

Love Curse

Steven E. Wedel



MoonHowler
Press
TEEN

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DEDICATION

Love Curse is dedicated to my friend, Carrie Jones, for re-introducing me to the magic of young adult fiction.

ALSO BY STEVEN E. WEDEL

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Chapter 1

Keith

I know it's only a dream.

It's only a dream.

And yet, my heart is thundering in my chest and my breath is coming in short gasps. And, yes, my eyes are wet.

When I close my eyes, I see her again. Mom. Not the moody, emaciated, pock-marked woman with rotten teeth and ratty hair who died of a heart attack the week before her thirty-third birthday, but the young, beautiful woman I barely remember. In my dream she was happy, like when I was just a kid, wearing a striped sundress that showed off her shoulders, and her hair was thick and wavy and filled with sunlight.

The smell of marijuana smoke hangs in my room like the aroma of basting turkey on the evening of Thanksgiving Day, when the bird has been carved, eaten, and the leftovers stored. The smell must have seeped into my walls by now. I know it's in my bedding, in my clothes, my hair, my soul. For the first time ever, the smell makes me feel sick. Sad and sick. The smell, and the thought of smoke, distort the image of Mom. My eyes open, but the smell and a feeling of regret remain.

I throw off the covers and sit up on the edge of my bed. Some light from the moon and a streetlight filters through the thin curtain on my window. Dad has fallen asleep in front of the TV in the living room again. The dialogue and laugh track of an old sitcom he and Mom used to watch together rolls on and on. I can see the burned nub of a blunt in an ashtray on my floor, and in the open drawer of the night table some light glistens on the clear plastic of a baggie with a couple more ounces of weed.

Don't follow me.

I close my eyes. This does two things. First, it squeezes the water from my eyes and lets it run down my cheeks. It also brings back the image of my mother, an image I know more from old photographs than from actual memory. In my mind, she's

smiling at me, but she's sad and worried. She's telling me to change, to not follow her, to ...

Be more than your surroundings.

Yes, to be better than what's around me.

I look around my room. It's a wreck. Clothes are in piles around the floor. Wrappers from Ding Dongs, mini-doughnuts, and Twinkies are tangled with empty chip bags and dropped microwave dinner containers. There's a stain on one wall where I fell against it with a bowl of mac and cheese because I was too stoned to walk right. My closet door is open and inside hangs the one perfect item in my room, my NJROTC uniform, neatly pressed and kept in a plastic bag so the smell of pot won't get into it so much.

Mom and Dad met at a party. They smoked pot together that night, hooked up, and never separated. I was born a year later, and about five years after that Mom picked up her first crack pipe. Dad wouldn't use the crack, he claims, drawing the line at pot and a little coke when he could afford it. When I was twelve I stole some weed from a bag I found in their room. That went on for a few months, until Dad caught me. But all he did was yell at me for stealing. A couple of weeks later I came in from playing outside and caught Mom and Dad toking up on the couch. Mom acted guilty for a second, but Dad laughed and said I was already an old hand. Then he passed me his joint. After that, we got high together pretty often. My friends played Monopoly with their parents while I got wasted with mine.

I was fifteen years old when Mom died two years ago.

It's time to stop. Time to grow up. Be responsible.

It was only a dream. Right?

A new smell, faint but there, worms its way up my nose. Mom's perfume. Some cheap perfume she bought from a neighbor. The smell brings memories of Mom's voice reading Dr. Seuss, of her tucking me into bed, holding me while we watched Thomas the Tank Engine.

"Mom." My voice is just a whisper, but it trembles, hangs in the air like smoke. Like smoke that shouldn't be there.

When I move my arm, it's like it isn't really me doing it. Some other hand reaches out and gathers up the blunt, pulls the

bag out of the drawer. Feet that aren't mine drag me toward my bedroom door.

There's a recruitment poster from the U.S. Marines hanging on the inside of my door. A young guy with blue eyes like lasers stares at me through his camo paint, challenging me, asking if I'm good enough to be what he is.

