

24/7 Demon Mart

CRITTERS FROM THE POO LAGOON



D.M. GUAY

CRITTERS FROM THE POO LAGOON

A 24/7 DEMON MART CREATURE FEATURE

D.M. GUAY



Copyright © 2020 by D.M. Guay

All rights reserved.

Cover by James at GoonWrite.com

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

If you like horror comedy, sign up for [Monsters In Your Inbox](http://MonstersInYourInbox.com) a once-a-month email filled with all things funny and horror. Books, movies, and weird news!

[Sign up at http://eepurl.com/czs0Rr](http://eepurl.com/czs0Rr)

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Sherbet Punch](#)

[Midori Splice](#)

[Long Island Iced Tea](#)

[Get Monsters In Your Inbox](#)

[Who the heck is D.M. Guay?](#)

[Books by D.M. Guay.](#)

Hello. My name is Lloyd Wallace, and it's party time. Time to lounge by the pool, sipping fruity cocktails. No monsters, no demons. All fun. Wait. What's that in the drain? Uh oh...



CHAPTER 1

MOM's busted-up minivan emitted a high-pitched squeal, then stalled out. Again. She pressed the clutch all the way to the floor and prayed, "Come on, baby. You can make it," as she steered us across the parking lot, aiming for a spot.

Um. Yeah. Mom's car was in bad shape. It had been for years. But Jennifer Wallace, like any good Midwestern Mom, was determined to make it last because it was paid for, free and clear. So she carried on, dead-engine rolling, burning oil, belching blue smoke while not-so-secretly hoping someone, someday, would total it so she could get a new car for free. Don't judge. We're on a budget.

Normally, it didn't bother us. We weren't the only people stalling out at Walmart. But this time was different. Because we were at the Country Club, and every single person outside stopped to watch our hunka junk death roll through the lot. Yes, I said the Country Club. As in, THE Country Club. Caroline Ford Vanderbilt's Country Club. Kill me now.

"Jennifer needs to pray her way to the auto shop. God isn't a mechanic, you know. Miraculous tune ups are low on His list of priorities." Angel eight ball somehow managed to roll right into my cup holder, triangle pointing straight at me. Of course. "Quick question. How many cheeseburgers do you think you've eaten in your life? I need a rough estimate."

"Are you serious right now?"

"Sadly, yes. Pravuil is the new head of accounting, and boy, that angel is a stick in the mud. He's making us update all the sin sheets to include everything listed in Leviticus. Can you believe it? I'm drowning in paperwork. I have to work all weekend. FYI, eating meat and dairy in the same meal is technically a sin, and it counts now, so plan accordingly."

"Oh, they're serious, all right," Mom said. She thought I was talking to her. "Well, la di dah. I'm sorry you've never had to live on a budget before. This is the real world, honey."

She said it to all the fancy ladies in their pristine white tennis skirts whose jaws dropped in shock when they watched our minivan, which also tilts down slightly on the driver's side, roll to a stop in the space closest to the front door.

Ha. The jokes on them. I can't wait to see their faces when they figure out we aren't here because we need a tow. We're here on purpose. Tonight, Mom's hosting the first annual Charity Ladies' Auxiliary Volunteer Appreciation Potluck. Mom had dubbed it "Paradise by the Pool," and declared it a ladies-night luau. Free food, open bar, and Mom's signature mix of nineties dance grooves from eight 'til midnight. No husbands, no kids allowed.

Except for me, but I didn't count. I was here to help. The ten trays of tiny party sandwiches Mom cut into little triangles this morning weren't gonna carry themselves inside. Neither were the giant inflatable plastic palm trees with the beer coolers built into the bottom. Or the two hundred fake flower leis and matching plastic pineapple drink cups she'd bulk ordered from the party store during a wine-fueled midnight Internet shopping spree.

Did I mention my Mom goes all out for theme parties? Like ALL out. The word low-key isn't in her vocabulary. But, hey. It's for a good cause. These ladies volunteered, bake sales, and fundraised all year long, because they legit, honestly wanted to help people. They deserved a daiquiri-fueled night of no holds-barred, tiki tacky revelry.

"As long as no one eats any pork. That's a sin again, and if they've got bacon-wrapped scallops? Forget it. Praviil makes us count by the bite. I do not have time for that," Angel said.

Yeah. Me either. So I threw him into the back seat. What? This was the first Friday night I'd had off in months, and I wasn't gonna let him ruin it. One night floating in a pool, drinking margaritas, with nary a demon or monster in sight—and no judgmental angels—wasn't too much to ask for, was it?

Mom kicked the van into park and hopped out while I locked Angel eight ball inside. I met Mom by the trunk. She unhooked the bungee cords holding the door down, and as soon as it flew open, she grabbed a pool float shaped like a unicorn, looked at me, and said, "Lift."

I put my arms up, and she shimmied it down around my waist. She pushed and squeaked three neon glitter inner tubes down around herself. Then she looped about ten pounds of plastic flower leis around each of our necks. The food came next. She shoved a two-liter bottle of Ohana—Hawaiian Punch was too rich for our blood—into each of my armpits, then stacked a dozen foil trays of homemade cocktail sandwiches in my arms. They were so heavy, I had to use the unicorn head for extra support.

So of course, that's when Angel eight ball somehow managed to escape and roll directly into my feet, throwing me off balance. The tower of foil trays teetered. *Holy crap! No no no!* My feet shuffled, but I managed to stay standing and slide the trays back against my chest. Phew. Sandwiches saved.

The Ohana didn't fare as well. The bottles slipped out of my armpits. Apparently, my arms flap like chicken wings when I'm about to fall over. The bottles plooped to the asphalt, then rolled right onto the big rusty grate over a storm drain.

Stupid angel. "What do you want?"

"Is your shirt a cotton/poly blend or just polyester? Apparently, it's a sin to wear two different fabrics at once. Again," Angel said. "I don't know how Moses kept up. All these rules are giving me a headache. Hold on. Do you smell that? Something stinks. Is that you?"

"What? No! Can't you see I'm busy? If you really want to help me, grab the Ohana."

"We have been over this before, Lloyd. Magic 8-Balls don't have hands, and I only commute if it's an emergency. Do you know how far away you are?"

"Don't worry, honey. I'll grab it." Mom thought I was talking to her. Again.

Angel was always getting me in trouble like that. I kicked him under the wheel.

Before Mom could take a step, a tiny orange sports car that was so exotic it looked like something out of a Fast and Furious sequel pulled in next to us. It parked diagonally across two spots. Gee. How polite. Even worse, the back tire stopped right on the Ohana, which erupted in a red syrupy explosion. Shards of plastic flew in all

directions. The caps popped off with such force that we had to duck for cover. One hit a light pole, bounced off, then flew straight down into the storm drain.

“Ow! This is an outrage! The time for negotiation is over. We must dispense with them, posthaste.” A small, angry voice shrieked. “Wait. Do you smell tuna? Mmm. I am famished. Who has the snack bag?”

“Be patient. We stick with the plan,” another voice said. “We’re almost there. Look at this map. Our exit is up ahead.”

Uh, that wasn’t me talking. Or Mom. I looked around. It wasn’t the snooty ladies eyeballing us, and it wasn’t Angel eight ball, who had rolled out from behind Mom’s tire to survey the mess. “You humans with your litter. You’re disgusting. You should have seen how amazing the ocean looked on day three. THE day three. Pristine. Until people like you ruined it.”

“Me? It’s your fault I dropped the bottles!”

Mom stared at the crushed remains of the Ohana, genuinely distraught, and not just because her two dollars literally went right down the drain. “This goes straight to the river. I just hate all that plastic pollution in the water. Have you seen the videos of the whales choking on it? So sad. I’ll ask them to move the car so we can pick up the pieces before they fall in.”

Just then, the expensive orange door popped open. A long tan leg with French-manicured toes in a slinky high-heeled sandal stepped out of the car. When the owner of that leg slid out, my heart sunk. Nope. Not going to move the car. Definitely not. Because that leg belonged to Caroline Ford Vanderbilt. Unfortunately, it was attached to the rest of her. Apparently, she’d upgraded her ride after the possessed snowmen destroyed her Porsche at the Christmas Party.

Caroline rose from the car, wrapped in a long, vaguely flower print, definitely designer dress. She glanced at the gawking crowd, and they immediately scattered. As in, legit ran out of there, terrified. Dude. I get it. I wanted to run, too. Just standing next to Caroline raised my blood pressure. My palms had already gone sweaty.

Caroline's head snapped, like she'd caught a glimpse of something scary in her peripheral vision. She did. It was Mom's outfit. "Why, Jennifer. All dressed up for the big night, I see." She eyed Mom's day-glo party store kitsch ensemble with a big ultra-white faux smile. All teeth, all gritting. "You have such a unique interpretation of theme."

"That woman could sing *Happy Birthday* and make it sound like an insult." Angel rolled his triangle.

Suddenly, she turned to me and her lips pulled into a kissy pout. Uh oh. *Run!* Too late. She grabbed my Hawaiian shirt and began smoothing the wrinkles with her manicured claws. "Are you Mommy's big helper tonight?" She tapped the tip of my nose with her finger. "I bet your Mom is so proud of you. You're such a special little man."

I froze, helpless, clinging to my foil trays like life preservers. Did I mention that Caroline, for some reason, thinks I am special needs? Yep. Even though I'd saved her many, many times. Like that night she was possessed by a suicide cult leader in the housewares aisle. And that time the blood-thirsty ghosts of the van load of escaped convicts she'd run off the road wanted to kill her. And how about that time I stopped the zombie apocalypse she accidentally started? But who's keeping track? Okay, I'm totally keeping track.

As she pinched my cheek and fake cooed, I retreated to my happy place. I fantasized about what life would be like if Caroline knew monsters were real. Or if she knew I was responsible, in part, for saving her. She certainly wouldn't talk down to me anymore. I bet she'd be nicer, too.

"Nicer?" Angel eight ball said. "Don't count on it. You should see her spreadsheet."

Well, a man can dream, right?

Caroline turned to Mom, who said something about moving the car to clean up the crushed bottle teetering in the storm drain, but I don't think any of that sunk in. Caroline was too focused on the three six-foot inflatable palm tree beer coolers Mom pulled out of the trunk. When Mom lifted a dolly out and loaded it with boxes of plastic pineapple drink cups and faux flower leis, and said, "How do we get

to the Presidential Pool? We need to set these up,” Caroline went green and wobbled like she was about to faint.

She pointed to a gap between some bushes at the very end of the parking lot. “Take the service entrance.” Then, without another word, Caroline cat-walk strutted in the opposite direction, up the white marble steps, through the front door, head high, like we didn't exist. She didn't look back. Not once.

I'm not proud of it, but for a split second, I wished bad things on Caroline. Because maybe a little near-death experience at the hands of a grizzly supernatural creature would scare the mean out of her. If that didn't do it, nothing would.



CHAPTER 2

“YOU'RE KIDDING.”

Service entrance? More like *Temple Run* meets the apocalypse. It was a very long, narrow stubbled concrete path running between two untamed, overgrown hedges. I was pretty sure a giant demon monkey was gonna pop out and chase us.

The hedge rattled. Two glowing red eyes appeared in the foliage. *Ah! Demon monkey! Run!* I panicked, tripped on the grate over a big stinky drain, and dropped the top tray of sandwiches face down on the concrete. The red lights blinked out. *Oh.* Probably a security camera or something. Still. Creepy! “Why didn't Caroline just let us in the front door?”

Don't answer. As I watched Mom squeak down the path in her glitter flip flops, ringed in inflated neon plastic, dragging an armload of pink palm trees taller than she was, I already knew.

