

“Aw, crap!”

Dracula’s last thought before he crumbled to dust.

Fang Face

By Norm Cowie

“I am not going to sleep in a coffin!” Erin screeched.

As any attendee of a High School Musical concert can tell you, there’s nothing like a teenage girl’s shriek to wake up the auditory sensors. Every dog in the neighborhood simultaneously yipped in pain, except old Dork, a deaf Chihuahua from up the street.

Alex ducked, even though the shriek wasn’t directed at her. It whizzed by her ear with a whistling sound and went looking for another eardrum to pierce.

Immune to the sound, their father calmly leafed through a magazine. “Hey, this one looks nice. It’s the *King Tut* model.”

Erin whirled around and snapped, “King Tut was a boy. Do I look like a boy to you?”

Beth interrupted softly, trying to reduce the sudden tension, “They actually have one shaped like a Coke bottle. It’s attractive.” The faint frown line between her eyes indicated that maybe she thought otherwise.

“Mom! This is ridiculous. I’m not sleeping in a coffin!”

“But, honey, I think you’re supposed to,” her father said. He was clearly uncomfortable and was twisting his finger in an ugly necklace hanging loosely around his neck.

“Hey,” Alex interrupted, looking at another magazine, “here’s a biodegradable one.” She

grinned impishly. “Good for the environment when we bury it.”

Erin gritted her teeth. “Even... if... I ... were ... to ... sleep ... in ... a coffin ..., WE WOULDN’T BE BURYING IT!”

She glared at everyone around the kitchen table, turned around and stalked to her room, pausing to slam the door. Then she opened it again and slammed it again with more force than a teenaged girl should possess. The oak door splintered but held.

There was silence around the table.

Finally Alex said quietly, “I vote that we just go ahead and cremate her now.”

Part One

Chapter 1

Several months earlier.

Ian Trug was the ugliest kid at Lincoln Jr. and Sr. High School. Not just his school, the entire school district.

Maybe even the entire country.

No one would bother to even call for a vote. It was too much of a sure thing. And this isn’t to be mean. It was simply a sad fact.

By all accounts Trug had been a very cute baby. But as a toddler, things began to go very wrong. First, parts of his body began to grow at a different rate. One arm grew longer than the other. Then, as if it was some kind of physiological competition, the other arm caught up and passed it. Feeling left out, his head got into the contest and ballooned, leaving his body behind.

Of course his body rose to this new challenge and caught up in fits and starts. The competition continued for a couple years until his head and body obtained what might generously be called symmetry.

To complete the picture, thatches of coarse black fur sprouted like weeds from the backs of his hands, and another strip marched down his back like that of an Arkansas razor-back. It would be cruel to mention the pimples on pimples, but, well, (shrug).

Anyway, by the time he was a teenager, he'd reached a plateau of ugliness that he fervently hoped would never get worse.

He and his ugliness were sitting alone together in covert surveillance next to a potted fern that somehow flourished despite, or perhaps because of, copious amounts of milk dumped on it every day.

That's when the subject of his surveillance showed up.

"Oh, my God," he thought to himself as Winifred Mandrake glided through the busy room. Obviously he thought this to himself. He couldn't think it to anyone else, unless there were some mind readers in the room.

His eyes followed Winifred and as always, the sight seemed to stun his lungs into inactivity, leaving him gulping for breath. Or maybe it was that she attracted all of the oxygen in his immediate area.

She had entranced him since he first inhaled the sight of her a couple months before.

"Wow," someone breathed.

Who said that? Trug looked around. There was no one there.

His heart lurched. Had he said it out loud?

Gulp.

He looked around in panic. Whew, nobody had heard him.

He turned his attention back to her and suddenly his vision started blurring.

Aaagh! I'm going blind.

No wait. Breathe, dummy! Got to remember to breathe.

He took a deep breath and turned his attention back to the goddess.

Winifred was wearing a dark green skirt with a form fitting black top. It was the only possible look for her. Then again, she had a way of making anything she wore look like the only possible look. With black glossy hair and perfect white skin, her onyx eyes effortlessly enchanted boys, and gave the girls plenty to be catty about.

She sat down at the Becky table. Becky's are the perfect girls. Popular, pretty, cheerleaders. Better than anyone else in school. They looked down at their noses at the normal students, particularly those whose acne regularly overwhelmed their acne cream.

Well, they weren't totally perfect. Half of them had metallic smiles. But eventually they'd be perfect, at least until their twentieth reunion - after they'd had a few kids. Small consolation, because for now they looked perfect. Even worse, they knew it.

The Beckys rarely actually ate lunch and generally kept aloof as if their table was some kind of throne. Only their personal knights from the Jock-table had the courage to draw their disdainful interest.