"Yes." I open the door.

The dream – the vision, with its smell of Mom – is the final straw. I've known for a while I have to do this. I have to.

I have to.

I'm weak. Part of me fights what I'm doing as I make my way down the short hallway to the bathroom. I stop at the toilet. The lid, and the ring, are up, waiting, inviting.

I can't do this. Getting high has pretty much been my life for too long. All my friendships are based on the herb in this bag.

For your future. For me.

Then it touches me. Something touches me. Mom touches me on the neck. I know it's her. I smell the perfume again.

"Mom?" I look around, but don't see her. There's only my own face, pale and tired looking in the mirror over the sink. "Are you here, Mom? Or am I going crazy?"

There's no answer. Of course there's no answer.

I tear the white mouthpiece off the strawberry-flavored cigar, and drop the brown, burned blunt into the water. It darkens with the wet, floating in a little circle like a lonely, pinched-off-too-soon turd. I look at the bag in my hand, the brown herb inside. How much did I spend on this bag?

It's time to grow up.

The perfume again. I breathe in deep and quick, but there isn't enough of it. Just a trace. Just a tease.

I like to get high. I do.

How many times has First-Sergeant Benson told me I won't get into the Marine Corps with my urine coming up positive for marijuana? Too many. I've already failed the piss test once.

Be more than I was.

"Mom?" It's not even a question. It's a plea. I'm begging her. Is she real? She's dead. She's dead, but ... could she be here with me?

I turn the bag over and let the expensive pot slide out. It's like autumn grass floating on a small pond. I push the lever, watch my weed swirl, then disappear with a gurgle.

Dad's a strong believer in the hair-of-the-dog method of treating a hangover. He came home loaded on beer and whiskey from Andy's Bar. When he turns off the TV and stumbles out of the living room around 10 a.m. I don't pay much attention to him. I hear the slosh of a bottle as he tips it up, the crash of the toaster falling off the counter as he blunders through the kitchen. I know he's coming toward me, but I ignore him, focusing on the photograph album open on my lap. I sit in my Dad's bedroom, on a chair most people would throw out, and stare at what my mother looked like on her wedding day.

I guess I'm too intent on the picture. Over the past couple of years I've been able to anticipate my father and have become strong enough and fast enough to fend him off. This time, though, his heavy, meaty fist connects solidly against the side of my head, behind my left ear, and sends me sprawling across the old, dirty shag carpet.

"What the hell you doin' lookin' at those old pitchers?" he bawls at me.

I look up at him, forcing myself to ignore the sharp, ringing pain in my head. He's wearing filthy red boxers that come up to meet the belly that sags over them but hangs out of his stained wife-beater undershirt. His arms are thick, but have turned flabby, and his face shows that he's been all used up for a long time. His eyes are sunken but filled with a sort of distant rage as he glares at me. He needs to shave. His hairline is creeping back toward the bald patch at the back of his head and I wonder how long it'll be before he drinks himself into the reserved grave beside Mom.

"Well? What are you doin'?" he demands again.

"I had a dream about Mom," I explain. "I wanted to see her picture. The old ones, the way she was before."

He sways a little, raises a bottle of Jim Beam and takes a pull at it. He lowers the bottle and wipes his other hand across his mouth. "She's dead. I told her not to smoke that shit, but she

wouldn't stop. Selfish bitch."

"Don't talk about her that way," I say, my own voice hard. Dad barks a short laugh at me, then looks away. "Dad, I want to change. No more pot. I want to ..." I look around at our disgusting house. "I want to be more than I am. I want to live in a clean house and –"

"Nobody never changes," he says, turning his eyes back on me. "Nobody never changes." His eyes are distant and sad. He turns away and shuffles back toward the kitchen.

"I will," I whisper at his retreating back. "I won't become you."

Chapter 2

Ashlie

“If somebody doesn’t say something right now, I’m turning the music back on,” Jenn threatens. She throws a look at me, her blue eyes serious, her mouth set. I look to the back seat, but Anna’s no help; she’s all wrapped up in texting her flavor-of-the-week boy.