Mom answered anyway. “Maybe this way is shorter. We do have a lot to carry. She acts like a meany pants most of the time, but there's a heart beating in there somewhere. I just know it.”

“Your mother. Always the optimist. Personally, I like to believe all human souls can be redeemed, but with Caroline? I'm not so sure. Now where were we? Oh, yes. Have you ever lied about being a virgin? Apparently, that's a sin, too.” Angel eight ball rolled next to me, then stopped suddenly. “Do you smell fish?”

“Dude. I just dropped a hundred tuna sandwiches.”

Mom hadn't noticed. “Caroline did get us the venue for free, and she paid for the open bar. I couldn't turn that down. You know how much Mrs. Miller can drink! This is a life lesson, honey. You have to make the best of every situation. It's not where you are, it's who you're with.”

“But we're with Caroline.”

“I'm starting to believe Caroline is a test sent straight from Heaven. Biting your tongue when she speaks takes an act of divine willpower. It's as good as praying a rosary. It melts the sin right off of you,” Angel said. “Speaking of sins. Don't leave that empty tray on

the ground. Thou shalt not litter. That isn't one of the commandments, but it should be."

"Fine."

I looked down. Huh. The tray wasn't there. It wasn't in the bushes. Or on the path. It was gone. Like it'd magically disappeared. So had all the sandwiches. Weird, right?

Guuuuurp. Urp. A spiral of brown gas rose from that giant icky drain.

"I do hope they call a plumber," Angel tiskied. "A clogged drain never ends well. Ask Noah. It took us a whole year to clear the pipe and siphon all the water off the Earth."

"What?" I looked at Angel. He looked at me.

"I found the door!" Mom called.

Thank God, because this path was creepy. I squeaked my tuna sandwich tray carrying/ inflatable unicorn wearing self—plus my smug, judgmental guardian angel—through that door right quick. And Hol. Eee. Shit. The temple run was worth it.

Presidential Pool? More like billionaire dictator with a private Greek island. The pool house looked like the Parthenon. Its tall white columns loomed over sparkling blue water, pristine and clear. Even the domed alcove over the hot tub looked Socratic. The pool was surrounded by a huge green lawn with a lush border of palm trees, pretty orange flowers, and two glowing red dots? Geesh. Weird camera. I swear the lights looked like eyes, staring out at me from between some palm leaves.

The service entrance dropped us near a long row of tables draped in white fabric, loaded with real plates, real silverware, currently being polished by two real waiters in tuxedos. Fancy yummy things bubbled in chaffing dishes. Giant shrimp hung off rims of sauce-filled glasses. Little canapes so delicate they looked like jewels were artfully arranged on silver trays. Wow. Our homemade sandwiches were gonna look pretty shabby next to that.

"Excuse me." Mom hailed a waiter. "There must be some mistake. This is supposed to be a potluck. We can't afford catering."

The waiter's eyes went wide, scared. Not because of Mom's paltry budget, but because Caroline rounded a spiral topiary next to

a marble bar—with columns, of course—followed by a small army of waiters. “Really. Where is the ice sculpture? It’s large, grand, and very expensive. How did all of you manage to misplace it?”

The waiters burst out in a cold sweat. I feel ya, brothers. The scorn of Caroline was no joke. She stopped barking at them when she saw Mom’s inflatable palm trees. “Well. I see your décor survived the journey.” Clearly, she hoped they wouldn’t. “Jennifer: A few guidelines before the guests arrive. First, I apologize that we couldn’t reserve the nice pool. It’s booked a year in advance, so this was the only available space. No one uses it anymore. It has gotten so shabby and run down, but we’ll make do.”

Uh, run down? Was she blind?

“Even though the pool is modest, we must take care of it. The policy is very strict. We do not tolerate trash at the club.” Caroline glanced at Mom’s trees. And us. “This club was built by the sweat and generosity of the industrialists who made this country great, including my family. We’re founders, you know. It’s a monument to prosperity. We’d like to preserve that legacy. Now if you’ll excuse me. I must find my ice sculpture.”

Oh, she wasn’t going anywhere. Caroline was so busy grandstanding, she hadn’t noticed the hand creeping up over her shoulder. A hand with long hot pink fingernails with tiny glitter palm trees enameled into the ends. A smiling face with matching pink lipstick, topped with an orange beehive wig, rose behind Caroline like Jaws rising up from the deep.

Grandma Linda wrapped one arm around Caroline, dug those pink nails right into her toned tan arm, and squeezed. “Wow. What great digs. So ritzy! Hey. Don’t I know you? Are you the lady who wrecked her car at the Christmas Party? What a stroke of bad luck and on a holiday! How are you, dear? How are you holding up?”

Caroline went stiff and stopped moving in Grandma Linda’s iron grip. Yeah. She was a lot to take in. Grandma Linda looked like a living, breathing discount-store party favor: Pink cha cha heels, yellow plastic hoop earrings and a tight blue bamboo-print dress with cleavage as deep as the Mariana Trench spilling out over the top. She had to be wearing a corset made of Adamantium under it,

because her waist was as big around as my knee. Grandma Linda was a big lady. That had to count as a Jesus-level miracle.

“Amen to that.” Angel eight ball said from his hiding spot underneath the buffet. “Oh, and don't eat any shrimp cocktail. You're only allowed to eat seafood with fins and scales from now on, okay? It'll save me a lot of paperwork.”

“Ladies, you are in for a special treat. I've got some hooch in the car, fresh off the still in the holler back home,” Grandma Linda said. “I picked it up this morning. You just have to try it. Nothing beats homemade.”

The words “hooch” and “holler” kick-started Caroline like a defibrillator. “Ladies. May I remind you, if you'd like to use the facilities in the future, this party must meet Country Club standards. I will personally see that it does.” She flashed her fangs, then dialed up the saccharin sweet. “After all, it isn't every day I get to thank my lovely little volunteers for all the hard work they do. Now, if you'll excuse me.”

“Caroline?” Mom pointed at me, still balancing ten—okay, nine—trays of tiny sandwiches on the head of a plastic glitter unicorn, and said, “Where—?”

“Oh, yes. The potluck.” Caroline looked like she had indigestion. “It's there.”

Caroline waved her hand, pointing nowhere in particular, then stalked off to speak to the DJ. Although, DJ might be too strong of a word for a guy in a tux who stood stiff as a stick next to a control panel piping snooty classical music into speakers around the pool. But tomato tomahto, right?

“Where do you want the moonshine, Jenny?” Grandma Linda said. “I've got four crates ready to go.”

“That's so sweet and so generous.” Mom's worry wrinkle appeared, and it was knee deep. “But, you should save that for yourself. You drove all that way to get it. It's special. It'd be wasted on this crowd.”

Here. Let me translate for you: Mom didn't want to mix backwoods homemade hillbilly booze with well-meaning charity ladies. And if you'd stood within twenty feet of Grandma when she

popped the top on a bottle of that hooch? You'd know why. We didn't want any party guests going blind.

“Sure thing, sweetie. You're the boss. This is your party. I'm only here to help.” Grandma Linda winked at me on the sly, and whispered, “I can think of a few places that lady can stick her standards.”



CHAPTER 3

GRANDMA LINDA SASHAYED off to flirt with the waiters, while Mom and I looped the pool twice looking for the potluck table. It wasn't easy. Caroline had hidden it in a corner along the back fence, behind a tall hedge trimmed to look like naked Greek ladies. Muses, maybe? Didn't matter. These bushes were a hundred percent naked. With evergreen boobs. And nipples. Yep. Caroline's secret corner of potluck party shame, hidden behind hedges with tits. Next to yet another big ugly stinky drain that smelled like fermented gym socks. This party was off to a great start.

So, of course, Mom was devastated. Her eyes got shiny with tears, and her bottom lip started to quiver.

Dude. You don't understand. Midwestern moms love potlucks. Like capital L love. The potluck was supposed to be the centerpiece of "Paradise by the Pool." But if we expected everyone to bypass Caroline's five-star spread then run a gauntlet of plant boobs? We needed to roll out the big guns. We had to make it worth the trip.

Luckily, we had a secret weapon: Mom's sherbet punch. If you're thinking "What the hell is that?" You A. Aren't from the Midwest, and B. Don't know what you're missing. Sherbet punch is a fizzy, fruity, creamy staple Midwesterners break out on high-level special occasions like birthdays and graduations. Yeah. That shows you how high this party ranked in Mom's world.

"It'll be okay. Yes. It's fine. Just fine," Mom pep-talked herself as she dumped the last of the sherbet into her punch bowl and swirled everything into a fruity, fizzy pool of sticky sweet heaven. She then turned to me and said, "Can you make the table look nice? I need to talk to the DJ."

Mom wiped her tears, then disappeared behind Terpsichore's meticulously trimmed rump. I stared at the dolly of pineapple cups, then at the empty table. Gulp. No pressure, right?

Gurrrrrrrrrrp.

Uh. What was that? I spun around. A noxious urp rose from that giant drain, and I mean giant. My whole body could fit in it. I stared in

and spotted some sort of liquid blurbing in the bottom. *Blech.*

"You're telling me. Doc didn't set up my portal in time, so I had to use the sewer to get here. It's a mess down there. Bottles. Cans. Straws. Tons of crap. I mean junk. Well, and actual crap, too. Obviously. Anyway, I don't know what the hell *that* is. It wasn't there when I came in." Kevin stood on the rusty grate, looking down at the stewing icky brew. He had a tiny white bath towel wrapped around his middle. "But don't worry. I took a shower. Man, this place is plush. You gotta check out the pool house. Great soap. Here. Take a sniff. I smell like a coconut."

He lifted one arm and motioned for me to sniff his teeny tiny pit. I didn't move. Because oh my God. Room spinning. This can't be happening. Cockroach party crasher. Plus potluck corner of shame and tit hedges? This party was a disaster already. "What are you doing here? I've got enough problems!"

"Geesh, kid. Relax!" He pulled a Milky Way candy bar out of—huh. I don't even know where. "Here. Put this on the table. I'm saving it for later."

"What? No! And I will not relax. Last time Mom saw you, she sprayed you with Kill 'Em Dead! She's already on edge. If Caroline ruins the potluck and this party fizzles, she will absolutely lose her shit. She'll be a crying crabby mess for days, and when her life sucks, my life sucks. So no monsters, no demons, and no cockroaches allowed. Do you hear me? It's my night off. Go home!"

"Yeah. About that. It's not technically your night off. Not any more."

"What?" My anxiety knob dialed up to eleven.

"Hear me out, kid." Kevin, unruffled, clearly did not understand the gravity of the situation. "We have to do twenty hours of off-premise team building every year, and I'm the one stuck planning all that hippy dippy crap."

"Don't care." I tried to shoo him along, but he grabbed the grate and held tight. "Time to go!"

"Look. When I walked over your phone last week, I saw your Mom's texts about the party, and I thought, 'What better way to team

build than drinking pina coladas in the hot tub?' Surprise! You're getting paid tonight! To drink! You're welcome."

Kevin was clearly oblivious to my pending total meltdown. Seriously, I was sweating like a soft serve ice cream cone in death valley. "Nope. No way. Not tonight. Go home."

"Uh, no. I'm staying. We need the team-building hours. Did you see that bar? Caroline didn't skimp. Besides. Too late. I already filed the papers with corporate and clocked us in."

"I don't care!" Man. He was really holding on to that grate. I pulled, but he didn't budge. "Two people doesn't make a team."

"Duh," Kevin said. "DeeDee'll be here in ten. It doesn't count unless we're all here."

"What? DeeDee? Here?"

Oh God. The room went full on Tilt-A-Whirl. DeeDee? In a pool? With me? A vision of me, topless, in a unicorn floaty chilled me to my bones. Baring my pudge in front of a bunch of old ladies was one thing, but in front of DeeDee? Hell no. She couldn't see any part of me naked until I could legit impress her.