That didn't stop Trug from admiring her from afar. There was a table of Gamers between Trug and the Becky table, so he was able to watch her with impunity. Gamers lived for video games, and their lunch period was usually devoted to peanut butter sandwiches and tales of conquests and cheats. They wouldn't notice anyone staring past them.

"Hey, Trug. Whatcha doing?" Brian Slimnan's tray clattered noisily on the table as he

thumped into the seat across from him..

Trug started and hastily scooped up his wandering eyes, put them back in and looked at his friend.

“Hi, Slim, what’s up?”

Slim was slim the same way that some huge guys are often called ‘Tiny.’ He wasn’t fat, he was more...

...well, okay, he was fat.

But he carried it well, and wore loud shirts that advertised his presence, just in case you didn’t notice two hundred and fifty pounds when it showed up next to you.

For all that, Slim was the most graceful person of his size that Trug had ever seen. He was a diver on the school’s swim team, and somehow, when he sliced into the water, there was only a blip of a splash. That didn’t make him look any better in a swimsuit, but Trug still thought him somewhat a freak with his physical ability.

Slim’s eyes slid across the room, taking in Winifred as she slipped into a seat with feline grace. His lips pursed, “Whoa, she’s something, huh?”

Trug’s face colored, “Uh, who?” he stammered.

Slim shot him a knowing grin, but didn’t say anything as he watched the pretty girl chatting with the other Beckys.

A whirlwind blasted into the room, and shot towards them through the milling crowd. It thwapped into the next seat. Slim’s tray slid from the impact, but he managed to catch it before it could fall. He gave the whirlwind a reproachful look. Okay, not a whirlwind, but most kids didn’t move that quickly.

“Hey, guys! What’s up?”

Trug grunted a hello at Little Nevin, though he continued looking at Winifred from the corner of his eyes.

Nevin noticed, and he turned around to see who Slim and Trug were looking at.

“Oh, ho, there’s a babe,” he said cheerfully, staring straight at her.

“Don’t let her see you looking at her!” Trug hissed.

“A babe? Did you just call her a babe?” Slim asked, an incredulous grin spreading across his face.

“Yeah, a babe.”

“Nobody says ‘babe’ anymore,” Slim said.

“Why not? She is a babe, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, I guess so, but you can’t call her that.”

“Why not?”

“Uh, I don’t know, but it’s just not right.”

“You call people ‘dude’ all the time and no one does that anymore.”

“That’s different!”

“How’s that?”

“Um, uh, I don’t know. It just is.”

“Okay, you find out something else to call her, and I’ll call her it, as long as it’s the same thing as ‘babe,’” Nevin said.

“Chick?” Slim suggested.

“Chick?!” Trug and Nevin chimed, laughing.

“Yeah, ‘chick.” Slim said defensively.

“Chick is even more outdated!”

Winifred noticed them staring and gave them a sulfurous smile from across the room. Her friends' heads whipped around like merekats.

“Agghh,” Trug yelped.

Slim's eyes skipped down to his tray, which reminded him of his food. He grabbed a spork and started shoveling.

Little Nevin wasn't embarrassed. He waved cheerfully at Winifred, whose smile brightened, as if it was possible for a supernova's light to grow more intense.

“She likes me,” Nevin announced.

“Yeah, right,” Slim grumbled.

Trug couldn't look. While covertly spying on Winifred was a harmless but necessary part of his existence, she was not to notice him, for he was Trug.

Ugly Trug. A slug who should not be consorting with the jeweled bird.

Ugly didn't seem to make a difference to his friends. Even though Trug had only lived in town since the beginning of the school year, after meeting Nevin and Slim, they quickly formed the kind of quick-freeze friendship that happens only in school and war.

“Anyway,” Slim continued, his eyes serious and mouth full of food, “you don't want to have anything to do with her.”

Trog's eyes slid involuntarily - well, not quite involuntarily ... but contrary to the brain's instructions - towards the dryad in green and black, “Why's that? Besides the obvious physical inequities, of course.”

“Physical what?”

“Inequities. She's um, well, you know... and I'm ...” he shrugged helplessly.

“Oh, that. That's not the point,” Nevin said. He had produced a tray of food from

somewhere and was eyeing it speculatively. It was an immense mountain of food.

“She’s not, um...” Slim started.

“Like us,” Nevin supplied cheerfully.

“Duh,” Trug scoffed.

“Seriously,” Slim managed through a full mouth. “She’s not nice...”

“She looks nice,” Trug protested.

Slim spoke around a mouthful of cafeteria pseudo-food, “Yeah, she used to be.”

“Yeah, in middle school,” Nevin added.

Slim continued, as if Nevin hadn’t interrupted, “But not any more.”

“But she smiled...” Trug began.

“Told you,” Nevin said. “She likes me.”

Slim continued, “Yeah, recently she’s turned, um...”

“...mean,” Nevin chirped.

