality: None.

So today, Starlet, the ever watchful, was sure she spotted Trent Yves in the Burger Arcade. I swear, any time I'm with Starlet, celebrities are swinging from the trees. ("Trent" by the way sounded exactly like an American. You'd think he'd have that telltale British accent when he's not playing a deaf Appalachian child or a kid from Milwaukee. But Starlet didn't notice.)

I apologize for wasting valuable blog

> ABOUT ME

Name: Mystic

Location: Out-in-the-Wilderness, USA

> PREVIOUS POSTS

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Autumn Plies on Spirituality in Film

My Sister, Dr. Freuda

Timothy Castle Talks Catholicism

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Scientology: Why?

> ARCHIVES

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space on someone like Trent Yves, but hey, why don't we talk about the *opposite* of the spiritual quest? Trent: A pretty boy *Celeb'* magazine cover decoration who doesn't even try for meaning.

Here's a direct quote from the May 2 *Celeb'*: "I've been accused of having 'reckless good looks.' Makes me afraid I'll cause an accident." 'Nuff said.

Whitley Sandstone has met with the Dalai Lama. Timothy Castle raises money for orphans in Haiti.

Trent flips off photographers and shows off his pecks on Malibu beach. Wake up, Trent! There's a whole wide universe out there beyond your bathroom mirror.

Trentsbabe responds:

trent is varry misunderstood & how can u dis him? hav u even seen *Rocket*? he is 1/2 french and that is why he is so sexy. so what if he knows it? i dont care if he dosent have a religion. who cares? thats personal anyway's. and he flipped off those reporters b-cuz they where bothering him. I LOVE U TRENTY!!!!!!!!!! I AM URS 4EVER!!!!

Mystic responds:

Rocket? No, I did not race out to see it. A runaway living on the streets with a reformed hit man isn't sure whether to stop a murder plot against his rich father? Puh-leeze. First of all, that's a pure Hollywood-obvious script. Second—Trent Yves? The smart-alecky magician's son from *Presto!*? The one who's always strutting around with his shirt off? Truly, I'd go see it if Trent's conceited slimeballness didn't take over everything he's in.

Xombiemistress responds:

Hey, Mystic! I agree with you. He might have wowed the critics in *Sparrowtree*, but since he's grown up, Trent is nothing but hype.

Loved your Whitley Sandstone post. I didn't know he was a Buddhist. Did you see my post on the Dalai Lama? I got to hear him speak! So awesome! Haven't heard from you in a while, girl.

Aquarius0210 responds:

Mystic, will you hate me if I admit I'm a Trent fan? You have GOT to give *Rocket* a chance. He's not just the cute kid from *Sparrowtree* anymore.

Elfmaiden36 responds:

trent iz so hottt!

Girrlpowr10 responds:

women need to be empowered by goddess energy—not worship at the altar of outmoded male supremacist hollywood culture.

Kitty_earz12 responds:

sexee sexee trent. mmmmm.

chapter two

Natalie was planted on the tree house rug when I climbed through the trapdoor. I swung my feet onto the porch and went inside. No Devon. Not that I expected him.

Natalie scrambled up before I could even say hello. “Oh. My. God, Brigitta. I just talked to Ruby Chavez from the post office. Why didn't you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” I brushed some dirt off the rug and sat.

Natalie rested against the ladder to the loft and folded her arms. “About who bought the Hansen mansion.”

Dad called the Hansen place an “eco-monstrosity”: a sprawling estate built by a software millionaire, complete with fountains, a theater, and a heated driveway.

“Trent Yves is living right next door to you!”

My heart started to beat faster. The Trent Yves guy? Fifteen acres from my bedroom?

“Ruby Chavez said it was Trent Yves? Really, Natalie?”

Natalie sighed loudly. “Well, okay, no. She says their name is Geoffrey. Luke and Ann Geoffrey. But it's a boy and his mom. And didn't Trent's parents have a vicious divorce?”

My stomach twisted. Next door! The arcade boy lived next door! It was one thing to be humiliated in town; it was another to face repeated humiliation from now until college. The fact that he looked like a movie star only made it worse. Now Natalie would never leave it alone.

“He’s so hot!” Natalie plunked herself on the rug. “We should go see him, Brigitta. We should go over there right now!”

I propped a cushion against the cedar trunk that grew through the floor. What could derail this train?

A sudden yank on the pulley rope brought Natalie back to her feet. “That’ll be Cheryl.”