“Where do you even find those bands?” I ask Jenn. “What was that one you had on when we got in?”

“Savage Spazm,” she answers. “Wanna hear some more?”

“No.” I pluck the CD case from the console of her mother’s Buick Skylark and look at it for a minute. The cover is a crude black-and-white drawing of a man hanging from a tree, but his head is a big yellow smiley face. I put the jewel case back into the console.

“They’re from Oklahoma City,” Jenn says. We’ve been friends forever, way before she went all goth, dyed her hair black and started wearing too much eyeliner. Most people at school don’t even remember she’s really as blonde as me. She’s prettier, though, if you can get her to pull her hair back and ditch some of the black makeup.

“Oh. Who would have guessed that Oklahoma City would produce a gloomy goth band?” I snark.

“They’re industrial,” Jenn argues.

Outside the windows of the car, miles of barren land roll by; the wheat harvest was finished months ago and now the fields are empty. A green highway sign says we’re just a couple of miles from Lahoma, which is a speck on the map between our home in Windy Acres – an even smaller speck – and our destination of Enid, the biggest city within seventy-five miles of home. The empty land is bleak, but not like Jenn’s music. The land is sleeping and it will wake up again in the spring. Jenn’s music makes me think of tall buildings, constant shadows, and urban decay.

"It's depressing," I tell her.

Jenn slows down as we enter the Lahoma city limits. She hates driving slow. An old Dodge pickup rolls out in front of us and goes about thirty miles per hour. Jenn pats out a rhythm of frustration on the steering wheel.

"Speed trap," I warn, pointing ahead and to the right where a black-and-white cop car sits almost hidden beside a convenience store.

"Damn pigs," Jenn mutters, slowing down even more.

"Are we there?" Anna asks suddenly from the back.

"No," Jenn and I both answer together.

I don't look directly at the cop as we slip by, but I can't help watching out of the corner of my eye. I see him aim his radar gun at us, then check it. "How'd you get your mom to let you take the care out of town?" I ask Jenn. Back during the summer, Jenn tried to arrange a trip like this and her mom wouldn't let her go.

"She didn't say anything," Jenn answers.

"Nothing?" I turned to look at her. Jenn shrugs.

"Nothing."

About two years ago, Jenn's mom was hurt in a workplace accident. She was towing a train car with a tractor at the grain elevator when something went wrong and the tractor flipped over. She's been in a wheelchair since then. As far back as I can remember, she wasn't a very pleasant person, but the accident made her almost unbearable to be around. I've only been to Jenn's house a few times since the accident, and both times Jenn was doing chores while her mom yelled at her. Jenn's dad has never been in the picture; when her mom found out she was pregnant, her dad took off and no one heard from him again.

"Ashlie, read this." Anna leans forward and hands her phone over the seat. I look at the message on the screen: UR THE HOTTEST PEACE OF ASS IN DAT SCHOOL.

"Wonderful." I hand the phone back. "Who is it?"

"Jordan Gooden." Anna Sanchez is one of those Hispanic girls with perfect skin and thick black hair. She's so different than me, with my thin, limp blonde hair and alabaster skin that goes all lobster red if I let sunlight hit it for more than two minutes. Jenn's almost as pale as me, but with her it's a choice.

“What’d it say?” Jenn asks. I tell her. “Oh, that’s class,” she says.

“I like him,” Anna sulks, leaning back in the seat.

“Of course you do,” Jenn says as we break free of the Lahoma city limits and she speeds up again, slipping to the left of the farm truck and laying on the horn as we race by. I wave and smile at the older man who turns a surprised face toward us. “Stop being nice,” Jenn demands.

I have my driving permit, but can’t test for my license for another three months. Not that I have a car, or anything. If I could drive us, I don’t think I’d honk when I pass people. It seems rude. Anna failed her permit test twice, so gave up. She said she’ll do it again when she’s sure she can pass. My mom made me promise I wouldn’t drive today, even if Jenn offered to let me. She didn’t like the idea of me coming to Enid with Jenn and Anna and no adult, but I talked her into it. Jenn, who hasn’t had her license all that long, didn’t offer to let me drive.