“She also used to be blonde,” Slim added.

“Blonde?” Trug asked. Usually girls changed their hair from dark to blonde, not the other way around. At least he thought so, though his knowledge of girls was still mostly speculative.

“I heard they say that blondes are going to be extinct some day,” Nevin said.

“Not as long as they have bottles,” Slim snickered.

“No, seriously, I read that natural blondes are...”

Something caught his attention, no doubt something bright and shiny. Nevin was the magpie of the human world.

“Wait, gotta go. See ya, bye.” He jumped up and tornadoed out of the cafeteria, leaving

his tray behind. The huge mound of food was gone. Trug looked at the empty tray in amazement. He hadn't even seen Nevin eating it.

Slim looked up, "and she didn't always look like that either."

"Like what?"

"Like that."

"Um... and that would be?"

"That good."

The bell rang.

"Later, dude," Slim waved and headed for the exit.

Bemused, Trug watched how effortlessly his large friend weaved through the throng of students, marveling again at his curious grace. Then he picked up his tray and Nevin's, dumped them off and headed to his own class.

He found his room, thumped into a seat and tried not to look ugly. That is, he smoothed out any scowls and worked at keeping his face totally blank of expression, because any expression at all just made things worse.

It was the first day of the new semester and a new class. 'Web-Design.' Last semester, he'd taken 'Keyboarding.'

Suddenly a small figure slipped into the seat next to him. He caught a whiff of something clean and good smelling, which pretty much ruled out it being a boy. He willed himself invisible.

"We're seatmates," a pretty soprano voice chirped, confirming the girl theory.

Then again, most of the boys in the class were still sopranos, so that wasn't necessarily conclusive proof. But it was definitely a feminine voice ... he thought.

He dared to slide his eyes towards her.

An almost- pretty little brunette girl was smiling brightly.

He looked behind him to see who she was smiling at. There was nothing there but the chalkboard. She was smiling at him.

It was such a radiant smile that it involuntarily pulled a matching smile from him.

Suddenly he remembered with horror what his smile looked like, and he quickly erased it.

“Uh. Hi,” he grunted as nicely as possible.

“I’m Alex,” she chirped.

“Um. Trug.”

Her pretty face crinkled, “Trig?”

He cleared his throat, “Uh, hem.. Trug. It’s my last name. That’s what people call me.”

“People call you by your last name? Why? Don’t you like your first name?”

“No, uh, it’s ... I mean, it’s fine.”

Trug was a little bewitched by her green eyes,

She waited.

“What?” he croaked.

“Oh, sorry. I thought you were going to tell me your first name.”

“No. I was ... I mean, sure... it’s Ian.”

“Ian.” She smiled, “I like that. So why do people call you ‘Trug’ if you have such a nice name?”

Trug swallowed, “Well, I guess it’s more, um... descriptive...”

She was looking at his hands twisting on the desk. Thick tufts of black hair bristled from the tops. He hastily jammed his hands under his desk.

“I don’t agree,” Alex declared. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to call you Ian.”

“Um. Okay,” he mumbled. He could feel his face getting red.

“There, that’s settled.” She stuck her hand out, “Well Ian Trug, I’m Alex. Pleased to meet you.”

Just then Winifred Mandrake glided into the room.

An involuntary ‘gack’ sound slipped from his throat and his eyes Googled, no, they goggled. Alex turned around to see where he was looking and her eyes narrowed the way a girl’s eyes narrow when she sees a pretty girl.

Winifred swept in and viewed the filled chairs. The only open one was on the other side of Trug. After a reluctant pause, she walked over, sat and busied herself with her purse while leaning as far as possible away from him.

Her subtle perfume clouded Trug’s olfactory nerves and senses stomping his heart into mush.

HE WAS SITTING NEXT TO WINIFRED MANDRAKE!

“Are you okay?” Alex cried.

“What?” he choked.

“You turned white. Are you going to pass out?”

He took a shuddering breath. “No. I’m okay. Must be that cafeteria food.”

She looked doubtful, “Well, okay.”

Just then, Mr. Nantz walked in the door and the class straightened to attention.

“All right, students,” he said briskly.

Trug slumped in his seat, emotionally exhausted and grateful for the teacher’s arrival.

Chapter 2

Nobody noticed the two vampires talking quietly at the corner table at Starbucks.

There were a lot of reasons they might go unnoticed. The most obvious reason is that they were sipping cappuccinos instead of frothing glasses of bright arterial blood. That, and they were munching on banana bread muffins instead of necks. Okay, so the younger vampire was holding a neck, but it was that of a bottle of tea he'd just purchased.

