

Chapter One

The night is so cold as we run down the dark alley. I will never, never, never again take a bus to a funeral. A funeral that's out of town.

“Open the door!” Jess says behind me.

I drop the key in the slush by my feet. Why didn't I bring gloves? My fingers are freezing.

I wipe the slush off the key, jab it at the lock. “Come on!” I mutter.

“Gregor. Damn it!” Jess says.

She is tiny and very beautiful in her prom dress, with her pink ski jacket on top. Even in the dark. Even this late at night.

I bend down to try to see the keyhole clearly. The key finally slides in. The lock is so loose I have to hold it with my other hand as I turn the key.

When the door is open we race down the stairs. I slap on the overhead light. There it is: our one room. One room for almost everything: the old fridge, the pullout couch, the hot plate. No oven. And no kitchen sink. We wash dishes in the bathroom.

“God, I hate that light,” Jess says. She slaps it off, as if the ugly, glaring light were my fault. Then she turns on the light by our bed, the pullout couch.

We just need to go to sleep, I think.

“It’s so cold in here!” Jess says. We take off our jackets anyway. I stand in front of the fridge and look in. I can’t help it. I’m hungry.

“We are never taking a bus to a funeral again!” she says. My feelings exactly. She pulls out the bed. I get out the milk and reach for the cereal box. Not much left. I empty the last of the cereal into a bowl.

“You have to get your driver’s licence,” I say. “Then we’ll be able to rent a car the next time we need to go out of town.”

Just as I’m about to pour the milk, she says, “That cereal is all we have for breakfast.”

I stop. “Really?” I say. “You waited till I was about to pour.” Then I think: why did I say that? I don’t want to start an argument. I just want to go to bed.

I just want to hold her in bed.

“I did not wait,” she says. “I just couldn’t believe you would eat all of our breakfast.”

The wrong word now and we could be up all night fighting. Not that we fight, not often. But losing our friend Peter and then going to his funeral has been hard.

“Why do *I* have to get my driver’s licence?” she says. I return the milk to the fridge. I eat one flake, then I pour the rest of the cereal back into the box. Dust and all.

She’s hurt, she wants to fight, and I have to be careful. I have to stick with a safe topic. So I say, “You came the closest to getting your licence. If only that stupid car hadn’t stopped in front of you when you were taking your test. We could be renting by now.” It was a small accident. She needs to try again.

She needs to believe enough in herself to keep going.

I turn on my old laptop. It used to be Peter’s. It was too slow even for him. But it works.

“We have no money to rent a car,” Jess says. “That’s the big problem. You aren’t checking messages now, are you?”

The laptop takes forever, but finally my e-mail comes up. The conference centre needs me tomorrow, first thing. Before first thing!

“I have to set up chairs for a big meeting in the State Room at eleven o’clock in the morning,” I say. “I have to be there at nine-thirty. That room is huge. You could park a train in it and no one would notice.”

“How many chairs will you have to move?” she asks.

“I don’t know. Hundreds. Hundreds of thousands.”

“So you might build some muscles or something?” It’s the first nearly funny thing she has said since the bus.

Why is this computer so slow? There are other messages . . . The Rats’ Nest, a comedy club, wants my team to perform on Saturday night.

“Hey,” I say, and glance at Jess, about to tell her the good news. She is lying on top of the bed in the blue silk slip she had on under her prom dress.

The one I got her from the second-hand store last Christmas.

She’s so hot she could melt butter in that slip.

“Wait a minute,” I say. “Are you—?”

But she gets up quickly and changes into her flannel pajamas.

“Wait a minute,” I say again. “Was that—?”

She hops deep under the covers. “Too late. I’m freezing.”

I push the laptop aside and hurry to the bed. But I don’t get in, not yet.

“Too late!” she says. “You saw it. You blinked.”

I start to rub her back. She closes her eyes and makes purring noises, in her way. I let my tuxedo jacket fall from my back and onto the floor. How silly to wear a formal costume like that to a funeral. And the suit isn’t even mine, it belonged to Jess’s father. I kiss her neck.

“Too late,” she says.

I pull off the bow tie and undo my fancy shirt.

“You could just do my . . .” she murmurs.

I reach under the blankets and rub her bum.

“Mmm . . .” she says.

I worm my way out of my suit pants and socks. Then I slip under the blankets beside her.

“You’re not going to leave my dad’s clothes on the floor,” she says. A whisper. With an edge.

“They all have to be dry cleaned anyway,” I say.

I kiss her neck again. Why are my lips still cold? Because I'm so skinny. I lose heat easily.

But she has stopped purring. Right. All the clothes had been her father's. I groan but get out of bed anyway and pick them up. I race across the freezing room and hang the tuxedo in the closet.

"We could not have been more stupid," she says. "Dressing up like that for Peter's funeral."

"Well, everyone knows Peter and I have... *had*... a comedy act," I say.

"But they didn't get the joke, did they?"

Suddenly the door blows open and lets in a blast of icy air. Is the lock broken now? I dash up the stairs, slam the door shut, and stare at it, as if that might keep it closed. Then I dash back into bed and run with my legs to warm up the sheets.

"Did you break the lock?" Jess asks. She wants to fight. She wants to fight. Why is she in such a mood?

Because of Peter. Maybe we need to talk about Peter. So I say, "How could he just wake up dead like that?"

"Are you trying to be funny?" Jess says.

"I'm sorry," I say. I stop running and reach for her. She is warm already, and soft, and good to hold.

“He isn’t going to wake up.” She turns off the light.

We breathe together. I think about what I almost asked her on the bus. But timing is everything. Better to stay quiet now. Go to sleep. I just need to . . . nuzzle closer. But she keeps an inch between us. The cold has crept into the blankets.

“He was only twenty-eight,” she says. “A few years older than us. I’ve never had a friend just, like, die before. He had a nice body. How could he—?”

Sleep, sleep. How can she not be bone tired? Because she slept on the bus. I move my thigh against hers. That’s all I want now.

She has the sweetest voice. A man could . . . could get lost in a voice like hers . . . “Hey!” She elbows me, not hard, just hard enough. “I can’t believe you’re asleep already! I was talking about Peter.”

“I heard you,” I sputter. It’s dark here in the cold. I don’t really want to open my eyes.

“What did I say?”

“You said he had a nice body.”

“What else?”

“And that you were lusting after him,” I joke, “and now that he’s dead . . .”

“Shut up!” she says. She pulls the blankets around her body. My feet stick out in the night. Now I really am awake.

Jess is winding me up. So I say, “You wondered how a guy who can sing ‘O Canada’ in Pig Latin can just have his heart stop in the middle of the night. And he wasn’t even, you know, with anybody.”

“There was no nooky,” Jess says.

“No necking, no nibbling . . .” I try to nibble her neck.

“Stop it!” She turns her head away but I follow. I kiss her hair, her shoulder. Search for her mouth. She pushes my arm, and my hand ends up around her small wrist. But she tears free and slaps me. God!

Hard. Right on the face.

I can see her in the light coming in from the alley through our one tiny window. She looks startled, as if she can’t believe what she has just done.

“Ow!” I say, rather late, and sit back holding my jaw, stunned.