My mind wanders in the moment of silence after we pass the truck. This is the closest thing to adventure I’m likely to experience in the three months before or after this trip. For a moment I imagine we’re like Hobbits, leaving the Shire, maybe not on our way to Mordor, but at least going to Bree.

I look at Jenn and try to imagine her as a Hobbit. It makes me grin and I turn back to the window before she catches me. No way. No Hobbits here. Thelma and Louise? Maybe. Jenn could be Louise, that’s easy enough to see. And Anna could be Thelma. Me? I’m the third wheel, the uncelebrated one who’d jump out of the car before they drove it off the cliff and into infamy.

Once, when we were younger, Anna heard some older boys talking about stealing a lot of candy from the grocery store. They’d hidden it in a tree house they’d built in an woody area over by the dump. Jenn decided we would go and steal the candy from them. The Chocolate Heist, she’d called it. I didn’t go. What if the boys caught us? What if they didn’t? How would I explain having all that candy when my parents knew I didn’t have any money? What if the police knew where the candy was and were waiting to see who would come for it?

Anna made herself sick on Milky Way bars that day and Jenn

had candy bars at lunch every day at school for almost a month. I never got so much as a taste of what they'd taken because, as Jenn put it, I was too chicken to go with them.

"Cow sex," Jenn announces, pointing to a field where several cows are eating from round bales of hay. A bull is on the back of one of the black cows, his front legs spraddled across her back while his torso bucks up and down.

"Gross," I say, looking away.

Jenn laughs at me. "Look at the cow," she says. "She's still chewing her food like she doesn't even notice it."

I look, and sure enough, the cow's jaw is working from side to side as she chews her cud, almost like she's bored by what's happening at her other end. We all laugh, then the scene is behind us.

"I've done it like that," Anna says, her phone in front of her face again. She sends a message, lowers the phone, and leans forward. "I wasn't chewing gum, though. It was with Randy Coker. He tried to put it in my butt, but I wouldn't let him."

"Well, that was very self-respecting of you," Jenn says, looking at me and rolling her eyes.

"That's gross, Anna. Why do you do that with guys?" I ask.

"It's what they want," she answers.

"To hell with them. It should be about what *you* want," Jenn says.

"I didn't say I didn't want it," Anna responds softly.

"Slut," Jenn accuses.

"Jenn!" I scold. "Don't call her that."

"You were thinking it, too." Jenn gives me a smug look. "Deny it." She challenges

"No, I wasn't." It's a lie; I was thinking Anna acts like a slut, and has for almost all of our sophomore year, but I would never say it.

Anna ignores Jenn, or maybe she doesn't even hear her. She's back to texting the boy who's telling her how hot she is. I realize there's something in her hair and reach over the front seat to get it out, but it's like a paste and matted in.

"What is it?" Anna asks, pulling the afflicted bit of hair so she can see it. "Gross!"

“What?” Jenn asks, trying to see in the mirror.

“Adelberto’s cereal,” Anna says, picking at the whitish-gray substance.

Adelberto is the second to the youngest kid in Anna’s house. Anna is number four, though her two older brothers and one sister live in Mexico with her mom’s parents. Anna is the oldest kid in her house, with five born after her. She explained once that her parents’ reproduction tendencies were tied to how close they were to the Catholic church at that time. When they first got married, in Mexico, they were devout Catholics and didn’t use birth control, so they had three babies in three years. The poverty caused by that drove them away from the church for a while, and that’s when he came to America, where Anna was born and lived as the only child for a couple of years. The family did well for a while and returned to the church, and her mom quit using birth control, which resulted in a set of twin girls the next year, followed by another girl, then little Adelberto.

Anna is saddled with a lot of the babysitting duties at home so her parents can both work. I don’t know how they support such a big family.

“Why is his cereal in your hair?” Jenn asks.