Another reason you might not suspect that they were vampires was the lack of fangs. Fangs and vampires go together like teenagers and acne, frogs and slime...no, like *lawyers* and slime, and well, you get the point

Anyway, if you did see a vampire, you'd probably have the intense desire to brandish a cross, a cup of holy water or maybe your own personal Terminator. You'd probably also feel an overwhelming urge to pee in your pants - which is okay, too - and not a sign that you're a sissy... unless you are a sissy, in which case you wouldn't need to read it on a sign.

The older vampire was wearing Bermuda shorts, a Tommy Bahama Hawaiian shirt and flip flops. He looked a carefully preserved sixty, but was in actuality nearing his one thousandth birthday. He had celebrated hitting the big 999 by eating a famous bleached blonde celebrity who was famous only for being a celebrity rehab bunny, getting into legal scrapes and going back and forth into clinics with the media greedily snapping photographs. He'd been sick for a week afterwards. Worse, he ended up having to throw out his entire coffin because he couldn't get the puke out of the satin interior. The whole thing soured him so much on celebrities that he could no longer read trashy tabloids any more without turning green.

It didn't stop him from reading the tabloids, he'd just turn green.

The other vampire was younger by some nine hundred and seventy years ... give or take

a year ... but who's counting at that point? He was a big guy dressed in dirty jeans and a blue shirt with a name tag.

And he was complaining.

“Why did we have to meet here ... amongst food?”

One of his fangs started popping out, and he struggled manfully, er, vampirefully, to get it to go back up.

The older vampire smiled, the twist of his lips not making it to his black fathomless eyes. “I'm sorry. How should you refer to me?” he asked mildly while peeling a muffin out of its paper holder. His fingernails were long, yellow and came to points.

The other vampire would have turned white, but seeing as he was already a chalky shade of white he stayed the same pasty shade. (If you want the exact color, check out Bone White - #C520-82 on the Behr Paint color chart at Home Depot)

“Oh. Um. I'm sorry, Master! Uh... please forgive me!”

The old vampire nodded, muffin crumbs tumbling from his black lips like dandruff, “You need to learn control and self-restraint. And as to why we are here, it is good for you to learn these lessons by suffering somewhat.”

“I don't want to suffer,” the younger vampire wined.

No, he didn't wine, he whined.

He cut off when the older one frowned and they sat for a moment in silence.

Finally the older man spoke again, his voice courtly. “We have a lot to do together, you and I.

“Um, Master... shouldn't it be 'me'?”

“Huh?”

“You said, ‘you and I.’ Shouldn’t it be, ‘you and me.?’”

The old vampire frowned, “No, I don’t think so. I think ‘I’ is the correct usage.”

“Okay, maybe.”

There was a moment of silence.

Then the ancient vampire continued on as if not interrupted, “and you will need strength of mind and body in the days ahead.”

The younger vampire leaned forward excitedly, “What, Master? What do you have in mind?”

The older vampire took a sip of his coffee, wiped whipped cream off his upper lip with a napkin, and smiled a smile that would look more at home on a hammerhead shark.

“We recruit, my young protégé. We recruit.”

“Recruit?”

“Yes. This is an excellent place, and prime for bringing more of our own into the fold.”

“Oh, okay.” Then the younger vampire frowned, “I never got that.”

“Got what?”

“Bringing someone into a fold. Why would someone want to be folded?”

The ancient vampire’s eyebrows Spocked, “I’m not sure. I know I am older than the saying, but somehow it worked its way into my vernacular.”

They sat for a moment in thought.

Then the old vampire shifted, “Whatever, as you younger ones say. Anyway, in any event, I have begun recruiting, and will have need of your help.”

“Really?” The younger vampire was excited. “What can I do to help?”

The old man leaned closer, and began whispering.

When they left Starbucks and went their separate ways, the older vampire simply turned to mist and disappeared.

“How does he do that?” the younger one muttered.

Then he shrugged. He was so frustrated and hungry from sitting with the cattle that he snagged a passing opossum and bit hungrily into its neck, grumbling the entire time he snacked.

His thirst momentarily sated, he went off to find better tasting prey.

Chapter 3

That night thunder storms drenched the area. Alex was watching a movie, hoping that her parents wouldn't realize that she hadn't done her homework yet.

“I hope we don't lose our electricity,” her mother said quietly, watching the rain come down in the darkness like dogs and cats – assuming pets could come raining down from the sky.

“Don't worry. The generator is gassed up and ready to go,” her father said. Secretly, he kind of hoped the power would go off. It was a Friday, with no work the next day. A night of playing family games by candlelight was appealing.

She crossed her arms, “I know. But I just can't stand the uncertainty of losing the power. It just makes me verklempt.”

“Dad!” Erin screamed, running up the stairs.

“What, honey?” he replied, mostly unconcerned. Most teenagers spoke in excited voices and he was experienced enough to ignore it.

Alex was sucked into the television program and didn't bother to listen. She turned up the sound.

“The basement!” Erin cried.