"Naked would be better than that outfit." Angel eight ball rolled out from under the table. "You look like Weird Al and Don Ho had a love child. And it's cotton/poly blend. May God have mercy on your soul."

I looked down. He wasn't wrong. Mom had plumbed the depths of the thrift store. Orange Hawaiian shirt, blue swim trunks, both with giant yellow flowers printed all over them. I looked like bad wallpaper wrapped in a glitter unicorn inner tube. Certified lady killer.

Suddenly, a wave of laughter rolled across the lawn. Oh no. I popped up. Through the evergreen boobs, I saw a mass of Midwestern moms and grandmas spill through the door, costume-store grass skirts flowing, covered casserole dishes in hand.

"They're coming!" I scrambled to the table and started piling Mom's tiny sandwiches up on silver trays as fast as my hands would move. But my stacks didn't look as good as Caroline's, and when I turned to grab another tray? The unicorn horn sent sandwiches toppling, turning the table into a disorganized tuna salad/ pimento cheese/ egg salad finger food disaster. "Gah!"

"You know what your problem is?" Kevin scuttled up onto the table.

"The talking cockroach on my punchbowl?"

"Ha ha. Very funny, but no. Look at you. You're shit under pressure. The littlest thing goes wrong, and you panic. And when you panic, you don't think straight. You get sloppy. You make dumb decisions, and you make everything worse."

"No. I don't!"

"Uh, yes you do. You're doing it right now." He pointed at the mess of sandwiches. "Just relax, kid. It's easier to handle a crisis when you have a clear head. See? We're team building already!"

Kevin climbed up to the rim of the punchbowl and breathed in fumes like he was a sommelier. "Pour me a cup of this. Mmmm. Brings back memories. My grandma used to make one with lime sherbet that was amazing."

Uh. There was a lot wrong with that sentence. Like, I'm pretty sure cockroaches don't make punch or have grandmas, but whatever. Bigger problems. "Get out of the bowl before someone sees you."

I gave up on sandwich styling and decided to drop all of them on the table, still in the foil trays. Then I grabbed an armload of pineapple cups. When I turned around, Kevin teetered on the rim, pouring a big white bottle of Malibu rum straight into my sherbet punch. "Noooooooo! What are you doing?"

"Getting the party started, duh."

"My PUNCH!" Yes. I screamed. This was our ace in the hole, our secret potluck weapon. "You ruined it!"

"Read the room, kid. Those broads are primed to party, and Uncle Kev delivers, you feel me?"

Just then, Grandma Linda rounded the topiary. *Shit! Shit! Shit!* I snatched the Malibu out of Kevin's hands. Legs. Whatever.

Grandma Linda glanced at me, at the Malibu. "That's my boy." She winked. "But that isn't nearly strong enough. If you're gonna do it, do it right. Now scoot. Let the pro take over."

She bumped me away with her cleavage, then bent down over a metal rolling cart filled with mason jars of clear liquid. Burning, nasty,

190-proof liquid. Grandpap's moonshine.

"Mmm. Hello!" Kevin was so busy staring down Grandma Linda's dress, that I managed to flick him off the rim before he even saw it coming. I heard a tiny "Aaaaaaaaah!" as he fell.

She opened one quart-sized jar, and before I knew what was happening, dumped it all into the punch bowl. *NO!! The punch! Why, God? Why?*

Angel eight ball rolled by the sandwich tray. "Don't blame God for that unholy drink. God didn't create hillbillies. You all chose that."

The fumes coming off that jar burned the hair clean out of my nostrils and made my vision go blurry.

"Dear baby Jesus, what on earth is that? I can smell that Satan sauce all the way up here," Angel said. Then he rolled off the table, passed out cold from the fumes.

Grandma Linda was unfazed. "Aw. Doesn't that smell wonderful? It reminds me of your Grandpap." She squinched her bright blue eyelids closed, crossed herself, then lifted the jar in some sort of angelic cheers. "God rest his soul."

Grandma Linda lifted Caroline's classy white tablecloth, then wrestled that cart of what had to be forty gallons of backwoods, illegal West Virginia moonshine underneath the table. "I can't leave it in the car too long, or I'll pass out from the fumes driving home. Our little secret, mmmkay?"

I stared at the punch bowl, then at Grandma Linda, who drank the last few drops straight out of that jar without so much as a flinch, like it was water. My heart kicked my ribs. The punch was ruined! And worse, Mom's friends had nearly reached the hedonistic hedge, excited about a potluck table currently covered in cockroach and moonshine. Well, at least the night can't get worse.

Grrrrrrrrlllllllp. Luuuuuuuuurp. Grerlllllp.

Scratch that. It just got worse. That big icky drain groaned like a fat old man's stomach after three rounds of Thanksgiving dinner. An ungodly smell, like a thousand rotten egg farts, spewed out. Kevin wobbled like he was about to pass out, clinging to the tablecloth. I held my breath as long as I could, but it wasn't long enough. It was the kind of stank that lingered.

“Lordy, that's nasty.” Grandma Linda waved her hand around her nose and stared down into the drain. “We better cover this up or Paradise by the Pool will be Paradise by the Poop!”

She peeled a few foil lids off of the sandwich trays and laid them across the drain, completely obscuring it from view. She took off her yellow plastic hoop earrings and hooked them around the grates to hold the lids in place. Then, she fished a perfume bottle out of her giant purse and spritzed it around in the air to cover the smell. She straightened her orange beehive, clipped on a new pair of earrings, and said, “Now, where did that handsome waiter get off to? I prefer not to drink alone.”

She clopped off like it was no big thing. Problem solved. Unholy smell diverted. Just like that, Grandma Linda totally saved the day.



CHAPTER 4

A SPLIT SECOND LATER, a wave of casserole-laden ladies crashed over the potluck table. Covered dishes and party platters transformed the sad, barren table into a land of plenty. Petit fours were oohed over, and the great “who makes the best potato salad” debate officially began.

I inserted myself between the ladies and the punchbowl, a last-ditch effort to shield them from the horror swirling within, but I was no match for Mrs. Miller, who used her plump, heart-shaped behind to hip check me out of the way. “Ooh. The pineapple cups are adorable! I’ve been looking forward to this all week. Jenny makes the best punch. Can I pour you one, Lloyd?”

I nodded, but I didn’t mean it. I just can’t think straight when I’m overwhelmed by toxic fumes. She ladled some punch into a plastic pineapple and handed it to me. Then she poured one for herself.

I had a sudden urge to run, to put some miles between me and the punch. Things were about to go south, and I didn’t want to be anywhere near the blame radius. So I slunk, back back back away from the table—nothing to see here, ladies—clutching my yellow plastic pineapple to my chest, whistling casually. I hid behind a big froofy palm leaf.

From my secret hidey hole, I watched Mrs. Miller lift her plastic pineapple to her lips, only to catch a whiff of the punch, make a face like she was chopping onions, then immediately pour it all straight back into the bowl when no one was looking. She then squinted down into the swirling pink liquid, like she was looking for the bottle of lighter fluid someone had accidentally dropped in there. Because that’s what it smelled like. For real.

Dude. If Mrs. Miller won’t drink it, you know it’s bad. Speaking of. I gotta get rid of mine before the fumes scramble my brain. I looked down in my cup and jumped. “Ah!”

Kevin floated around in there like it was the lazy river at Zoombezi Bay, wearing the world’s tiniest rubber inner tube. “It’s not

an inner tube, kid. I got it at Lion's Den. It's the only thing I could find that would fit me."

Oh, God. "Is that a cock ring?" This night just keeps getting worse.

"I'm a roach, kid. They don't make pool toys in my size. I had to improvise. Geesh. You want me to drown? Man, I love sherbet punch." He whipped out a teeny tiny straw, sunk it into the pink sticky liquid, and floated around the cup, sucking. His little roach cheeks puffed up full. And he immediately spit it all out. "Holy shit. Is Grandma Sweet Tits trying to kill us? My mouth's burning. What's in those jars, acid?"

"Grandma Linda gave us a jar for Christmas last year. Dad used it to descale the connectors on his car battery and clear the shower drain when it clogged. I'm too scared to drink it."

"Trust me, kid. Don't. Just don't." He coughed and wheezed. "You gotta pour that whole bowl out now. Save the MILFs while you still can."

"Yeah. You're probably right." As much as it pained me, Mom's sherbet punch was a total loss. It must be destroyed. What if I casually walked by and whoops? The bowl tipped over.

"You're a klutz," Kevin said. "They'll buy it."

I waited until most of the ladies walked away and made my move. Well, I tried, but those froofy palm fronds? It's gonna sound crazy, but it felt like they curled around my shoulders and held on. When I squirmed, they squeezed tighter. "Uh, help?"

Help wasn't coming. I could see Angel eight ball, still passed out, lying completely still under the potluck table. Kevin wiggled and kicked, butt deep in my spiked sherbet punch. "Get me outta here, kid. It's starting to burn!"

"Hold on." I looked over my shoulder, convinced my unicorn floaty was just hooked on a branch or something, and came eye to eye with two glowing red circles. Eyeballs. Not security camera lights. Nope. Red glowing eyeballs. "Ahhhhhhh! Demon monkey!"

My arms flailed, my drink went flying, coating the leaves in pink, melty sherbet. The palm fronds parted, and I dropped, face first, into the grass.

Ow. My nose. Like super ow. Although it would have been much worse if my unicorn hadn't cushioned the blow. I rolled over and put my fists up, ready to fend off the demon in the trees. But the red lights? They were gone. And the creature? Nope. Nothing there but palm trees.

"Thank you, Jesus." Kevin lay face down on the grass next to me, in a puddle of pink sherbet. "If I'd stayed in that cup any longer, it woulda killed me. That's some serious moonshine. I don't know how Grandma Hot Pants took a shot of that and lived."

"You've never watched her chug a whole bottle of vodka at a wedding reception," I said. "She's a pro."

"Why did you let him go?" Kevin's voice dropped unusually low. "Click clack ack ack ack."

"Do you have something stuck in your throat?"

"What?" Kevin looked at me.

I looked at him. "Why did you ask me if I let him go? Who are you talking about?"

"I didn't ask you anything, kid. Oof. I gotta wash this moonshine off. It burns. Why don't you hit the bar and get us a round of drinks? Meet me in the pool. It's time to team build." Kevin scuttled across the grass toward the water, cock ring inner tube still firmly around his middle.

"Fine." I stood up, straightened my glitter unicorn, and nearly tripped over Angel eight ball. He bumped my ankle, rolling like a drunk around my foot. "Uh. Are you all right?"

"I'm dizzy from the fumes. Dear Jesus, the clouds are spinning. Your grandmother sure has an iron constitution. That moonshine could kill lesser beings." His triangle shook side to side, like he was shaking off a hard bump on the head. "I came here to tell you something. What was it? I can't think straight. Oh, that's right. Something's coming."

Something? I glanced around. The palm fronds waved behind me, like a squirrel had just scampered across. Then I saw it. Angel didn't mean something. He meant someone.

She was a vision in pink. Flamingo, that is. DeeDee stepped in the door, holding a very large, very tacky, very pink flamingo pool

float under her arm. She'd dyed her hair to match. She glided through the crowd, so beautiful. She had a glowing gold aura all around her, like the sky had opened up and heaven had cast a beam of angelic sunset down to illuminate her.

"Wow. You have got it bad. But focus. I do not even believe what I'm seeing down there. You better—"

"Pull myself together?" Yeah. I had dirty knees and elbows, thanks to that face-plant in the grass. And a big wet pink sherbet stain on my shirt. And a dirty unicorn inner tube. I couldn't let DeeDee see me like this. I better clean up. "Thanks, Angel."