“Mom made me feed him this morning and he got his hands all in it and was throwing it around,” Anna huffs. “Is it all out?” she asks me, turning her head side to side. I look her over and tell her it is. Anna goes back to her texting.

I turn around and stare out the window. This is my adventure. Yay.

A big wooden sign with a picture of a cowboy racing on horseback tells us we have entered Enid. Ahead of us, the Walmart supercenter looms on our right. You know you live in a small town when you look forward to visiting a city big enough to have a Walmart.

“Here we are, girls,” Jenn announces as we enter the parking lot.

* * *

I got a pair of black pants and Anna got some makeup, but otherwise Walmart was a bust. We move on down the street to a strip mall with The Gap, Old Navy, and several other shops.

"I wish they had a Hot Topic," Jenn says as we get out of the car. "We should have gone to OKC."

"You suggested Enid," I remind her.

"Yeah. I still don't know why. Just seemed the thing to do this morning," she says.

The wind blows our hair all over the place as we hurry toward the storefronts. By the time we duck into The Gap, Anna's entire face is covered by her thick hair. Laughing at her, I smooth my own short hair back, then help dig Anna out. Jenn doesn't like to be touched, so she pushes her own hair back.

"Let's shop! Woo!" Anna pumps a fist in the air and heads for a rack of sweaters.

Me and Anna are soon in the dressing rooms, trying on various combos. Jenn, however, just stands around outside the dressing room, barely grunting at us as we ask for her opinion.

"Black pants and pink tops," she says to me. "Is that all you have in there? Either go goth or go bubblegum, Ash. You can't have it both ways."

"Oh, lighten up, Jenn. I remember a certain school picture of you wearing a big pink bow," I tell her, then go back into the dressing room.

I end up with two pairs of pants, both black, though one is really black-and-pink zebra stripes, and three tops, one blue and sleeveless, the other two yellow and pink with long sleeves. Anna gets a long purple sweater.

"Can we go?" Jenn asks as Anna pays.

"Didn't you find anything?" Anna asks her.

"Pfft. In here? Not likely." The girl at the register is about our age. She gives Jennifer an annoyed look. I can see by the look in her eyes that Jenn is about to snap at the girl.

"Let's go," I say, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her toward the door. Much to my relief, she lets me lead her outside, where the early October wind slams into us again.

"Did you see the way that bitch looked at me?" Jenn demands.

"Yeah. But let it go. Here comes Anna." Anna joins us and we move to the next store, an accessories boutique where even Jenn is able to pick up some black nail polish and a fake silver

bracelet. I buy a wide, shiny black belt. As we're leaving the store my phone goes off, telling me I have a text message.

"Who's that?" Jenn asks as I pull the phone out of my purse.

I look at the name and bite my lip. "Bethany," I answer. Jenn hates Bethany Simcox, one of my sort-of friends from show choir. Bethany is sweet, but too happy all the time and kind of a ditz.

"Wooo. What does Dumbo want?" Jenn asks. Sometimes I think some of her problem is she's just jealous that I have other friends. She's always been like that, though. She's even gotten mad when Anna and I have gotten together without her.

"She's just asking what's up," I answer as I text back that I'm shopping in Enid with Jenn and Anna. Bethany tells me to "Have fun" and adds two smiley faces. I put the phone back in my purse.

"I'm hungry," Anna says. She's painted her lips a deep crimson and applied turquoise eye shadow from a store sampler. Anna is a sucker for the makeup counter.

"I could eat," Jenn says. I agree.

We hit a Burger King for lunch. While we're eating, a little girl who can't be more than two years old wanders away from her mom and brother and ends up standing by our table, smiling up at us. She waves with her pudgy little hand.

"Hi," I say, leaning over the table toward her and waving back. She reaches for the silver plastic beaded necklace that dangles from my neck, her big blue eyes lit up with curiosity.

"My God, Ash. Can't you be cool?" Jenn mutters.

"What?" I ask, holding my necklace while the little girl fingers the beads. "She's so cute."

"You're such a dork sometimes."