“Yes, we have one,” he grinned.

“It’s flooding!”

“What?!”

He ran for the basement steps taking two at a time, something he hadn’t dared since stumbling down the stairs and breaking a toe the year before.

Then there was splashing, some muttering that they were probably better off not hearing and the heavy metallic sound of the toolbox being lifted from the workbench.

“Aw, man!”

There was more low voiced father-grunting, the sound of tools clinking, and then a big splash.

‘AAAHHG!’

Her mother stifled a grin, “Bill, are you okay?!”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he said. His voice was disgusted. “When I undid the pipe above the check-valve I got soaked.”

He sloshed through the ankle depth water.

Beth’s grin slid away, “This is going to ruin a lot of things down there.”

“I know. Good thing I didn’t finish the entire basement yet. Anyway, the water isn’t too high so maybe we can save everything but the carpet.”

His bare feet made squishy sounds as he tromped back upstairs.

“The only problem is, nothing’s open this late, so I can’t get a new sump pump until tomorrow.”

“You can’t fix it?”

“Nah. Motor’s fried. That’s what I get for not having a backup. I always figured if we lost electricity, I could hook the sump pump up to the generator. But that doesn’t help if the sump pump is dead.”

“How about a plumber?”

“I’d call one in a minute, if one were open this late,” he said.

He hated to bring in professionals. He must actually be worried.

“Let me check it out,” she said, happy to be able to do something.

A commercial came on, so Alex’s brain reemerged from her show and noticed the frenetic activity. She went to the basement door and poked her head around the corner. “What’s up?”

“Nothing, honey,” her mother replied, “Just a minor flood downstairs.”

Alex’s face brightened, “Really?”

She tried to see around her father as he tromped around her and followed his wife into the dining room.

Alex bounded downstairs.

“Stay out of the water,” her mother warned.

“I’m not stupid,” Alex said. She went to the bottom step, and poked the water with her toe.

“Here’s one.” Beth was sitting at the table with the Yellow Pages spread out. She circled a number in the book.

Bill read over her shoulder, “Midnight Plumbing. ‘We specialize in evening emergency service. Fast, friendly service. Bonded and licensed. Master Card, Visa, American Express, Diner’s Club accepted.’”

“Diner’s Club” she frowned.

“Yeah, maybe that’s if a restaurant has a plumbing problem,” he chuckled.

She handed him the phone, “Let’s call.”

As in ‘you call’

He took the phone and dialed.

Half an hour later, the doorbell chimed.

Bill peeked through the front window on his way to the door. There was a green van with the words, “Midnight Plumbing” in the driveway.

He opened the door.

“That was pretty quick,” he said to the large man on the front stoop.

Friendly dark eyes, black stubble and a Budweiser gut. ‘Richard’ was written in script letters on a round patch on the barrel chest. He was very light complexioned. Probably not surprising considering midnight plumbers probably don’t get a lot of sun.

The plumber nodded, “Yeah. It’s been a slow night so far. But it’ll pick up if this rain keeps up.”

“Come on in,” Bill said, holding the door open. “The basement is down the stairwell.”

After a slight hesitation, the plumber stepped inside and looked around, “Thank you. Nice place.”

“Thanks,” Beth said. She was standing at the dining room entrance. Alex popped out of the basement and headed upstairs, leaving wet prints behind her. She passed Erin going the other way.

“Hello,” the plumber nodded at Erin.

She muttered an obligatory, “Hi,” and escaped into the dining room.

Bill ushered the plumber downstairs. Soon there was splashing and the low murmur of men's voices.

"Is everything going to be okay?" Erin asked.

Beth sighed, "Yes. It'll be okay. But we'll have some work to do."

Forty minutes later, the plumber's truck was gone, the parents were pulling up the carpet and Erin and Alex were unhappily sweeping water towards the sump pump well. The new pump could be heard cheerfully humming as it sent water back outside where it belonged.

"Um." Alex said. "I just remembered. I have some homework ..."

Erin gave her a sharp glance.

"What?" Bill said. "You were supposed to have that done before television."

Alex gulped, "Well, about that. I didn't remember it until just now."

"It's Friday," Erin pointed out.

"LOTS of homework," Alex's face was innocent.

Erin snorted.

Bill sighed, "Fine. Get it done."

"Brat," Erin hissed, and gave an angry sweep of her broom.

Alex stifled a grin, and scampered upstairs.

Chapter 4

The next day was bright and shining. The carpet had been hauled out and was drying in the sun spread over a small city of workbenches, chairs, and sawhorses in the backyard.

The doorbell rang.

"It's your boyfriend, Nevin," Erin sang, peeking through the window.

“Shut up,” Alex said, coming downstairs. Her cheeks were red.

She opened the door and Nevin bounded into the room.

“Hey, everyone,” he said nonchalantly.