"RUN!" Angel all caps screamed. No wonder. Caroline was on a beeline for the potluck corner, so I turned tail. He didn't have to tell me twice.

The men's room was on the other side of the pool house, tucked between the sculpted pine buttocks of a second topiary hedge—this one trimmed into buff Greek heroes—and yet another giant icky drain. Something sloshed around deep down in there, and a noxious fishy sewer smell hung in the air. Jesus. Caroline was right. This pool was run down. The plumbing was in terrible shape.

I'll tell you one thing, though. Kevin didn't lie. That men's room was seriously posh. We're talking marble walls, floors tiled with cool Greek designs, ornate columns holding up the stalls. It smelled strongly of coconut, the lingering aroma of Kevin's body wash. Deluxe!

I stepped to the sink and grabbed a towel. A real towel. Classy! Although I don't know where Kevin got one in his size. Wait. Never mind. The first one on the stack had a tiny rectangle torn out of the corner. Aw, Kevin. Always improvising. I wadded it up and dabbed sherbet off my shirt. Okay, I didn't. I tried, but whatever food dye they use in sherbet? It had staying power.

I squirted the towel with soap, but when I moved to the sink, I jumped. An icky green slime oozed up through the drain. Yuck. And that stuff? It was in all the sinks! Okay, then. Not going anywhere near those. New plan: The stain stays. I'll just move the plastic leis around so DeeDee can't see it. Oh, and pee. Always pee. No P allowed in the pool with DeeDee around, no way. But that green

slime? It was in the urinals, too. *Blech!* This place looked great, but it was a real turd under it all.

Alas, a full bladder waits for no man, so I moved to a stall and let it flow. *Aaaaaaaah*. All good.

Until the sound of the stream stopped. But I hadn't stopped. Huh. I looked down. *Uh*. Something gray and solid had come up out of the trap into the bowl. And it moved, but not like any normal toilet-related solids move. It moved like an animal, pushing up and out. Well, that zipped my bladder up tight. Stone cold fear was as good as a wine cork in the urethra.

The thing pushed so hard, the porcelain cracked. Something that looked like a face slid out. Two black, glassy dead circles like eyes ringed in tentacles. Holy shit. That was an extra strong batch of moonshine. I'm hallucinating squid men just from fumes!

The thing grunted and chugged. *Grrr. Crick. Grrr. Crack. Sploosh!*

The toilet split in half. Water and chunks of porcelain hit the floor. The supply line snapped free, waving around in the air, spraying the ceiling, the stall, the floor. And me. And the squid man who'd reverse flushed himself straight out of the toilet trap.

Gulp. I'm not hallucinating, am I? There really was a giant toilet squid man coming at me. And he looked mad. And big. Really big. His gray slimy body slip slid through the drain, unrolling and expanding as it cleared the pipe.

He rose up up up from the sewery depths. When he stopped, he was taller than me, with a massive gray body that shimmered under the fluorescent lights.

I stood there, frozen in fear. His head looked like a fat squid, but his body had scales like a fish. He wore a pair of giant manta wings like a cape, and had short, spiky flippers that kinda looked like spiky hands. His tentacles parted, revealing a face. Beady black eyes. A lipless slit of a mouth, like a giant bullfrog, which opened, revealing a line of jagged, shark-like teeth. He looked like he was about to speak, but stopped.

Flech. Clech. Flech. Clech.

He pounded his chest with the tip of his manta cape and heaved uncontrollably.

Flech. Clech. Flech. Clech.

Either he was choking to death or hacking up the biggest ball of phlegm in the known universe.

Flech. Clech. Flech. Clech. PWOOT!

Suddenly, he spit a small round white thing straight at me. It hit me in the chest, hard, and when it rolled to the floor, I saw it was the cap of an Ohana bottle.

The squid man sighed, relieved, then turned his beady black eyes to me. Then he opened his big manta wings and dove straight for me.



CHAPTER 5

BOTH MY KNEES turned to noodles, but oh, you better believe I ran. I flopped my cooked spaghetti legs as fast as they would flop, because I sure as hell wasn't gonna be eaten by a toilet squid manta man on my night off! No way!

Unfortunately, my legs weren't the problem. The floor was covered in at least an inch of water, which turned my flip-flops into size twelve boogie boards. My toes clinched around the cheap plastic toe thongs, hanging on for dear life. Not that it mattered. My legs went out from under me. I landed flat on my ass and hydroplaned straight into the wall.

The manta man? Big Ohana? He lunged at me, but his fin was stuck in the sewer pipe. He collapsed face first on the spot where I once stood. He splashed around, but his spiky fin hands couldn't get enough of a grip on anything to pull himself free, and the water wasn't deep enough for him to swim. Not yet.

I rolled over and prepared to hop across the room like a giant bullfrog in a Hawaiian shirt, when I heard a *clunk clunk squoosh*. A big *squoosh*. The toilet bowls in the other two stalls had split. The water lines pulled loose, fwapping around, and two more manta men flip fwap flopped up out of the pipes.

Holy shit. Big Ohana brought friends.

I pushed off the wall as hard as I could with my legs. I slid across the men's room floor, ringed in a glitter unicorn inner tube, like I was on the world's worst water slide. Boy, that unicorn really moved. I swooshed across the tiles, through the deepening water, straight into the door. It flew open, and I flew, too. Over the threshold, airborne for a fleeting moment, before grinding to a halt face first on the sidewalk under the buff Greek bushes.

Pfffffffffffft.

That was the unicorn. It did not survive. It slowly deflated as I lay there panting. The men's room door clinked shut behind me, then full-on panic mode set in. *Fish monsters in the john! Aaaaaaaaaah! Gotta tell Kevin!*

I flailed on the sidewalk for a second. Dude. It's hard to get up when you still have a partially inflated ring of plastic around your already large middle. I eventually managed to sit up, but my nose landed directly in the most flawlessly painted, clipped, and moisturized toes I had ever seen. In a designer high heeled sandal. Attached to a toned tan leg. And if you're thinking, "Hellz yeah. That's how pornos start!" Stop right there. Nope. No way. Because these were Caroline's toes.

I looked up at her. She looked down at me. She snapped her fingers. A waiter appeared. He held a silver tray. She grabbed something off it, then shooed him away. Caroline held a cocktail glass filled with red sauce, the rim packed with shrimp. The corners of her mouth pulled tight. She said, "Your mother told me you like shrimp. Why don't you stand up and eat? Let's chat."

Oh shit. Caroline. And fish monsters. I suddenly felt like the world was one of those spinning funhouse tunnels at a cheap roadside carnival, and I was the terrified fat kid who rolled around in the bottom, too panicked to escape. But somehow, under Caroline's judgmental eye, I managed to stand up. My unicorn inner tube, completely deflated, hung limp around my waist. That ten pounds of plastic flowers knotted around my neck? It weighed at least three times that soaking wet. And all that water hadn't rinsed the sherbet stain out of my shirt.

"You poor thing. Look at you," Caroline cooed. "Interesting story. I was around the corner, directing our guests to the professional catering, when I heard an absolutely terrible racket coming from the men's room. The sound was very alarming. Naturally, I had to make sure everything was in order. We do need to preserve the club, and as the sponsoring member of this group, that responsibility falls to me. So here I am. And well, here you are. Shrimp?"

She held out the glass. Nope. Couldn't eat. My guts were in a knot.

Fwump. Fwump. Fwump.

I glanced back. The men's room door rattled. The fish guys. They wanted out. The water had stopped leaking from the crack at the bottom, and a dark shadow blocked the bottom seal. Fins.

Caroline was still talking, but nothing sunk in. Something about God's special people and Mom being an angel? Who knows? Who cares? Because, hello! Fish monsters. RUN!

She waved the shrimp in front of my nose. "Now, what have you been up to in there? If you have broken something, it's okay to tell me. Good boys tell the truth. And remember, you are the only boy at this party. The waiters have their own restroom, so there's no one else to blame. You are a good boy, aren't you?"

I looked at Caroline, at her tanned, accusing face. What the hell was I supposed to do? I couldn't tell her about the monsters in the men's room. Normies can't know about the monsters. That's, like, rule one of Demon Mart. I said, "It wasn't me."

Because it wasn't a lie.

She didn't say anything. It took me a second to realize she wasn't looking *at* me anymore. She was looking *behind* me. And she'd stopped moving. "Uh. Are you okay?"

A sound, like two pieces of rusted metal scraping together, *creeeeeeeeeeeeked* behind me.

That can't be good. I turned around, slowly. Very slowly. *Please don't be fish monsters. Please don't be fish monsters.*

Oh, good. It's not a fish monster. But I really needed to be more careful what I wished for. That sound? It was a man pushing open the rusty grate over that icky drain. He crawled out and waddled toward us. Unfortunately, he wasn't a human man. He was naked and green all over, covered in turtle-like skin. Large frilly gills wiggled at his neck as his mouth blubbed, sucking in air. His hands were webbed with yellow claws. He reached for Caroline.

Caroline just stood there like she was frozen, apart from the quick rise and fall of her breath. The shrimp cocktail shook out of her hand. My brain buzzed and swirled like mush. All I had was instinct. So when the shrimp glass fell, I grabbed it. Because the Wallaces do not waste good shrimp.

Then Gill Guy lunged at us, fast. I punched. My fist, shrimp cocktail and all, landed on his mouth. Which he immediately opened. Wide. My fist, glass and all, went right in, wrist deep. He chomped

closed around it then moved his tongue around, licking my knuckles. His mouth felt like slimy, tooth-lined jelly.

“Aaaaaaah!” He's gonna eat my hand!

I pulled, but he was really on there. His lips were like a vacuum seal. Until his mouth opened and my fist popped free, still holding the cocktail glass. Which was empty, completely licked clean. I backed away as the Gill Guy glugged down the last of the shrimp with what looked like joy.

My relief was short-lived, because we're in big trouble. *She knows.* “Caroline?”

I turned around. She was gone.



CHAPTER 6

OKAY, so if we're looking at silver linings here, nobody noticed. Well, nobody besides Caroline, who had completely disappeared. The rest of the Charity Ladies' Auxiliary was delightfully unaware that aquatic monsters from the deep had crashed their potluck. So that's good. Technically. In an icing on a turd sort of way.

And when I whirled back around, ready to fist fight the Gill Guy? He was gone. I saw his butt end disappear into the men's room. The second the door clinked shut behind him, some sort of super panic, lift-a-car off a toddler-level super strength adrenaline kicked in. My body flushed so hot I thought it might melt, but I was able to wrestle a very heavy ironwork trash can away from a nearby utility shed and drop it in front of the men's room door. It wouldn't hold for long, but it was better than nothing.

I used my last drops of adrenaline to quick-step to the pool. And I mean quick. I pumped my fat thighs faster than Richard Simmons' leg warmers. Because holy shit. We're. Screwed.

"What took you so long? Where are the drinks?" Kevin floated by, lounging on the beak of DeeDee's pink flamingo floaty in the deep end. With no DeeDee in it. "Did you forget the drinks? You had one job! You know I can't carry a margarita glass by myself! Hold up. Why are you all wet?"

"Problem. Big problem." The words barely squeaked out.

"Yeah, we got a problem," Kevin said. "I don't have a buzz. I can't team build sober."

"Where's..." My brain felt like a stuck button on my Xbox controller. "Dee...?"

"She's swimming. She'll come up for air in a minute."

"Shrimp...Ohana...Man." Woah boy. My brain panic-sprinted a hundred yard dash.

"Mmm. Yeah. Now that you mention it, I am hungry. You know what? Grab us some shrimp while you're over there. Roaches of the sea, my ass. They're delicious."

Can't. Breathe. Monsters. Mom. Party. Ruined.