“Cheryl?” Cheryl Thompson was a friend of Natalie’s. I couldn’t think why she’d be coming to the tree house. She’d hardly known I existed when I was at KHS.

“She’s bringing the pizza.” Natalie hauled on the rope to pull up the wooden “stuff” bin. The tree house is twenty feet up and at the edge of a clearing. It’s surrounded by enough cedar boughs that it’s practically invisible from the ground.

Cheryl’s fishnet arm gloves emerged through the trapdoor, followed by her green and purple striped head. “Hey”—she glanced at me as Natalie lifted two pizzas out of the bin—“I heard Mallory’s back.”

Mallory was always with us in the tree house even when she wasn’t in the tree house, especially since I had been her senior project: the Tree House Club (her name) was supposed to be a gathering where her pathetic little sister could find friends. We would discuss self-esteem and peer pressure. We would reject tobacco and say no to drugs. We would be a Community of Trust.

Mallory had scoured the KHS freshman class for members. A scattering of drama girls and brainiacs had rotated through. Being associated with Mallory Schopenhauer was never a bad move. Cheryl had come once or twice. Tarah, who lived on the property behind ours, had come a few times, but once The Center was completed, her mom thought it would make her demon-possessed and forbade her to come back. Eventually the “club” had dwindled to me, Natalie, and some-times Devon.

So why was Cheryl here now?

“Okay,” said Natalie. “Let’s eat quick, so we can go next door.”

Great. Natalie had invited her so she’d have backup for her Celebrity Ambush. I would chain myself here if I had to. I was not going to see “Trent.” “Hansen Manor’s probably guarded by rottweilers,” I said.

“So, we’ll bring hamburger.” Natalie passed me a Veggie Bonanza, but I waved it away. Thoughts of re-humiliation had killed my appetite.

Cheryl rolled her eyes. “Nat, are you still going on about that new guy?” She sat.

“Cheryl, he is so Trent Yves, it’s unbelievable.” Natalie folded a slice of Hawaiian Heaven in half and began taking rapid bites.

“Yeah”—Cheryl wound some cheese around her finger—“like that guy in Pioneer Square you thought was Robert Pattinson? The one who later asked us for change?”

Suddenly, I had a new appreciation for Cheryl Thompson.

Natalie pulled out her sunglasses and stuck them on top of her head. “All we have to do is knock on the door. We’ll speak French—and he’ll answer in French before he knows what he’s doing. And then, bang! We’ll have him!” She stood up.

“You mean you’ll speak French,” said Cheryl. “And he’ll wonder what the hell you’re talking about.”

“My French is good!” Natalie looked hurt. “I get As!”

Cheryl picked off her pineapple bits and ate them all at once.

Natalie sat back down. “All right, you nonbelievers”—she pulled a DVD case out of her backpack—“this is the perfect time for a TRENT MARATHON! Voilà! All three seasons of *Presto!* Compare Fox to Hansen Manor Hottie, and you will be a convert.” Natalie slid her laptop out of her pack.

Cheryl perked up. “I’m so bummed that show was canceled. Do you have the ‘locked in the workroom’ one?”

It was better than being dragged next door.

Dad calls television the “domain of the mindless.” Because I don’t

relish being mindless, I've never let on how media-hooked I've become. More than once I've tried to quit cold turkey: no gossip mags, no movie blogs. I've lasted an average of three and a half days. Nobody knows about the fansites I've bookmarked or the stack of *Celeb* magazines under my bed (along with a *tiny* number of *National Enquirers*). Nobody knows about my blog.

The fact is, nobody knows me. Not really. I am a secret.

It didn't start out that way. I used to be *The Brigitta Show*: Tune in here! What you see is what you get!

Let's just say that Kwahnesum High School gave me an education.

On Natalie's laptop, Trent Yves playing Fox, second son of Presto the Magnificent, appeared floating in the air. Natalie paused the DVD. "See?" she said. "Note jaunty grin. Note tasty pecs. Note magic wand." She drummed her fingers on the laptop. "The imagination runs wild."

I pulled my hair into a ponytail. "Your point being?"

"That is so the guy at the arcade, Brigitta."

"His chin was different," I said. "Also, he had no wand." I attempted a laugh.

"Um," said Cheryl. "I'm sure he had a wand."

I blushed. Trust me to leave myself wide open, just like I had at school.