Erin wasn't fooled. His cheeks were as red as Alex's. Obviously, he had been able to hear through the door.

His look was a pleased kind of embarrassed. Little Annoying Nevin. No, check that, he wasn't really all that bad for a boy, but his energy was exhausting.

And Erin had to admit, if there were something going on between them, they made an interesting couple. Nevin, with his always tousled hair, abundance of energy and boundless good humor, and her little sister Alex, beginning to fill out nicely in a willowy way and just a bit more than pretty.

She was also a good six inches taller than Nevin, a fact that didn't seem to disturb him in the least.

“Let's go play tennis,” he said to Alex.

“Sure. Sounds like fun.”

“Do you want to come, Erin?” Nevin asked.

“I stink at tennis.”

“So do I, but we can get out, get some sun.”

“I don't ...” Erin began.

“Ha. She likes the sun,” Alex put in.

“And maybe we can get Slim to come out, and maybe some more people. The more, the merrier. We can go get ice cream after,” Nevin interrupted.

Erin looked doubtful, “I'm pretty bad at sports. I'm not sure I need any witnesses.”

Nevin gave her a grin, “We’re all bad. So no one feels silly or anything.”

“Well, I guess I could use the sun,” Erin said.

Alex stifled a grin.

At the courts, Nevin slapped a blooper at Erin, who shrieked, kicked up a leg, and swung at the ball like she was trying to bash a spider’s brains out.

He grinned, “You weren’t kidding. You stink.”

“That’s not nice,” Slim admonished. He was wearing a lime green shirt with orange shorts. A pair of black and white checkered sneakers completed the ensemble.

Nevin and Alex were paired on one team, and Slim was playing with Erin. Despite Slim’s weird grace and speed, they were getting clobbered.

Alex sliced a topspin shot that Slim returned with ease. Alex pushed a polite ball to Erin’s forehand. Erin missed wildly, but Slim had managed to get behind her and get to it before it dropped. His perfect lob sent Alex scrambling, and she sent a hard shot back to Slim. He volleyed it back to Nevin, who blooped another easy one at Erin. She stood her ground but her enthusiastic but inaccurate swing whiffed completely.

She giggled. “This is hard!”

“That’s okay,” Nevin assured her. “It takes some practice. How about we’ll play where you only have to defend the singles court, and we have to play the doubles court on this side?”

“No, thanks,” Erin said. “I think I’m about ready for that ice cream now.”

“Yeah, ice cream!” Slim agreed. “I can hear a banana split calling my name ... oh, and maybe a Peanut Buster Parfait ... and, um..”

Nevin gave him a look, “Are you going to try and out eat me?”

Slim gave him a haughty look, “Listen, lightweight...”

“Who are you calling a lightweight?”

“You and your dog together don’t weigh a hundred pounds.”

“We do...”

“Not even dripping wet.”

Nevin grinned, “I don’t get why people would weigh themselves dripping wet.”

Slim nodded his head. “Yeah, what do they mean? Do people get out of the shower and weigh themselves without toweling off?”

“Or put scales next to their swimming pools?” Nevin said.

Erin snickered, “And there’s the ‘doctor’ weight.”

“Huh?” Nevin asked.

“You know, you go to the doctor and he has you step on the scales while you have your clothes on.”

“I can’t think of a girl who’d want that,” Alex laughed.

“Well, anyway, I can eat you guys under the table when it comes to ice cream,” Nevin declared.

Slim snorted.

Alex giggled, “Okay, guys. Enough.”

They gave each other mock stares. Then they zipped their racquets into their covers.

“Seriously, dude,” Slim said, “I’m not going to be happy unless I get some serious ice cream brain freeze.”

They slung their racquets over their shoulders and jumped on their bikes.

Chapter 5

Over the years, mankind has come up with many methods of torture.

The Judas Cradle, a seat where the victim is slowly impaled by his own weight.

The Iron Maiden.

The Rack.

Reality television.

These and other medieval torture devices showed man's ingenuity and propensity for inflicting pain and anguish on each other.

Even nature can be used to torture, such as leaving someone exposed to sun and ants, or electrocuted or immersed in water. Even a simple splint under the nail can cause exquisite amount of pain.

Man wars with his own impulses. Fortunately, forward thinkers established rules for what can and cannot be done to prisoners with laws for peacetime and the Geneva Convention for war.

Obviously Wayland Homer never got the memo.

Homer was the Official Torturer at Lincoln Junior and Senior High, going under the mockingly benign title of Boy's Gym Teacher.

And one of his favorite forms of torture was Dodgeball.

Erin was sure of one thing. Whoever created Dodgeball was not a woman. No doubt it was some egocentric, testosterone-crazed man wanting to sate his appetite for destruction and violence in a war-torn and crazy world... at the expense of women.