“You okay, kid? You don't look so hot. Are you still worried about the punch? Relax. This party's great. Look around. Everyone's having fun. Well. Kind of.”

My eyes slid across the party. Clumps of ladies milled around the DJ booth, looking bored. No one danced.

DeeDee backstroked across the glamorous pool in a white bikini, under the stars. My heart lifted, until I saw a weird shadow in the water. Something swam, stroke-for-stroke, underneath her. “Out,” I gasped. “Get out of the water.”

“No way, kid. It's great in here. You should get IN.”

DeeDee swam to the edge, looked at me, and smiled. She spoke, but her words seemed far off. A murmur. Because a dark shape circled in the water below her. That was no shadow. That was a fish. *DeeDee*. “Get.” I tripped over my flip flop and nearly fell in. “Out!”

I reached for her. Suddenly, a song, soft and melodic and airy—but with a very distinct country twang—filled my ears. It sounded like an angelic Shania Twain. My head cleared. All the fear, all the panic melted away. I felt fantastic. Happy. Relieved. I stood up, stick straight. “Do you hear that? What song is this? It's so...dancy.”

It kinda made me want to two step. Which is weird because I've never two-stepped before. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up stick straight. A woman's voice, high and light as air, sang a song so catchy it felt like someone had slipped magic dancing boots on my feet. I had to find the woman singing it. *Had* to.

I turned to the nearest speaker. Classical boring humdrum spilled out. That's not it. The dancy country song wafted through the air, over the snooze of the piped-in violins. It wasn't a recording. She was here, singing in real life. And she was close. I could feel it.

Angel eight ball rolled in circles around my feet. “Lloyd. Lloyd. Don't you dare. Stop right there. Listen to me—”

I kicked him out of the way and boot scoot boogied across the cement pool deck, tapping and bucking and two-stepping closer to that song, like I was being pulled by a magic tractor beam. Or maybe just a magic tractor. Hot damn. I didn't even know I liked country music.

And then I found the source. A woman lounged in the hot tub. She winked at me and sang. Her hair was mud brown and cut into one of those unfortunate reverse Mom mullets. Long in the front, short and spiky in the back. The rest of her was big and round. Her pendulous boobs and belly rolls bobbed in the stream from the hot tub jets. She didn't look like much, but whatever. I was into it. Because she sure could sing. She made me want to dance. She made me forget...Wait. What did I forget? Something important. Hmmm. I was supposed to tell someone something important. The thought was right there, so close, but... Oh well. It must not be *that* important.

She pointed at me and sang, "come to me," and I thought my knees were gonna give out. I practically tap danced down the hot tub stairs. I needed to be close to her. Like NEED. You don't understand. Her song was a fishhook in my soul.

Angel eight ball rolled to the edge of the hot tub. His triangle turned, but before it could emerge from the red liquid, the woman picked him up and plunk. Threw him in the pool, where he bobbed, struggling to turn around.

She looked me up and down like I was lunch. She licked her lips and rubbed her hands down over her fat rolls. *Yes! Yes! I'm yours!* I sunk into the hot bubbly water. Oh my God, it felt so good. I felt good. So calm and so relaxed, more than I'd ever felt in my adult life. Best night ever!

The woman opened her arms. I moved in. I had to be close to her. She grabbed me and squeezed. Then she opened her mouth. *Yes. Kiss me! Kiss meeeee!*

Then she stopped singing. *Ew. Wow. Maybe not.* This chick needed a dentist, stat. Those sharp, dirty, jagged teeth of hers could really hurt someone. Wait. Sharp teeth? What was I doing? This lady didn't want to kiss me. She wanted to eat me! Help!

Too late. Her nails dug into my back, and she held on really tight. I squirmed, but couldn't get away. My hands only hit water. There wasn't anything to grab onto. She licked her lips and opened wide.

Aaaaaaah! I don't want to die!

She stopped suddenly.

Herrrf. Herrrf. Herrrf.

She heaved. Her eyes went wide. She let go of me and sunk two fingers deep into her mouth.

Herrrf. Herrrf. Herrrf.

She pulled out something long and blue, like a magician tugging on a string of cheap scarves. Oh. It was a plastic grocery bag.

Herrrf. Herrrf. Herrrf.

I watched in absolute horror as she gagged and heaved and pulled out two more. A yellow one and a white one, slimy and covered in bile. She looked just as horrified as I did. She patted her chest and said, "Oof. I guess those weren't jellyfish after all. No wonder I'm so hungry. Come closer, baby. It's snack time."

She grabbed me. I tried to swim away, but she had a white-knuckled grip on those stupid plastic leis. *Help! I'm the snack. She's gonna eat me. I'm gonna die!*

Crunk.

Her grip went slack, and she fell face first into the hot tub.

DeeDee stood knee deep on the steps, with Angel eight ball in her hand. She must have hit that chick in the back of the head with my angel. The triangle turned. It said, "Ow."

"Sorry. You were the only thing around," DeeDee said to Angel. He looked at her and played dead.

"Great. Just great." Kevin scuttled up to the hot tub. "Which one of you dumb asses wants to tell me how a siren ended up in the hot tub?"



CHAPTER 7

“A WHAT?”

“A siren. You know, the fish chicks who lure men to their deaths in the water? So they can eat them? She did try to eat you, right?” Kevin stood on the pool deck, looking the lady up and down. “Boy. The employee manual sure got this one wrong. The illustrations made them look like supermodels. Oh, no. Wait. My bad. I remember now. Those were saltwater sirens. This one must be freshwater. Look at that haircut. Jesus. Yeah. She's gotta be one of the Put-in-Bay sirens. I heard there were some in Lake Erie. Looks like the rumors are true.”

Nothing he said registered. “Fish chick?”

“You didn't notice the tail?” He pointed.

A long, thick slimy thing that looked like the butt end of a catfish bobbed between my legs. It splayed out into a very distinct fin behind me. No way. I double checked and sure enough, the top half was attached to the fat lady. Who lay face down in the water. “Oh. Shit.”

“You know what's shitty? Sneaking a dead mermaid out of a hot tub without anyone noticing,” he said. “Oof. She's a big 'un, too. This is gonna take some muscle. You better do some stretches before you lift her, or you'll pull something. Well, what are you waiting for? Get to work. You're cutting into my drinking time.”

Kevin snapped his little roach fingers and rattled off some orders. DeeDee moved. I didn't. I stared at the lady bobbing in the bubbles. There was a streak of blue around the cut in the back of her head. Mermaid blood. Dead mermaid? Oh God. We killed her. At Mom's party!

While I stood there trying, somehow, someway, to cope, Kevin and DeeDee kicked into action. DeeDee pulled a chaise lounge to the hot tub deck. Kevin tipped over DeeDee's swim bag and rolled the beach towels out. DeeDee stepped into the hot tub and held open a towel. “Lift her out, Lloyd. Before someone sees.”

I didn't know what to do, so I did what I was told. I slid my arms around her chest and lifted. Okay. No. I didn't. Because just the lady

part, not counting the fish tail, weighed at least three hundred pounds. And as soon as the water wasn't buoying her up? Nope. Couldn't lift her, no way. The best I could do was drag her up the steps and make sure her head didn't hit any stairs on the way up.

Flup. Flup. Flup.

"Jesus, kid. Are you made of spaghetti? You really need to hit the gym," Kevin said. "Bubba's Yoked and Choked is free for employees, you know. Ha. See that? Team building! Shoot. Have either of you seen my clipboard? I gotta write that down so we can get credit."

DeeDee draped the towel over the siren's naked body as I pulled her out. For the record, the storybooks did get it totally wrong. This mermaid had naked long boobs dragging the ground, and her tail was slimy and diarrhea-brown. There wasn't a shell bra or glamorous shimmering blue scale in sight.

DeeDee grabbed her by the fin, and after a lot of grunting and heaving, we managed to slide her onto the pool chair. She arranged the towels, tucking and tugging until she was covered, boob to fin. Thankfully, DeeDee had splurged on the nice big beach towels. Big enough to cover most of this fish chick, anyway.

"Now move the chair back onto the grass with the rest of them," Kevin said. "This shit's gotta look normal."

DeeDee and I looked at each other. Then at the plus-sized mermaid. We grabbed the chair, and we lifted. Okay. I'm lying. We didn't, because holy shit, this chick was heavy. We made a very sincere effort, but this chair wasn't going anywhere. We only managed to drag it about a foot across the cement, but had to stop because the *screeeeeeeee* of metal legs against concrete was too loud. We decided the smart move was to grab a couple of empty chairs and move them up on either side of her instead, so she didn't look totally out of place.

Now that the spell had broken, I could see the fish chick didn't look fully human. Her eyes were yellow and glassy like a fish, and they were half open. She had scales along her hairline. Scales that would have been covered if she didn't have such a terrible haircut.

"You're right. It is terrible. Man, I miss the eighties. Feathered, bleach blonde hair as far as the eye could see. Now that was hair.

But don't blame the mermaid. Blame all the chicks in Put-in-Bay with that awful Kate Gosselin haircut," Kevin said. "Sirens mimic the fashion of the human women they see. Makes it easier to lure human dudes into the water."

"How do you know all this?"

Kevin looked at me. "Because I actually read my employee manual. Duh. Now how are we gonna cover her face? She doesn't look right."

"I have an idea." DeeDee speed walked all the way around the pool to the fancy canape station, filched something off the buffet, then grabbed a fresh fluffy white club towel off a cabana on the way back.

"Hold this." She put two fat cucumber slices in my hand. She lifted the mermaid's head, wrapped her hair in the club towel, turban style, arranging the hem so it covered up the scales. Then, she took the cucumber slices and put them over her half-open fish eyes. "There. Much better."

Huh. I'll be. She looked like a mom having a spa day. Totally relaxed. Dead, but relaxed.

DeeDee stared at her. "I don't get it. How did a mermaid end up here? Lake Erie is a hundred miles away. None of the rivers around here are big enough to support a population of humanoid sea creatures. It doesn't make any sense."

Humanoid sea creatures? Uh oh. My insides sank. That siren song must have been an epic brain eraser, because, dude, how could I forget? It all came rushing back to me. "There are fish monsters in the men's room. They came up out of the toilet and tried to eat me!"

"Really, kid? That would have been good to know fifteen minutes ago! Geesh, you shoulda led with that!"

"That's what I ran over here to tell you before...THIS!" I waved my arms over the mermaid.

"How big a fish are we talking here?" Kevin asked. "We talking minnows or sharks?"

"Big enough to split the toilets in half. Bigger than me."

“Great. Just great. There goes my buzz. Oh, no wait. I don't have a buzz because somebody forgot to bring me a drink.” Kevin eyeballed me. “This night is not going the way I planned.”

“And it's going the way I planned?” I screeched.

“Geesh. Calm down, kid.”

“Calm down?” Gah!

Angel eight ball rolled into my foot.

“What now?”

“Are you seeing what I'm seeing, or is Grandma Linda's backwoods moonshine really that strong?” His arrow pointed behind us. We all turned to look.

The Gill Guy. You know, the man with the turtle skin and the blubbing lips and gills? He waddled up out of the hot tub, webbed hands reaching for us. Quick as a flash, he wrapped his scaly arms right around DeeDee and dove into the water.



CHAPTER 8

Noooooooooooooooooooo! I saw a streak of white—DeeDee's bikini—flash across the bottom of the pool.

Instinct took over. I dove in and immediately smacked my nose on the bottom. Because the pool was only five feet deep. Ow. I definitely didn't think that through.