Mallory was a mighty senior when I came to KHS as a freshman: National Merit Scholar, head of the Random Acts of Kindness Club, founder of the Astronomy Society. Me? I spent three months drawing attention to myself and the other six trying to disappear.

I didn't know you weren't supposed to wear the patchwork coat your grandmother made you or drink nettle tea from a homemade thermos. You weren't supposed to like school food or English class or Democrats. You weren't supposed to audition for the musical unless you had been accepted by the "drama crowd." And playing the violin in the stairwell after you thought everyone had gone home? Uncool.

Natalie tried. But everything had changed between us. Suddenly, I

was in her world and she didn't know what to do with me. We'd been almost like sisters all our lives—running through the woods singing and quoting Shakespeare. But at school I saw a new side to her—a side that wanted to make sure she was doing the right thing all the time—listening to the right music, watching the right shows. I swear I never saw her do the celebrity sighting thing until after I started at KHS. And then she'd be all, "I saw Whitley Sandstone at Disneyland," and I'd be like, "Whitley who?"

And she'd give me this look I'd never seen before.

After a while I stopped eating lunch with her and her friends. Sometimes she flashed me a smile, but she didn't seem to miss me.

Eventually it had been Devon who invited me to his table. He'd found fellow geeks right away. I was the only girl, and all we talked about was gaming and sci-fi. But the secret Brigitta was thankful that nothing had changed between me and Devon.

Now everything has.

I stretched out on the rug and stuck the cushion under my elbows. In this episode of *Presto!* Fox convinces Candace, played by Randi Marchetti, that he has real magical powers, passed from magician father to son.

"I heard he got Randi pregnant," said Natalie. "She had a secret abortion."

Sounded like Trent Yves.

Candace and Fox end up locked in the teachers' workroom. Predictably, they need a rope ladder. Predictably, Trent makes one out of his shirt, jeans, and jacket, leaving himself in nothing but boxers. The effect, I hate to admit, is breathtaking.

"Ahh," said Natalie. "You sure you don't want him?"

"That is so cheap," I said. "Can't you see how cheap that is?"

"Do I care how cheap that is?" said Natalie. "Look at him, Brigitta! You want a religious experience? There's your god."

I hated what the sight of Trent's biceps did to me. "Trent Yves has a different girlfriend every week."

“Brigitta!” Natalie poked me playfully. “I thought you didn’t pay attention to Hollywood!”

“I don’t.” I am such a liar. “You told me that.”

Cheryl popped out the DVD. “That’s what the guy next door looks like?”

Natalie folded her laptop. “It’s eerie.”

“You know they don’t have rottweilers, Brigitta.” Cheryl had begun to succumb!

Natalie was bouncing up and down.

“I’m staying here.” I moved to the window seat. “You can go without me.” Maybe Devon would come for his coat after all. Maybe he’d bring chapters from the novel we’d been working on. Maybe he’d sit close to me on the window seat as we leaned over the pages, his arm bumping mine “accidentally.”

I remembered the look on his face at the Burger Arcade. No. Probably not.

Natalie stopped bouncing. “But, Brigitta, it won’t be any fun without you!”

Fun was not a word I had considered. *Mortification*, perhaps. *Ignominy*. “Angry Stud Muffin Reencounters Tabloid Girl.”

Cheryl scrutinized me. “C’mon, Nat. Let’s just stay. You didn’t ask me to come here for Mr. Hollywood.”

Then why had she asked her?

Natalie looked at her cell phone. “There’s time! We could visit Trent and still do the rest.”

“The rest of what?” I shifted on the window seat. The hinge was digging into my butt.

Cheryl cocked her head at Natalie and withdrew a velvet bag from her pocket. Natalie sighed and nodded, lowering herself back onto the rug.

Cheryl unveiled a pack of tarot cards. “Natalie says you need a reading.”

“I do?”

Natalie patted my knee and looked at me earnestly. “I called Devon.”

chapter three

My heart sank. “You called him?”

“Of course I did,” said Natalie. “I told him he’d better get his sorry ass up here or you’d never speak to him again.”

“Natalie, I already never speak to him again.” I slid a window open. No sign of Devon on the trail. Cheryl’s cards wouldn’t tell me anything I didn’t already know. And the thought of her using them to psychically vivisect me appealed to me not at all.

Natalie slid open another window and peered down sympathetically at the Devonless trail. “Do you have his coat?”

I pointed to the loft. Devon’s coat had been there since March. I hoped it was full of spiders.