And Mr. Homer and the girl's gym teacher Ms. Hapershall were devoted disciples at its

altar. Whenever rain or snow drove the students into the gym, you could count on a rousing session of Dodgeball.

So this morning, when the rains came back, it was no surprise when Mr. Homer and Ms. Hapershall convened a high council of Dodgeball. These discussions took place next to the doors, most likely to cut off escape.

Erin huddled with the other eighth and ninth grade girls in the corner of the gym. They were employing the survivalist strategy of ‘herding’ ... like wildebeests that travel in herds for mutual protection. Herding was easier than “Schooling” because schooling required too much effort, and they were in school already anyway.

The teens milled nervously about in grey, no, is it gray?... whatever... shirts and black shorts.

The black shorts were another bone of contention between the girls and the school. It was well established that black shorts were an evil plot by the school administration to make their legs look white and pasty. It was also universally agreed that black shorts were absolutely designed to make skinny legs look spindly and hefty legs look bulky. Most suspected that its true purpose was to tone down excess teen hormones in combined gym classes by making the girls look as unattractive as possible.

Mr. Homer and Ms. Hapershall spent little time in negotiations. Each moment wasted in discussion was a moment lost where some kid might take a ball in the face or something else vastly amusing to sadistic teachers.

After a few tense moments, the two teachers climbed the stairs to the balcony. It was Mr. Homer’s turn to divvy up the teams, so he stood above them on the platform like some kind of balding god. Mr. Homer, who just happened to be the baseball coach, always maneuvered teams

so that the jocks were on one side, the girls and non-jocks on the other side. And while the baseball team stunk at baseball, against these feeble opponents they were the Dodgeball version of the New York Yankees.

“All right kids,” he sneered. “Are you ready to RUMBLE?!”

“YEAH!” the baseball team shouted. They were all near the north end of the gym, expectant looks on their faces.

Mr. Homer pulled out a laser pointer.

“Okay, you people over there,” he said, the laser pointer neatly slicing a small group of Gamers from the herd. They were the absolute bottom of the barrel when it came to physical abilities. Give them game controllers and they were gods, but in Dodgeball, they were no more than shark chum.

With glum looks, they shuffled over to the red laser dot on the floor.

“And you guys,” he cut a circle around the baseball team, “over there.” The laser dot whipped over to the opposite side of the gym.

“You gals.”

Yes, he called them gals.

Erin saw a dot settle in the middle of her stomach.

Get over there with the first group.”

He proceeded to carve up the group into the most lopsided manner possible.

It was going to be ugly.

Ms. Hapershall put a whistle to her gargoyle lips, and blew it sharply, spittle flying.

She stepped back to stand with Mr. Homer. Their teeth were exposed in opossum grins of anticipation.

Erin spared them a baleful look, and then swung her eyes out looking for hostile projectiles.

The ball won't kill you.

The ball won't kill you.

The ball won't kill you.

But it hurts. It stings.

Worse, it can mess up your makeup.

Another particularly insidious part of the torture was how they began the game. A large wheeled basket lurked in the middle of the room, equidistant between the opposing forces. It was filled with weapons, blue rubber balls.

As soon as the whistle was blown, the torture, er game, began with both sides sprinting for the basket. Whoever got there first was first armed, and a skirmish would break out on the spot.

Of course, the track team was on the side with the baseball team.

So after the school's best sprinter, Winston Sneaker, beat Neal Rumbleston, the school's best chess player, to the basket, Sneaker spilled the balls to the jock side. Then Winston creamed Neal with a fastball to the gut. The school's champion chess player crumpled to the floor.

Meanwhile, the jocks had snagged the balls and they sprinted to the midline. They loosed the first volley virtually uncontested.

Wham!

A loud slam of rubber hit the wall above the small group of girls and they shrieked in unison. Other blue balls were whizzing through the gym, bouncing and caroming crazily.

Amy Renstiltlen squealed when a ball thwacked into her generous butt.

Heh. That's what she gets for swinging it all of the time, Erin thought.

Then she realized. Amy could leave the battlefield now.

No fair!

Erin watched in envy as Amy scooted away to safety. She briefly considered committing Dodgeball kamikaze and just getting it over with. She turned around just in time to see a blue ball coming right at her face.

She shrieked and a meaty hand swiped it away before it could hit her.

Owlishly, she blinked and looked for her savior.

A hideous face grinned at her.

"Aaagh, a gargoyle!" she shrieked.

No she didn't. She'd been raised better than that.

Besides, it was just a boy. An ugly boy, but a boy just the same. It was the new kid. The ugly one. Trig, or Trub or something.

He ran forward with the ball and whipped it at the other side.

Brian Slimnan and Little Nevin were with him.