The girl's big brother comes over and picks her up. The girl waves at me as he carries her away. She says, "Buh" as she waves. I laugh and tell her bye, then turn on Jenn.

"What's with you today? You woke me up wanting to come here, then you act like you want to be anywhere else."

"You are even more bitchy than usual," Anna agrees.

"See?" I point to Anna. "We're in agreement."

Jenn rolls her eyes, something that looks super dramatic

because of the dark eyeliner she wears, then flips some black hair off her forehead. “Whatever,” she says, then bites into her burger.

“Seriously, is something wrong?” I ask.

“No. I don’t know.” Jenn plays with the tip of her straw. “I just feel kinda weird. Wired up, you know?”

“Too much coffee,” Anna suggests.

My phone goes off again. Jenn and Anna ignore it and keep eating. I look at it quickly and see that it’s another message from Bethany. It says, “Jenn asked Matt out. He called her a zombie.” I put the phone back in my purse without responding. I eat a French fry and refuse to look at Jenn. Wow. That would explain her attitude.

“Your show choir geek again?” Jenn asks.

“Huh?” I blink and focus on her. “No. It was Mom. She wanted to make sure we got here okay.”

Matt Randle is one of the school jocks. He’s a wrestler. I don’t know anything about wrestling, but Matt’s supposed to be good. Really good. They say he’s already got a full scholarship at Oklahoma State if he just stays healthy. He is so not Jenn’s type. Bethany is very heavy into gossip. Maybe what she said isn’t even true.

The silence seems to draw out between the three of us. Finally, I look at Anna and ask, “You done texting Jordan?”

“He has friends over. They’re playing video games,” she says. “I told him I’d text him later. Do you think he’s cute?”

I almost answer too fast. Jordan Gooden is so NOT cute. He’s got a square head, a buzz cut, and always has a couple of patches of acne on his face. And a neck like a pencil.

“If you’re into jerks who can’t spell IQ,” Jenn answers. “He’s dating Christina Bell, you know?”

“Not anymore,” Anna says. “He was, but he texted me by mistake this morning and decided he likes me better.”

“What?” I ask.

“That’s stupid,” Jenn adds.

“He’s dumping Christina for me,” Anna says.

“He was telling you that shit about you being hot this morning without even breaking up with his girlfriend first?”

Jenn asks.

“Yeah.”

“Don’t you see anything wrong with that?” I ask.

“No.” Anna is on the verge of pout mode.

“He’ll cheat on you, too,” Jenn says. She sucks the last of her Coke out of the cup. “Let’s blow this joint.”

Jenn’s always been our leader. She’s the one who stole the cigarettes we tried smoking in eighth grade; I was the first to get sick. She’s the one who got a pornographic magazine from somewhere and showed us what a full-grown naked man looks like. She was the one who shared her mom’s wine coolers with us early last summer. Again, I got sick. At least the porno magazine didn’t make me sick. Just really, really embarrassed. And kind of scared of men and ... that thing they have. The ones in the magazine were huge. Jenn told us that most men aren’t that big, but how would she know?

When we leave the restaurant we find a yellow flyer stuck under the window of the car. Jenn pulls it off and we get in. Anna sits in the front seat, so I have to get in the back. I lean forward and read the flyer over Jenn’s shoulder, but it’s just an estate sale announcement. I lean back and sip the Dr Pepper refill I brought with me.

“We’re going to this,” Jenn announces. She starts the car and we hit the street.

“An estate sale?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“That’s where they sell stuff old people left when they died,” I say.

“It’s in the Indian Hills neighborhood, so they were old rich people. They have cool stuff,” Jenn argues.

I shrug and look out the window. She’s driving, and I don’t care enough to argue. Maybe they’ll have some vintage clothes, or cheap antiques I can put away for Mom or Dad’s birthday.

My phone beeps again. Bethany again. “Is it true?” she asks. I quickly answer that I don’t know. “Ask her!” Bethany responds. I tell her, “No way!”