Cheryl began shuffling her cards.

“Hey,” I said. “Let’s just skip the reading.”

Natalie’s face softened. “It’s Devon, isn’t it, hon? Oh, God, I feel terrible.” Sure she did.

Cheryl brandished her cards.

“It’s a good idea, Brigitta,” said Natalie. “You need the information.”

I sighed and gave in. If it would keep them from disturbing Angry Stud Muffin, it was worth being vivisected.

Cheryl laid the cards out in a pattern. I was more fascinated than I wanted to be. Devon would laugh.

“What does it say?” I leaned forward.

“Don’t rush me. I’m concentrating.” Cheryl examined the layout.

“Hmm,” she murmured. She tapped the Emperor card and frowned. “Patriarchy.” She sighed. “You’re letting the male establishment control you, Brigitta.”

Ha! The only “male establishment” around here was Dad, and he’d barely noticed me lately—unless he wanted work done.

She touched another card and closed her eyes. “The Knight of Swords sweeps in like a gale,” she intoned. “He may charm you, vanish, and leave you devastated.”

“That would be Devon!” Natalie clutched my shoulder.

A gale? It sure didn’t sound like him. Devon was more of a mild draft. And why such enthusiasm over “devastation”?

Cheryl opened her eyes and drew one more card: The Lovers.

“Ooh!” squealed Natalie.

Cheryl sat back on her heels. “Whatever happens will unfold quickly.” She surveyed her layout. “Your dreams are about to come true,” she said. “But you’re afraid of them.”

With Hollywood timing, the floor began to shake. “It’s him!” Natalie stage-whispered.

Devon’s head and shoulders appeared. My treacherous heart tripped over itself.

“Hey,” he said. “I heard there was pizza.”

I fumbled for the last four slices, while Cheryl surveyed her layout again. “So”—she peered at Devon speculatively—“how’s Jazmina_of_the_Night?”

“Oh, okay,” said Devon. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his hoodie.

Okay! He didn’t even have the decency to deny she existed.

Cheryl looked a bit deflated. Apparently her divination skills needed a brushup.

I had made Mallory invite Devon freshman year. She wanted her “club” to be about “women’s empowerment,” but I told her I wouldn’t

do it without Devon. I guess the joke was on me, because Cheryl had visited, decided Devon was an acceptable human being, and sent him a link to the Darkworlds forum where he became Master_of_Shadows and met Jazmina_of_the_Night (aka Erika from Vermont). Natalie said he'd met her in person at Norwescon. "You're so much better than her, Brigitta," Natalie had insisted. "Cheryl says she's really skinny—too skinny. Like emaciated, you know? He's going to lose interest. You'll see."

Devon's eyes flicked over to me and then down to the floor. He had a nervous little-boy look. Nothing like a gale.

I thought about how we'd done National Novel Writing Month the last three Novembers, racing to finish fifty-thousand-word novels in thirty days. Neither of us had ever gotten the full fifty thousand, but last November we'd almost done it. Near the midnight deadline, I was up to 49,901 and he was up to 49,892. We'd been sitting next to each other in the window seat, and he'd leaned over to check my screen. His hand was on the edge of the seat, not quite touching me. He smelled like soap and Altoids.

"We're close," I said.

"Yeah." He brushed a bug off my leg. "Almost there." He moved his arm to the cushion behind my back.

I started to sweat. "We've never made it this far," I said.

His eyes darted toward mine and then away. I could feel the heat of his skin. "I'm thinking of ending with a quote by Schopenhauer," he said. "*If we should bring clearly to a man's sight the terrible sufferings and miseries to which his life is constantly exposed, he would be seized with horror.*"

"That'd work." I swallowed.

"It's twenty-seven words," he said. He turned, so that his face was inches from mine. "I like your book," he said.

"Thanks." My cheeks went hot. I could feel his breath. My lips parted slightly.

"How much more time do we have?" He swiveled his head back to the NaNoWriMo countdown clock on his computer: 0:00.

Devon's shoulders had slumped. "Oh well," he'd said. "Next year."

What about this year? NaNoWriMo was only four months away. Would we go back to where we'd left off? Maybe he realized now how shallow Jazmina was—that she only wanted him for his extensive knowledge of original *Star Trek*. "Brigitta!" he'd say. "It was only you, all the time."

I considered forgiving him.

"I should probably go," said Devon. "Brigitta, do you have my coat?"

I decided forgiveness was overrated.