The three were putting up a spirited defense and were actually holding off the baseball team. She watched amazed as Slim weaved and shimmied around, artfully moving his large form so that balls missed him by inches. And Nevin was monkey-quick. He scampered around picking up errant tosses and flinging them back with wild enthusiasm. He was grinning maniacally.

Her savior was very big. Too big to duck, so he simply stood his ground. Trug...now she remembered, was catching the balls with his big hairy mitts. A caught ball counts the same as hitting someone, so the baseball team was thinning out.

And he had one heck of an arm. After catching a ball, he would rear back and hurl it back at the team, scattering them like nervous mongooses ...er, mongeese? ... whatever.

She couldn't help but notice Mr. Homer salivating from the balcony. Undoubtedly, he was planning to visit with the young man in the near future to discuss joining the baseball team.

Erin also noticed something else. The three boys had aligned themselves so that they were putting up a defense for the group of girls.

Then the bell rang.

As the classes ran for the locker rooms, Erin stood for a moment in shock. For the first time ever she'd played a game of Dodgeball without getting clobbered.

Chapter 6

The cafeteria.

The social center of every school.

Well... there and the hallways ...

...and, um, the parking lot ...

...the buses ...

...well, okay, kids socialize as much as possible, sneaking in a minute here, five minutes there. But as far as a goodly time together with only light monitoring, not much beat the cafeteria.

"You know what I don't get?" Nevin said around a mouthful of spaghetti.

Trug tried not to look because Nevin tended to eat with an open mouth.

“No, what’s that?” Slim said, industrially working on his own plate.

“Okay, the Earth is spinning around at what, two thousand miles an hour, right?”

“Um, I guess so.”

“So if I jumped up in the air, and the surface is spinning at two thousand miles an hour below me, how come I land on the same spot instead of, like, fifty feet away?”

“Actually, if you were in the air for a second, it would be closer to a half mile,” Trug put in.

“Isn’t it because the atmosphere spins with the planet?” Slim wondered.

“Okay, if that’s true, wouldn’t you still get a better jump if you jumped in the same direction the planet is going?”

“I dunno,” Slim disagreed, “actually, you’d go further if you jumped against the rotation.”

“Hey guys,” Alex slipped into a seat. She found that she preferred sitting with guys rather than girls, neatly avoiding the up/down looks that come standard in any group of girls. She much preferred the simple appreciative and furtive glances of guys. It’s far more honest and way less lethal.

Slim eyed her plate speculatively and snatched a cookie.

She gave him a look, “Fine, I didn’t really want that.”

“Bad for you,” he mumbled through crumbs. “I’m just protecting you from the sugar and white flour. Those will kill you.”

She snorted.

“And this stuff goes right to your butt.”

“Yeah, right.”

“No, seriously. You don’t want that.”

“You saying my butt is big?” Her voice was dangerously soft.

“Um, no,” he choked on the cookie.

She speared a meatball, “Anyway, you guys want to come over after school and hang out around our pool?”

“Sure,” Nevin chirped.

“Sounds good to me,” Slim agreed.

There was a silence.

“Ian? How about you? Can you make it?” Alex asked.

“Um.” The last thing Trug wanted was to be seen in a swimsuit. He agonized every year during the swim sessions in gym class. And to do it voluntarily?

“No, sorry. I can’t make it,” he said finally.

Or thought he said.

What actually came out of his mouth was, “Sure. I’ll be there.”

Aargh!

What did his traitorous mouth do?

Alex gave a pleased look and piled some spaghetti on a roll.

Trug spent the rest of the afternoon wondering how he could come up with an emergency illness, accident or swimsuit calamity. Unfortunately, the day went by and nothing came to mind, so he glumly accepted that he would have to go.

He knew that once Alex saw his hideous body with its bristly back hair, weird lumps and growths, she would be so repulsed that their friendship would surely be over.

School finally let out, and he slumped over to his bicycle refusing to look both ways as he

crossed the drive in hopes that a bus might run him over before he could get home. Then he rode by all of the houses that had vicious dogs, hoping that one might spy him, rush out and give him the Holy Grail of puncture wounds, sending him to the hospital for stitches.

But no dogs showed up this day, lousy curs.

They had agreed to go to their houses, get their swimsuits, and meet at Alex's afterwards. So he dutifully he went home, grabbed a snack, well, three, and changed into his swim suit.

Finally, he stood in front of the mirror.

Hmm... not bad.

Of course, that was with his eyes closed.

So he steeled himself and pried his eyelids open.

Fortunately, the trend for boys' swimsuits was for very long, baggy suits, so only the bottom of his legs showed. Still, though, that was bad enough. A thick swatch of bristly fur erupted from the bottom of the shorts, and his toenails were thick and yellow. His body was muscular, but shaped generally like a sausage. He wasn't proud of it. I mean, it functioned just fine. It just didn't do so in style.

He sighed, and headed for his bike.