“Who are you texting back there?” Jenn demands. “Somebody saying *you’re* the hottest piece of ass in Windy Acres

now?"

I laugh at her. "Not hardly. It's Bethany."

"Doesn't she have a rainbow to chase?"

"Be nice," I say, but my voice is weak. I'm dying to know if there's any truth to what Bethany texted, but I don't know how to ask with Jenn in the mood she's in. My phone goes off again.

"It's true," Bethany says. "Ricky was there. Saw it all. Poor Jenn."

Poor Jenn.

I put the phone away. Jenn turns the car into the first block of a very nice, very rich old neighborhood.

"Hey Jenn?" I begin. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Why are you asking me that?"

"What's the deal with Matt Randle?" I ask.

I see Jenn's hands tighten on the steering wheel. Her voice comes from gritted teeth. "Who told? Your stupid choir friend? How'd she find out?"

"You know Bethany. Gossip is crack to her," I answer. "She's worried about you." She did say "Poor Jenn", but I'm not sure that counts.

"Yeah, I bet she is."

"What happened? What about Matt?" Anna asks.

"Nothing," Jenn snaps. "He's an asshole."

"Why'd you ask him? He doesn't seem like your type at all," I ask.

Jenn parks the car in front of a house with an ESTATE SALE sign in the yard. She turns to look at me and for just a second I see the pain in her eyes before she drives it out. "This is retarded."

"Tell us. We're your best friends," I urge.

Jenn presses her black lips together but doesn't answer.

"I told you about Ricky Wood in seventh grade," I prompt her. Ricky had asked me to be his girlfriend, and five minutes later tried to use his brother's cell phone to take a picture while holding the phone under my skirt.

"And I tell everything," Anna adds.

"She does. Whether we want her to or not," I agree.

Jenn smiles. It's a little one, but it's enough. "Fine. Yeah, I

asked him out. I thought ... I was stupid. I thought I caught him looking at me in the hall. Not the way everyone else looks at the weird goth chick, but ... I don't know. It's stupid. But I thought maybe he was interested but couldn't ask me because of who he is. You know, the big jock. So I caught him alone and asked him out. But some of his friends came up behind me and heard."

"What happened?" Anna asks.

Jenn picks at a seam in the seat fabric. "He told me he already has a girlfriend. Then I guess he saw his idiot friends. His face changed and he said he – " Jenn's breath catches in her throat like she's holding back tears, something I've never seen before. "The bastard said he doesn't fuck zombie bitches," she grits out.

"He did not!" Anna yells.

"Oh Jenn. I'm so sorry." Instinctively, I reach out and put my hand on the side of her head. She lets me for a second, then shrugs me away.

"It doesn't matter. I thought he might be something else, but I guess he's just the tool he acts like, anyway. Let's hit this sale," Jenn says.

As it turns out, the estate sale does have vintage clothes, but they belonged to someone much larger than me. I could probably cut some of them down and use the fabric to make something that would fit me, but I don't like any of the patterns enough to really consider it. I wander away from the clothes and see that Anna has flopped down in a leather wing chair and is chomping her gum and looking out a huge window at a guy watering the lawn next door. Jenn is looking at books on a tall shelf. I go to stand beside Jenn.

"Anything good?" I ask, hoping for a first edition Charles Dickens or Louisa May Alcott hidden amongst what looks like mostly old encyclopedias and Reader's Digest condensed books.

"This." Jenn holds up a strange looking book. It's really thick and old, with a brown leather cover that has a lot of wear to it. I try to take it to look at it, but she won't let it go.

"What is it?" I ask her.

"A grimoire," she says. "It belonged to somebody named Rosalyn Astor."

“Grimoire? Isn’t that like a spell book?” I ask. I remember hearing the word on a TV show about girls with magical powers.

“Yeah. Pretty creepy, huh?” She smiles a real smile for the first time on this trip.

“I guess,” I admit. “What’s in it?”

Jenn opens the book. The pages are made of heavy paper and are covered in a thin, spidery handwriting. A lot of the pages have drawings that look kind of like astrological signs. Jenn flips the pages pretty fast so I don’t really get to look at anything.