None of us noticed my sister until she was actually in the room.

"Gita-girl!" Mallory flung her arms around me. She smelled like coconut shampoo.

"Hey," I said. "Welcome home."

She was tanner than when she came back for winter solstice, though Mallory doesn't tan exactly. We both have fair Irish skin like Mom's. Mallory's short, black hair fringed her face. Her UCal T-shirt clung to her flat stomach.

"Malloway!" Natalie hugged her.

"All my little chicks have grown up," said Mallory. She reached up and ruffled Devon's hair. "How's the rooster?" she said.

"Fine," said Devon.

"Still taking good care of my sister?" Devon shrugged.

"Not exactly," said Natalie.

How could I be somewhere other than here?

"Not exactly what?" Mallory looked from Devon to me. "Is there a problem between the two of you? When I left in January, you were thick as peas."

Thieves, I thought. We were thick as thieves. Mallory always spoke in mangled metaphors.

Devon looked like he'd swallowed a coat hook.

Mallory got that rolling-up-her-sleeves look. "Sit down," she said. "We need to work this out."

We do not need to work this out, I thought, but Devon had already obeyed Mallory's order, and the others were settling in, waiting for the wisdom to drop from Mallory's lips.

She turned to me. "Brigitta, could you express to Devon how you're feeling? Try to use I statements."

Devon became interested in a knothole by his foot. I could not open my mouth.

Natalie touched my shoulder. "It'll help to talk about it, Brigitta. Men need to know how their insensitivity impacts other people."

Mallory turned to Devon. "Is there something you would like to say?" she asked, oh so gently.

"Um," said Devon. He rubbed at a cut on the back of his hand. "Well, I'm not trying to be insensitive." He was quiet for a moment. Maybe he was thinking of me, regretting all the grief he'd put me through. "But I really have to go home," he finished.

Maybe he'd never met anyone more boring than me.

Mallory stood up and blocked the door. "You can go home after we've had some honest dialogue."

Devon stood but didn't try to push past her. "I can't stay," he said.

"Devon," said Mallory. "I want you to look inside and ask yourself why you can't stay."

"I can't stay," Devon said quietly, "because I'm grounded. And if I don't get home before my parents, I will lose my car privileges for the rest of the year."

"Ohhhhhh," said Cheryl as if she'd suddenly figured something out.

"Why were you grounded?" said Natalie.

Devon picked at some dirt on his jacket. "Oh, you know," he said. "Chores. Stuff like that."

Cheryl folded her arms. "Chores? Really? Chores?"

Devon shifted. "I really have to go."

Cheryl stood up. "Or did your dad check your hard drive?"

Realization flashed.

"Eww!" said Natalie. "How can you look at that stuff?"

Devon ducked his head. He shrugged.

Cheryl looked ready to put an evil spell on him. "This is how patriarchy has held women down for generations!"

"I don't think it takes generations," said Natalie. "Only a few minutes."

I shut my eyes and wished for invisibility.

Mallory folded her arms. "Girls," she said, "we need to get a grip. This is all a normal part of psychosexual development in the adolescent male. Males use images from the Internet to—"

"Mallory, it's okay!" I said. "We get the idea."

To his credit, Devon did look like he wished he were somewhere else. Maybe in front of his computer looking at thought-provoking pictures, while dreaming of *Jazmina_of_the_Night*.

Mallory stepped aside so Devon could open the door. His narrow shoulders and brown curls disappeared down the ladder, leaving his coat behind.

I pulled my knees to my chest, feeling naked. And stupid. All that time I'd longed for him to kiss me when he had digitized perfection at his fingertips.

I thought of what was on my hard drive: Whitley, Daniel, even Trent. They weren't naked but...my porno? If anyone found that stuff, I would most surely die.

I thought again about the boy from the arcade, the only one who had seen my secret "starstruck" side. I prayed to God I'd never see him again.

chapter four

t KHS I developed this fantasy about people reading my mind.

A I wanted them to read my mind, because then they would say,

“Oh, Brigitta! Now we understand!”

Um...yeah. I got over it.

Dad used to kind of read my mind. When we made the long drive to Seattle for violin competitions, he could sense what sections I was nervous about without me even saying anything. If I was really freaking out, he'd pull over and play them on his flute. Then he'd give my shoulders a rub and say, “Relax, Gidget. You're my star whether you win or not.”

But all that changed when my grandparents died. After that, it was like a door had shut between us.