But I kept swimming, because I had a woman to save. And since you're asking, no, I didn't know how exactly I would fend off an amphibious Gill Guy in an epic water battle. I just knew I had to try. I paddled and bobbed, eyeballs stinging from the chlorine, following anything that looked like a trail of bubbles or a menacing shadow. But the water was dark, illuminated only by the white of the occasional pool light. I turned around and around until my lungs filled with pins. *DeeDee. Where are you?*

I had no choice but to come up for air. I broke the surface and sucked in oxygen like my middle name was Hoover. I treaded around and around, looking for any sign of life. But there was nothing. No bubbles. No Gill Guy. No white bikini. I'd lost them.

Herp herp. Huh herp.

Yeah. I'm crying okay? Don't judge me. I just lost the love of my life to a turtle man. Kevin was right. I was stupid and useless in a crisis. I didn't think it through. I didn't have a plan, and I'd missed my one chance to save DeeDee.

I clung to the side, devastated. And also right next to Grandma Linda's fat foot, which strained the straps of her tiny cha cha heels. She stood by the pool deck, apologizing very loudly to my Mom. "Sweetie, don't worry about the punch. I just put a little in there to liven up the party. I'm sure the ladies will love it. They just need to try it! You girls need to kick back and relax. You spend all year taking care of other people. Let me take care of you for a change. Come on. Let's go to the bar. I met the most dashing bartender in Key West last summer, and he made me something called a Splice. It's delicious. Come on, I'll order you one. He taught me the recipe."

Grandma Linda took a long drag off her Virginia Slim, then flicked the still-burning cigarette butt straight into the deep end. She looped her arm around my Mom and whisked her away, cha cha heels click clacking against the cement.

Not two seconds later, DeeDee shot straight up out of the water, gasping for breath. She's alive! ALIVE!

I immediately swam to her and attempted water rescue. I was by no means an expert life guard, but if there's one great thing about being a fat guy, it's that fat floats. I was essentially a human rescue tube. I grabbed her and doggy paddled us both back to the side, kicking extra just in case my fishy nemesis dared follow us.

"I don't know what happened." She grabbed the edge and sucked in air. "A cigarette butt hit him on the head. He let go of me and swam away. It must have spooked him."

"Oh, good. You're not dead." Kevin's head poked out over the edge. "Why are you two dumb asses still in the water? You waiting for Jaws to come around and take another bite? Geesh! We got work to do! We gotta figure out how these fish sticks are getting in here so we can shut this shit down. Plus, we got problems."

"Yeah. We know!"

"No. I mean, we got *problems*," Kevin said. "The trailer park mermaid's missing. She swam off during all the excitement, so hurry up and get out of there. This pool's about as safe as Amity Island on Fourth of July weekend."

"Huh?" I looked at him.

He shook his head. "See?"

A fin crested the water a few feet away. Whatever it belonged to—Gill Guy or mermaid with a mom hairdo—it wasn't friendly or human. I felt a very sudden, very strong urge to get out of the water.

DeeDee was already up the ladder and out of there, eyes on the fin. "Hurry, Lloyd."

She didn't have to tell me twice. I scrambled up and out, despite the thousand pounds of cold, sinking dread inside me. A minute later, I stood, dripping, fully clothed, in a thirty-pound halo of soaking wet plastic flowers, scanning Mom's luau for mythical sea monsters.

At least, I thought they were mythical until a few minutes ago. This was definitely not how I thought I'd be spending my night off.

"There! Look! Hurry!" DeeDee pointed over my shoulder, which just happened to be the same direction as the patio with the buffet, DJ, and bar. Party ground zero.

Aw, man. Nope. Don't tell me.

I turned around, eyes clinched tight, too scared to look.

Please don't let the siren eat my Mom. Please don't let the siren eat my Mom.

When I opened my eyes, I half expected to see a catfish lady slapping across the cement, fangs out, ladies screaming as they ran away in terror, but all I saw were ladies milling around with drinks—in real glasses. Fancy glasses, nary a plastic pineapple drink cup in sight—making polite conversation, tugging at their faux grass skirts uncomfortably as they listened to classical music, looking...bored?

Shit. Add fizzling party to the list of tonight's problems. The Charity Ladies' Auxiliary didn't look like they were being rewarded. They looked like they were being punished. Caroline had made it so classy, she'd sucked all the fun out of it. Speaking of Caroline.

Gulp.

She stood by the buffet, her face twisted up in what looked like absolute disgust. Or terror. Maybe both? Hard to tell with all that Botox and dermal filler. But it was all in the eyes: The frozen face with the laser beam eyes, like her rage retinas were about to melt someone into the floor with sheer disgust. She stared at a flabby woman wrapped in a beach towel, who was stuffing cocktail shrimp into her mouth. And I mean stuffing. She sunk her fat fingers deep into the delicate glasses, scooped up prawn by the fistful, and shoved them into her mouth like she was a starving rabid walrus.

She ate so fast, chewed crustacean mush spilled out of her mouth as she shoveled the new shrimp in. Her cheeks were puffed up like a blow fish. She had a white towel wrapped around her head like a turban. And her legs were shiny and brownish. Like scales. Holy. Shit. It's the mermaid. She's got legs!

"It looked a lot better when Daryl Hannah did it," Kevin said.

I looked at him. "Who?"

“Never mind.”

Caroline circled her like a shark, closing in, ready to pounce, rage fueled by the siren's terrible table manners. And, you know, the fact that she was obviously topless under that towel. And maybe a monster. Because Caroline knew about monsters. Oh shit. Brain cloud fully removed. I tugged at my collar. Man. Was it hot in here? “Uh. I forgot to mention it, but uh, Caroline met Gill Guy earlier, the one who grabbed DeeDee.”

“What?!?” Kevin screamed. “Anything else you need to tell me?”

I shrugged. That pretty much covered it.

“I'll handle Caroline.” DeeDee smoothed out her hair and strolled casually toward the buffet, head high, smile wide, like she was having a great time. She waltzed right on up, inserting herself between Caroline and the siren. She hugged Caroline, which rendered her both mute and immobile. I could see DeeDee fake laughing, chatting up a shocked and confused Caroline who, despite all the times they'd met before, had no idea who DeeDee was.

“All right, kid. She's got this. You and me? We're on damage control. Fess up. How much did Caroline see?” Kevin hopped onto my collar and punched me angrily in the chin.

“Ow!” I recapped. Gill Guy came out of the drain. Caroline froze in fear. She was gone when I turned around.

He looked Caroline up and down. “Well, she seems fine. Then again, she only has two looks: Judgmental and mean. Well, worse comes to worse, we'll have Doc brain erase her again. Hmmm. I wonder how many times you can do that to a person before there's permanent damage.”

“Wait, what? Again?”

“Forget it, kid. We'll deal with Princess Snooty Pants later,” he said. “It's time we had a little chat with the fish in the john. Let's go. And act natural. We don't want to make a scene.”

“Are you crazy? I'm not going back in there!” I screamed it so high and loud people looked at me. Standing all alone, shrieking. Soaking wet, head to toe. So much for acting natural.

“Yeah. Sure, kid. Sure. Ignoring this problem will definitely make it go away. Your mom's pals are either gonna be MILFs or fish food.

Your choice.”

I chose MILFs. Even though, ew. Gross. But duh. I couldn't let fish monsters eat Mom. Maybe Caroline, though. That'd be okay.

Angel eight ball hit my foot. “Wishing death on someone is a sin, you know. Even if they are irredeemable. I have to write that in your file.”

I kicked him away. Stupid angel. He was no help at all.

“I keep telling you. Angels are dicks. One of these days you'll believe me. Now get moving, kid.”

I didn't want to go. Like really really didn't want to, but I did. I inched closer to the Parthenon pool house, and despite every cell in my body screaming “Run away!” I managed to walk us all the way to that trimmed row of buff Greek hedges.

We had big problems—even bigger than when I'd left—because the lawn around those buff bushes was absolutely saturated, in puddles at least an inch deep. I heard the sssss sound of faucets on full blast. Not good. Not good at all. I rounded the topiary, and sure enough, water gushed out from under the men's room door. And I mean gushed. It poured out of there, down and over the walkway, like an ankle high Niagara Falls.

I glanced over the hedge. Caroline politely smiled at the ladies, but between bursts of banal chit chat, she seemed to be scanning the party with intense focus, looking for trouble. Or monsters. Or me. Either way, something was up. This whole smile and nod and pretend everything was great? It was just that. Pretending. An act. She'd retreated, but she'd regrouped. She may not quite understand the scope of it, but she knew something was up. And she knew I was in on it. “Kevin. Caroline—. Kevin?”

He wasn't on my shirt. Suddenly, a rush of cold air hit my behind, like someone had opened a door to Antarctica. The back of my swim trunks froze solid. I spun around. *Oh no.* I swear this night can't get any worse. It wasn't Kevin. A fat round blue head floated in the air, unattached to a body. Eight white eyes made the saddest wrinkle puppy dog eyebrows at me. “Bubby. What are you doing here? Go home!”

My head buzzed.

He clicked his pincers. *Blipp blop. Blipp.*

Yes. It was Bubby, the two story-tall blue jelly centipede from hell. At Mom's luau. At the Country Club. Seriously, God? Why not strike me with lightning and get it over with? Or are you having too much fun slowly torturing me to death? Although, if I'm looking for bright sides, only Bubby's head was here, poking through a tiny portal. His body must still be in the store.

Kevin was having none of it. He stood on the grass, pointing a very angry leg at Bubby. "Oh, so now Doc gets my portal working? Tell him thanks for nothing," he snipped. "You know I had to take the sewer to get here. It's cool. Tell him I don't mind being covered in shit. Literally. I'm already a roach. I don't need dignity. Now, what do you want? We're in the middle of a crisis here."

Bloop blup blup.

"What? You came all the way here for that? The Netflix DVD is always next to the cheap smokes behind the register. What do you mean you checked there? I don't know. Maybe it's still in the mailbox. Well, if you really *need* to see The Rock and Stone Cold Steve Austin kick Triple H's butt, your fat ass is gonna have to check the mailbox. I know you don't have hands. Make Doc do it. Geesh. Now get outta here. I'm busy! Hold up. Wait a second. Why are you out? It's only nine thirty!"

Blip bloop bloop blup.

Kevin balled up his little roach fists and dug them into his carapace. "Doc let you out early? I leave him in charge one time, and he's breaking rules? He never breaks rules. What? Poker night. With Morty? Without me? Wow. Just wow. You two are a pack of jerks. You know I'm stuck team building tonight! I thought you were my friends."

Bloop bloop blup blip.

"No. No. It's cool. It's fine. Get outta here. And go tell your new best friends the gate doesn't open 'til midnight for anyone. Capeesh?"

Let me tell you. There's nothing worse than Bubby's jelly hell centipede sad face. It really pulls at your heartstrings. Okay, I lied.

There was something worse. Bubby's floating head hanging around the Country Club, while Caroline Ford Vanderbilt was on the prowl.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

Okay. I lied again. Things are even worse than that. The men's room door clanked against the metal trash can I'd pulled in front of it. The fish monsters were trying to get out. "Get Bubby out of here. Caroline is coming!"

I stared out over the topiary. She was chit chatting her way toward the pool house, toward us, and she'd picked up the pace. Caroline saw me. Her eyes narrowed. I ducked behind an evergreen bicep. *Shit! She found us! We're screwed.*

And we were. Until a bright pink and orange streak shot across the grass like a meteor. Grandma Linda intercepted Caroline, gushing in giant hand gestures about something. Yes! She'd bought us at least ten minutes, and we needed it.

The naked fat siren, beach towel hanging on for dear life, waddled across the lawn behind them, clutching three glasses filled with shrimp cocktail. DeeDee tailed her, trying—not completely successfully—to keep the beach towel over her boobs.