“Can I help you girls?” A man in his forties has slipped up behind us. He’s tall and kind of thin, with a receding hairline and a hooked nose. He’s wearing a yellow polo shirt and tan slacks.

“How much is this?” Jenn asks, closing the book.

“Off that shelf? Well, we’d planned to sell those books for five dollars per shelf. They’re not books anybody really reads, but they make a nice display in an office or home library. They make the owner look well read, you know.”

Jenn looks at the shelf and I see the empty space where she’d pulled the thick book. “I don’t need a dictionary or ... whatever those other books are,” she says.

“Can you tell us anything about that book?” I ask. “Who is Rosalyn Astor?”

“Who?” the man asks, but his face changes before he says it.

“Rosalyn Astor,” Jenn repeats the name.

“An aunt. Or, rather, a great aunt. She died many years ago. My grandmother inherited her possessions,” the man says. “Does that book have her name in it?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Then take it,” the man says. “I couldn’t sell anything she owned. It should probably be destroyed. She was not a Christian woman. I imagine if it was anything too horrible Grandma would have gotten rid of it. You may have it.”

“Free?” Jenn asks.

“Yes. Is there anything else you might be interested in? China dishes for a hope chest, maybe? Grandma had three full sets of good china.”

“Hope chest?” Jenn asks.

“No,” I tell him, pulling at Jenn’s sleeve. “We’re not ready to

think about a hope chest yet.” Jenn lets me lead her away. Fortunately, an elderly couple enters the house then and the man turns his attention to them.

We gather Anna and go out to the car. The neighborhood is very old, with huge trees that are just beginning to take on their autumn colors. The houses are made of stone, or at least made to look that way, and the driveways have Lincolns and Cadillacs parked in them. Jenn’s older Buick is obviously out of place.

Jenn goes to the back of the car and opens the trunk. She puts the book back there with the bags from our store shopping trips.

“What? I can’t read it while we drive home?” I tease her.

“No. I found it. I get to read it first,” she says.

“Found what?” Anna asks.

“Just an old book,” Jenn says.

“A book?” Anna wrinkles her nose. She doesn’t like to read.

We get into the car and Jenn turns the key in the ignition. The engine makes a sick, kind of spinning sound, but doesn’t start. For some reason, I have the thought that the car was running fine before Jenn put that book in the trunk. Then she starts cussing about the battery being dead.

“We’ll have to ask that yuppie grandma’s boy for a jump start,” she mutters.

“I’ll do it,” I volunteer. “You’re too mad. Nobody will help you when you get mad like this.” I slide out of the backseat and go back inside the house. The man looks up at me and smiles just a little from where he’s showing the elderly woman an old glass jar with a crank handle on the lid and wooden paddles that stir whatever’s inside the jar.

“Did you decide you saw something you just can’t live without?” he asks me.

“No, not exactly,” I say in my best show choir voice. “Our car won’t start. I was wondering if you could help us. Jenn says it’s the battery.”

“Oh. I’m afraid I really don’t know anything about cars, other than how to drive them,” he says.

“I can help you, miss.” It’s the husband of the woman looking at the jar. He’s a short man with thick white hair, but his eyes are

clear and sharp and smiling. “I used to run a service station here in town. I have cables in my trunk.”

The man pulls his pale yellow Town Car up in front of Jenn’s Buick and opens the hoods of both. After running some black and red cables from one engine to the other, he tells Jenn to start her car. The old clunker starts right up. The man unhooks his cables.

“Thank you,” I tell him. “Can we pay you for helping us?”

“I wouldn’t take your money, young lady,” he says, smiling and waving my offer away. “You just do a good turn for somebody else down the way.”

“Thank you. We will,” I promise.

Jenn drives us home, and suddenly she is chatty in her old snarky way again. We talk about things we saw, about school, about boys, but the whole way back to Windy Acres I keep thinking about how that book is behind me, in the trunk. I don’t like it.

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