My grandfather Opa died around the winter solstice during “that” year—the year I went to KHS. And Nonni died near Valentine's Day. It's a funny thing when people die. Okay, it's not *funny*. What I mean is that before it happened, I wanted so badly to be known by people at school, and after, I wanted to disappear. I couldn't risk bursting into tears or something stupid. A few times I almost did, but I was able to stop it. The trick is not to let yourself feel anything too strong. Just keep everything sort of even. It's better not to play the violin, for example.

No sooner had I figured out how to disappear, than Mom and Dad's chanting, drumming, eco-happy friends finished building The Center out of old tires and dirt. The Center is an Earthship. Dad says it's “a

completely independent globally oriented dwelling unit made from materials indigenous to the planet.” Translation: a half-buried building insulated with pop cans. Not that I'm allowed to drink pop.

The Center is Dad's dream come true. Mallory and I spent our formative years in a single-wide on our twenty acres so that The Center could finally rise out of the ground, gleaming with social consciousness. The whole thing is all adobe and solar panels and sloping greenhouse windows wedged into the hill like a glass stairway. The upstairs gazes from the hilltop like a tranced-out giant. The front door is his nose.

With its thick, rounded walls and trees growing inside, it looks like a combination of something out of *Star Wars* and an elf dwelling from *Lord of the Rings*. The *Seattle Times* featured it in their Living section, along with a complete rundown of what the Schopenhauers were up to: drumming in the sweat lodge (Dad), past-life regression workshops (Mom— who also talks to fairies, though, thank God, she didn't tell any reporters).

Needless to say, none of the other freshmen lived in Earthships (with or without fairies).

Dad got really busy after that. There was “no time” to drive me to Seattle for Youth Symphony, so I had to quit “for a while.” (Right.) He lost his flute (he said), so we couldn't practice together. He started trying out this new “spirituality” thing, though he'd never even used the word *spiritual* before. (That was Mom's department.) Mostly that was a good thing, because he stopped exploding at us all the time. But it also made him a stranger.

And then nobody could read my mind.

What is it to be known, anyway? Maybe being known is overrated.

* * *

Something was wrong. I sat up in my sleeping bag blinking in the gray light of the loft. The air was cold, and my mattress had deflated, leaving me on the bare boards. Sleeping in the tree house had been more appealing than another therapy session with Mallory.

Wind in the limbs rocked the tree house gently. I'd named this tree Eve, and she was a good place to be when life went south. A cedar branch curved across the skylight like a protective arm. A few moths fluttered in the domed glass.

I quieted my breathing and listened to the outside: squirrels chattering near the window, the buzzing of a wasp. And down below...That was it! The kinglets and robins were sounding an alarm. Something was down there.

It was freezing outside my bag. I yanked on my jeans and pulled out my Nonni coat—the patchwork one she made me right before she died. No one knew I slept with it, but it made me feel better. I slipped it on and stuffed my feet into my sneakers.

Out on the porch I scanned the clearing. There! Twenty paces from Eve was...Oh, God, what was *he* doing here? Wasn't the Hansen acreage enough for him? If there was a God, why would he (or she) send me this?

He sat against the Douglas fir I'd named Adam, knees drawn up, arms wrapped around them. He couldn't see me on the tree house porch. I'd leave it that way. I could wait him out. I slowly sat myself down against the wall and put my hands flat on the damp boards. Pitch stuck to my fingers. Mosquitoes bit me. My hair probably looked like mice were living in it, and I hadn't brushed my teeth. He'd better go away soon.

At least ten minutes went by. Luke Geoffrey leaned back against Adam, ran his hands through the pine duff. He was beautiful. I hated myself for thinking that, but he was. He looked sad, and I had a ridiculous urge to go down there and hug him. Instead, I was spying on him. This thought came to me slowly. Most people who sit in the woods like that want privacy, and I was unabashedly scanning his face for clues about his sadness. His mother had died, I thought. No, he had befriended a homeless orphan child he'd found in a subway station in

Manhattan. She was six, and he'd convinced his parents they should adopt her. But she'd died, horribly of AIDS the following year, since her mother was a heroin addict. All Luke had left of her was a Raggedy Ann doll he had given her, and now he carried the doll in his pocket, crying into its stained apron when he was alone.

Luke got up from where he was sitting, and I was instantly, screamingly embarrassed about the orphan girl, as if he could read my mind from down there. This was the boy who had infrared humiliation-sensing capabilities. This was the boy didn't know anything good about me. He didn't know I was deep and philosophical or that I had won violin competitions. He only knew I read the *National Enquirer*.