"Give me a hand, kid. He's stuck." Kevin grunted. He clung to the edge of the portal, using his feet to push Bubby's fat head back through what was supposed to be a roach-sized door, telling Bubby, "It's not rocket science. I push, you pull. Got it? Ready? One. Two. Three."

I put my hands on Bubby's ice-cold forehead and pushed.

Bubby grunted. *Bloooooooooooooooooo.*

Kevin grunted. *Goooooooouuuh.*

I grunted. *Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuurp.*

Pop!

Bubby's head shot backward through the swirling green portal, which zipped up behind him and disappeared. *Phew! Thank God.*

Kevin fell to the grass, smoothed himself out, and scuttled up the topiary. "See what's up with the fish guys while I assess the Caroline situation."

The fish guys. Woah boy. I turned to face the men's room door and the proverbial music. Or not. My nose landed in a tall, lanky,

weird-looking evergreen tree. Huh. It was on the sidewalk, between me and the door. Weird. I didn't remember that plant, did you? Then again. I wasn't the most observant person.

Anyway, it wasn't like the topiary. This bush was untrimmed. Wild. Its branches were all droopy. It looked kind of like a man in a ghillie suit or an evergreen Bigfoot.

"This is worse than I thought." Kevin stood on the toned rump of a Greek God, looking out at the party.

I, however, was still confounded by this tree. It looked like it was growing out of solid concrete. I swear this wasn't here before. Maybe it was in a pot, and I'd accidentally bumped it across the grass? I bent down to inspect. Nope. No pot. No nothing. It's like it'd just magically appeared here.

Kevin droned on, completely unconcerned by this horticultural mystery. "Oh shit. The fat mermaid brought a friend. Great. Just great. Another trailer park siren. Yeesh. I never thought I'd say this, but that first one was the pretty one. Wowza. Those are some rode hard mermaids."

Nothing Kevin said really registered, because that tree? When I stood up, its branches rose up and curled like arms. My throat tightened. The wily evergreen loomed over me, branches out.

"Mermaids my butt. More like merpigs. They eat like my Uncle Louie. Shoveling it in. Jesus. They're stuffing shrimp in there like it's nothing. Oh shit. Gill Guy's back. I can see the top of his head bobbing in the hot tub."

Then two red glowing eyes appeared in the evergreen branches, glowering at me. I wanted to run, but branches wrapped around my ankles. I could feel the needles climbing up through my leg hairs.

"Kevin." I squeaked. "Help."

"Yeah, kid. I know. We're up to our butts in sea monsters. We got fish guys in the john, a gill guy in the deep end, and two trailer park sirens clearing the buffet with their tits out. And worse? This party is fizzling. We gotta kick this party up a notch. We gotta keep the MILFs distracted and outta the pool. If any of those broads decide to swim, it could turn into a blood bath. You ever see that movie *Piranha*? We don't want that!"

"Kevin."

"What? Did you peek in on the fish dudes in the men's room yet? What do they want?"

"Help me."

"Geesh. Do I gotta do everything?"

Shwap shwap shwap. Clunk.

That was the fish dudes. They'd finally fwapped open the men's room door, toppling the trash can. A gray slimy fin rose behind the evergreen man's head. Well, the branches around his eyes. That technically counts as a head, right? Kevin still didn't notice. He was too busy staring at the charity ladies and giving me a full report on how bored they looked milling around the canapes.

"Help."

"Hold up. I got an idea."

"Help me," I whispered.

"I said I got an idea! Geesh. Relax. I'll take care of it!" Then, he mumbled, "There's no I in team, but apparently there's a Kevin in team."

Kevin jump flew through the air. Yay! He's going to save me!

Or not. He flew right past me, completely oblivious to the finned and foliated horrors closing in on me. He landed right on the spot where Bubby's head used to be. A tiny swirling green portal opened up, and Kevin flew right through it and disappeared.

"Kevin, no!" *He left me. He left meeeee!*

I lunged for the portal, stumbling thanks to the branches around my legs. My arms stretched, fingers out. If I could just grab it and put my head in there and call for help. I was so close, but my fingers missed the swirling green by half an inch and closed around thin air. I fell flat on my face. The evergreen man's branches wrapped all the way up to my knees. I rolled over, fists up, ready to fight, but I didn't even get the chance. The tree thing grabbed my ankles and dragged me straight into the men's room.



CHAPTER 9

HE DRAGGED me through the water, across the slippery tiles, and dropped me near the remains of the stalls. A watery gurgle behind me said, "Places everyone!"

Big Ohana flopped around, followed by two smaller, equally ugly gray fish monsters. One of them slammed the door shut and stood guard. The other fiddled with Big Ohana's manta wing cape. The evergreen man stood next to me, silent and eerily tree like.

I'm a goner, so I prayed. *Jesus, if there's any way you could see it in your heart to help me NOT die, please do so at your earliest convenience. Amen. P.S. This is Lloyd, and I'm about to be eaten by fish monsters in the men's room at the Country Club. Amen again.*

While I waited for divine intervention, I decided my best bet was to lie there on the wet floor, stiff and still, playing dead. It was my only defense. My eyes darted around, looking for an exit, secretly hoping I could just slink away when no one was looking. What? It could work. If Gill Guy could get out of here, so could I.

Or not. Fat, rubbery vines rose from the evergreen man thing and snaked up and across the walls, covering them with what looked like ten years of jungle plant growth. It made some sort of impenetrable seal around the door, because the water level immediately began to rise. All the faucets had been turned on full tilt, and the water gushed out over the bowls. The toilet connection hoses thwap thwapped around, loose and spewing. It didn't take long for the water to rise chest high. I mean, I was lying down, but still. That's deep.

The giant fish dudes circled around me and splashed their manta fins like they were excited.

Okay. Any time now, Jesus.

Angel eight ball floated by. "You'll have to handle this one on your own. Jesus is on vacation. Fishing trip. I hear the Sea of Galilee is lovely this time of year. Now where was I? Oh yes. Have you ever worshipped a false idol? If so, how many times? FYI, this new accounting system won't be kind to godless heathens like you. Have you considered going back to church?"

“Help meeeeee!” These guys were getting ready to kick into a feeding frenzy. I'd spent six months unemployed. I'd watched Shark Week. I knew the signs.

“I am busy saving your immortal soul. Besides, you will never learn to help yourself if I step in to save you. As they say, teach a man to fish. Although, in this case, I wouldn't recommend fishing.” Then he just floated away, with the same bored expression my Mom has when she files her nails.

Then they came for me. Big Ohana opened his manta ray fin cape, revealing his short spiny hands and belly full of scales. He looked down at me with beady black eyes, and in a voice that sounded like someone talking through gargling water said, “Summon the others.”

Uh...fish dude talks? Even worse, someone—or rather, some *things*—listened. The two smaller fish dudes, who were equally ugly, but whose heads were shaped more like scared wilted penises, reared up and made some sort of *click click arrkarrk arrkarrk* noises. Angry clucks, like pissed off dolphins on meth.

The grate popped off a vent in the wall above the hand dryer, and something hard and green pushed out. It looked like a giant wad of hard, scaly Play Doh shooting through a tube. Until it looked up at me with glassy yellow eyes. Gill Guy. So that's how he got out of here.

He splashed down into the rising water. And he wasn't alone. Something else came in behind him. At first, it looked like a knotted fishing net dripping in brown sludge. But it turned out to be hair, belonging to a pair of very pale, very blubbery arms, attached to a very large woman. She looked up at Gill Guy. She had yellow eyes and rows of rotten jagged teeth. Another siren. And wow. Kevin was right. That first one was the pretty one.

She clicked something that must have meant, “Can you give me a hand here? I'm stuck.” Because she put her arms out, and Gill Guy pulled, hard. It wasn't enough. He had to put one giant green web-toed foot on the wall to get enough leverage to yank her girth through the vent, which was about the size of a large doggy door. So it wasn't small. Just saying. This mermaid was a big girl.

One of the fish dudes had to help. He wrapped his manta fins around Gill Guy, and the two of them grunted and clicked until that disheveled siren popped straight out of the gate, and dropped like a boulder into the rising water. Just so you know, she had legs—until she hit the water, then they melted together into one big slimy catfish fin.

Vurp. Gonna barf. Seriously. You can't unsee a lady's toes uncurling and her thighs melting into fish. You just can't.

They all turned their full attention to me. Gill Guy stared at me with his glassy, unblinking eyes, gills aflutter. The siren hissed. So did the two lackey fish dudes. They inched closer, and my eyes watered.

No, I'm not crying so just shut up already. They watered from the smell. These guys reeked like stagnant polluted pond water mixed with a hundred backed-up Port-a-Potties on a blazing hot July afternoon.

Well, at least I wouldn't have to suffer long, because they were totally going to eat me. That's what I get for making tuna sandwiches all afternoon. I ate the tuna, now the tuna eats me. The irony.

My life flashed before me. Okay, not my life so much as the realization that it was going to end as fish food. And probably not painlessly. All of these years, all this struggle, and I amounted to six-feet of juicy marbled man meat dropped in a piranha tank. I couldn't run. There was no way out. I was surrounded.

I closed my eyes tight. The creatures clicked and grunted and *arrkarrk arrkarrked* at each other. Geesh. These guys were having a full fishy conversation, like an aquatic version of friendly chit chat at a dinner party while the cook put finishing touches on the hors d'oeuvres. Lloyd d'oeuvres. Gulp.

A pair of slimy fins grabbed my collar and yanked me to standing. *Dear Lord, please don't let it hurt.*

"There were supposed to be two of them," Big Ohana blurbled. "Where is the other one? The woman. The leader of the knights."

Hold up. Two of them? They planned to eat DeeDee, too? *Oh. Hell. No.* My fight returned. The creatures stood in a tight circle around me. The tree man's eyes glowed red. The three angry fish

men bared their rows of jagged teeth and hissed. I raised my fists. Then they all bent down on one knee and bowed down.

Oh. I didn't realize I looked so intimidating. Go me!

"Your excellency, esteemed President of North America," Big Ohana said. "We are the humble leaders of the Kingdom of the Freshwater Blue."

Tree guy cleared his throat. Well, he made that kind of noise. I wasn't sure about the anatomy.

Big Ohana looked at the tree guy, and said, "Oh, pardon me. And this is the representative of the Kingdom of the Midwest Green. We have made a long and treacherous journey to humbly ask you, president of the hairless leg men, to join us. We must strike an accord between our mighty kingdoms so that we may restore the land and sea. We must unite to defeat our common foe."



CHAPTER 10

WAIT. What? “So you're not going to eat me?”

Just then, I saw something small and brown scuttling across the ivy-covered wall behind them. Kevin. He looked at me and said, “What the hell is going on here?”

“Fuck if I know.”

Oops. I should have kept my mouth shut. Because as soon as the words left my lips, a piece of ivy snatched Kevin. He screamed as the ambulatory vine plucked him off the ceiling and held him aloft in the air. The harder his little legs moved, trying to escape, the faster the ivy wrapped around him.

“A spy! I knew it. We cannot trust the leg men!” Big Ohana snarled.

Kevin helpfully said, “aaaaaaaah,” as he waved through the air in front of the creatures, held aloft by sentient ivy.

“Stop!” I yelled. They all stared at me. “He's with me. He's my...vice...president?”

Shut up. It's the best I could come up with on the spot. If you hadn't noticed, I'm making this shit up as I go along.

“Your excellency,” The evergreen creature said.

Holy shit. The tree can talk.

His branches parted, revealing a smooth green face that looked eerily like the topiary. Smooth and green and trimmed. Except, you know, talking and with creepy glowing red eyes. “Forgive our rudeness. We did not know,” he said to me. The vine dropped Kevin on my shoulder. “We humbly ask for your assistance.”