He started walking toward Eve. *No!* I thought. *Go back!* Or at least don't look up. Every muscle in my body tightened. I would stay perfectly still and not breathe until he went away. He stopped and picked a few huckleberries, lifted his palm to examine them, and then dumped them on the ground and squished them with his foot. He crouched to tie his shoelace. I could see the back of his neck as he bent forward.

And then I saw her. She emerged from behind Adam, all in one motion: tawny gold fur, white muzzle outlined in black. "Cougar!" I heard myself scream.

She was probably seven feet long from nose to tail. I don't know why I decided she was female; I'd never seen a cougar outside of Northwest Trek Wildlife Park. Cougars don't let people see them unless they want to be seen. Dad says they can track a person for miles and he'll never know.

Luke fell backward, catching himself on his hands. The cougar's ears lowered as she locked eyes with him. She was terrifyingly beautiful: strong and sleek. Luke froze.

My knuckles were white on the railing. "Get big!" I yelled. "Stand up!"

He must have wondered where the disembodied voice was coming from, but he didn't dare look away from the cat. He got to his feet and

began backing away from her. I could see that he'd soon be trapped against the bushes. I had to think like a cougar. Luke certainly wasn't going to.

I clambered down the ladder. The cougar didn't even look at me. I had nothing to fight her with. I tore off my Nonni coat, not sure how that was going to help. All I could hear in my ears was my own hollering. I had no time to consider whether I was crazy.

Luke was yelling "Get away!" At the cougar or at me, I couldn't tell, but I raced forward and began whacking at the cat with my coat. (Yes, I realize now, I was crazy.) The cougar shook her head, like the coat was an annoying insect. She laid her ears flat and opened her mouth. Four huge canines gleamed in the morning light. Her muscular shoulders rippled as she moved toward us, and a hiss like a rattlesnake came from her throat.

Luke was breathing hard. "Holy shit," he said. The cougar circled. She was fixed on Luke. I scooped up a handful of dirt, rocks, and fir cones and threw it at her face, but she didn't even flinch. I kept swinging my coat.

Luke grabbed a broken tree limb and thrust it at her. She snarled. My coat caught on a branch, and she swiped at it with a plate-sized paw. I felt naked without my coat. undefended. I'd die here with Luke. Really die. Not like in the stories I made up. *Focus*, I told myself. *Breathe and focus*.

I read an article about a woman killed by a cougar in Colorado. The cat had sunk its teeth into her head and neck and peeled her scalp back. That's how they'd find us: scalped, covered in leaves with all our vital organs eaten out. I wished I knew less about animals.

Luke swung the tree limb in front of us. The cougar stayed in a crouch, her tail twitching, her eyes locked with his. I became a two-legged rock thrower. "Oh, God!" I kept screaming, "O-god-o-god-o-god-o-god-o-god!" I yelled myself hoarse and went on yelling. I was

drenched in sweat. We backed, one step at a time, across the clearing, past Eve. The cat followed us step for step, tail low, icy golden eyes staring Luke down.

Then, as if she'd suddenly thought of something better to do, the cougar relaxed. Her canines disappeared, and her tongue came out to lick her nose. And then she turned and walked into the trees. Stopping for a brief moment, she looked back at us as if to say, "Not this time." As quickly as she had appeared, she disappeared.

I collapsed against Eve. I was shaking and couldn't stop. Luke's face was covered in dirt and maybe tears. I'd prayed never to see him again, but now it didn't matter.

He held his hand out to me. I took it. "Thanks," he croaked and pulled me to him. He wrapped his arms around me. He was shaking, too. We stood that way for a long time. I smelled the wet wool of his sweater. He put his chin on my hair as if we'd always known each other. I felt the fear drain out of both of us. Devon had never, ever held me like that. No one had.

Luke stepped back and looked at me, his hands still on my arms. Then he stepped into the clearing and picked up my Nonni coat from where the cougar had tossed it. Three huge rips ran down the back of it. I shivered and he put it around me. "Here's your hero cloak," he said.

His eyes were so blue I thought I'd fall into them and drown. I wanted to touch his jaw where it curved down to a strong chin streaked with dirt. His lips were wide and kissable. He smiled.

And then, in the middle of the most romantic moment of my life so far, I opened my mouth and said, "You do look like Trent Yves."