“Back up,” Kevin dug his fists into his hips. “Did you say 'your excellency'?”

“Why. Yes.” Big Ohana pointed a fin at me. “We have made a long and perilous journey to seek an audience with the President of North America. We have come to your majestic, regal court to ask for help.”

“Heh. Heh. Heh.” Kevin laughed so hard tiny tears emerged from his beady little roach eyes.

“This is no joke, insect man,” Big Ohana said. “The situation is severe!”

“This guy? President?” Kevin tried really hard to keep a straight face.

“Why. Yes.” Big Ohana waved a fin at me. “He is large and well fed, bedecked in flowers. These are signs of power, wealth and high status.”

“Oh. Yeah. Yeah. Sure. You're right. I was just testing you. Boy. You know your stuff! This guy's definitely president.” Kevin laughed so hard, he was wheezing. “I mean, look at him. Very regal. You nailed it. Totally worth the trip.”

Gee, Kevin. Rub it in. I stood in water up to my nipples, about to sink under thirty pounds of party store plastic flowers.

“El Presidente,” Kevin cackled and smacked his knee like this was the most hilarious thing he'd ever seen. He did eventually manage to stand up straight and wave a leg at the fish men like he was in charge. “Listen up, fish sticks. I'm the vice president. You don't get an audience until you tell me who you are and why you deserve to chat with the mighty, round President of North America. Our time is valuable.”

What are you doing? They'll kill us!

“Relax, kid. I've got this.” Kevin put a leg up and whispered to me, “best team build ever.”

The creatures straightened up and looked a little ruffled. Kevin soaked in his newfound power. He eyeballed tree guy up and down. Although, tree guy wasn't much of an evergreen anymore. He'd reverted to more of a really tall, rigid, rippling pile of sentient algae. “What the hell are you supposed to be, anyway?”

“Why, I am the representative of the Midwest green.”

“Who the hell is that?”

“It's the regional plant community. From the smallest blade of grass and humblest moss to the mighty oak—”

“Okay. I get it. So what, you're like Swamp Thing? All tuned in to the plants and stuff?”

“No. Well, kind of. He's a cousin of mine, actually,” not-Swamp Thing said.

“Cousin, huh? Where did you come from? There aren't any swamps around here.”

“I was formed by the collective material consciousness of the local plant kingdom. I rose from a small, still body of water not far from here, tasked with a sacred quest, to give voice to the green.”

“What water?”

“I do not know its name.” He held up a slimy, dripping arm and pointed West. “It had much algae—as you can see—and it had wide black paths on either side.”

“You mean that filthy drainage pond by the freeway? Eek. That's harsh. Tough break, Pond Thing. That water's disgusting.”

“Why, yes. I nearly choked on a discarded man shoe as I arose. But I had no choice but to heed the call of my watery brethren. The plant kingdom is also in danger—”

“Yeah, I know. Lawnmowers. They're terrifying. Moving on. What's his deal?” Kevin pointed at Gill Guy. “I thought he lived in the Amazon. How the hell did he get here?”

Gill Guy's mouth blubbed, slow gasping for air, as he made a sad gargle noise then ducked slowly down into the water.

“You must pardon him. He's shy,” Pond Thing said. “His great grandfather hailed from the Amazon, it's true. His family emigrated to Buckeye Lake in 1954, after an unfortunate run in with a boat full of humans. It was rather sad, I'm afraid. They speared his great grandfather with harpoons and dropped poison in the lagoon twice. Leg men can be such cruel, heartless creatures. The poison rendered the lagoon uninhabitable. They had no choice but to move.”

“Oof. Tough break,” Kevin said. “You know, he tried to run off with my employee. Tell him to cut it out.”

“My apologies. He does get lonely sometimes,” Pond Thing said. He then pointed at the siren.

“This is Hogras. She and her sister, Sorko, represent the merfolk of Lake Erie and the Cuyahoga River.”

Kevin put one leg next to his mouth so Pond Thing couldn't see and said, “Jesus. More like Hoggy and Porko. Called it. Redneck

riviera mermaids. No wonder they're rode hard. You know the Cuyahoga's so polluted, it caught on fire thirteen times!"

Pond Thing was still making the introductions. The fish dudes were apparently something called a sea bishop, one of those mythical sea creatures that used to appear on old nautical maps. Okay. They weren't so mythical. Although, Big Ohana and his two dick-looking minions spent most of their time trolling the rivers between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, rather than the open sea.

"So, uh, what do you need us for?" Kevin asked.

"We, the creatures of forest and sea demand the land bound leg men clean the waste of their kind from the waterways." Big Ohana curled one of his manta fins into a fist and pounded it for effect.

"You really aren't going to eat me?" What? I wanted to be sure, okay? Like *sure* sure.

"As delicious as you may be," Big Ohana said. (Hogras licked her lips to drive home the point.) "We have made the long treacherous journey to your seat of government, glorious Washington of the DeeCees, to beg you, the President of North America, to clean waste from the rivers and streams immediately. We do not have time to waste. Our people are suffering. A threat like no other has risen—"

"Suffering?" Huh. I didn't know how I missed it. It was so obvious.

The trailer park siren's knotted hair was tangled up because there were wads of fishing line, lures and net stuck in it. One of the fish dudes had a plastic six-pack holder stuck on his dorsal fin, and it had squinched it so tight in the middle, it looked like a lady's waist in a corset. Gill Guy had a fat rusty fish hook stuck in his cheek. One of his dorsal fins looked gimpy, malformed. Pond Thing, now that he'd resorted to his more slimy self, was a rippling blob of algae with discarded cigarette butts and lighters, bottle caps, and plastic drink straws stuck in him.

"You aren't kidding," Kevin said. "Y'all are train wrecks."

And the first siren had barfed up plastic grocery bags that she'd accidentally eaten. And Big Ohana choked on that bottle cap. Jesus. These guys reminded me of every depressing viral photo of sea creatures choking on plastic bags that had ever made my Mom cry donate while late-night wine scrolling the Internet.

While I jogged down memory lane, Kevin and Big Ohana kept up the chitchat. I tuned back in when Kevin said, "So let me get this straight. You want us to get all the plastic out of the water, clean up all the toxic chemicals every factory has ever dumped in any river anywhere, stop global warming and never litter again?"

"Well. Yes," Big Ohana said. "Except for global warming. We don't mind that. Sea level rise means more habitat for us. Otherwise, we demand action immediately. Your waste has created a mighty—"

"Stop right there. You convinced us. We're gonna get right on that. Mission accomplished. Good work, guys. It's all settled," Kevin said. "Wow. Look at the time! You guys better get a move on. I bet your little filets back home miss you. Thanks for stopping in. Buh bye!"

Kevin pressed on Pond Thing, like he was trying to move him out the door.

They looked confused, but stood fast. "But we cannot return home, not until the water is clean," Big Ohana said. "It's not safe."

"I told you we'd take care of it." Kevin kept trying to slow poke corral them toward the pipes in the stalls. "We'll get you some bottled waters for the ride home. Those are safe."

"Water. In bottles? BOTTLES?" Big Ohana was furious. "The same bottles that clog our waterways and trap our fry? This is an outrage!"

Kevin rubbed his eyes like he had a massive headache. "All right. This isn't fun anymore. Sorry fish sticks, but I gotta come clean. Look. Litter is sad and sucks and all, but people have been trying to fix that problem forever, and it's only gotten worse. There's nothing we can do for you. You're in the wrong place. You took a wrong turn. This ain't Washington D.C. He isn't president. We don't have the power to do squat. We're just two guys at a luau."

"But the columns. The temple. The clean, blue water. Surely this is the seat of leaders," Pond Thing said. "We overheard one of the hairless leg people say this was the Presidential Pool before we emerged."

"Sorry." Kevin shrugged. "Nope. Not it."

“Lies! All lies!” Big Ohana stomped and waved a fin at his underling. “We followed the map!”

One of his minions pulled the saddest, wettest map out from under one of his flaps. Don't even ask me where he'd been carrying it. He waved it around, as proof we were lying. It took me a minute to figure out it was an old, laminated restaurant place mat. It even had the kid's menu printed over the Atlantic Ocean.

“That's the map? Geesh. No wonder you're all turned around. Sorry. We can't help you, so hit the pipes,” Kevin said. “You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here.”

“Are you refusing our treaty?” Big Ohana said. “After we humbly asked your assistance?”

“I told you. We can't fix it. The problem is too big,” Kevin said. “So don't let the door hit you on the way out.”

“But we can't go home,” Pond Thing said.

“Sure you can. I use the sewer to get around all the time. I'll point you in the right direction.”

“You do not understand. We *can't* go home,” Pond Thing said. “The situation is urgent, otherwise we would not be here. You see. Your waste has formed—”

“Yeah, yeah. Time to go, fish sticks. Come on. Get a move on.” Kevin did not want to hear it. “We've got enough problems.”

Pound. Pound. Pound.

A heavy knock rattled the door.

“I know you're in there. I demand you come out this instant. The time for pranks is over. Vandalizing the lavatory? Really. I can forgive a lot, considering your delicate condition, but this is out of line. There's water flooding the parking lot, and I know it's coming from in here.” A stern voice echoed around the room. “Open the door this instant!”

Enough problems? Yeah. And now we had one more. That was Caroline Ford Vanderbilt pounding on the men's room door. And as soon as Big Ohana heard her voice, he turned to Pond Thing and yelled, “Seize her!”



CHAPTER 11

To SAY the creatures were angry was an understatement. Clearly, they had expected a different answer to their very sincere request. Pond Thing and Big Ohana argued, while I tried to insert myself between the door/Caroline and the fish people.

The water level rose higher. Any minute now, I was gonna be up to my neck. I waded toward the vent Gill Guy had come through. Unfortunately, like his swampy cousin, Pond Thing could make and move plant material like appendages, and he was a killer multitasker. He grabbed me and wrapped me up in ivy to keep me from leaving, without so much as a break in his argument.

"They lie! They disrespect us! Their president released waste on me," Big Ohana hissed, still convinced I was in charge. "The hairless land dwellers have darkened our home for the last time. They must pay for their indiscretions. The time for negotiation has ceased. We attack!"

"I didn't know I was peeing on your head!" I squeaked. "I'm sorry!"
Apology ignored.

"The president of the hairless land dwellers has insulted us," Big Ohana blubbed. "While he and his subjects pollute our home with their discarded bottles, smoking butts and waste, you stand idly by and do nothing. They must pay. They must be held to account. We shall make an example of him. We must show all the leaders of the leg men we will not be ignored!"

Uh. That didn't sound good. Not good at all. I wiggled. The ivy tightened.

"You were right, kid," Kevin said, holding tight to my lei to keep from floating away. "They're gonna kill us."

Then do something! Help!

"What do you want me to do? I'm a roach. I can't swim. And I lost my cock ring. I can't even float!"

Gah. Stupid Kevin!

"I heard that."

Pond Thing was still talking. "We came here to negotiate a treaty with the land dwellers, and that is what we shall do. Peacefully. We move to Plan B."

He snapped a patch of algae like it was fingers. Gill Guy and the siren dove underwater. Oh boy. Plan B was eat me. I'm sure of it. They're just grabbing the forks.

They reemerged with...signs? Yep. Signs. Gill Guy and the siren passed out a bunch of homemade signs on little wood sticks. I couldn't figure out what they were supposed to say, because they had about the same production quality as kindergarten macaroni art. I had a feeling English wasn't their first language. Plus, they'd drawn most of the letters in mud, which was now running. Water and poster board don't mix. But hey, they tried.

It took me a minute to figure out what the signs were for, then it hit me. These were protest signs. The vibe was very much, "Hell no, we won't go" and "Holy shit. Look how disgusting you humans are."

Yes. Yes. We are. But dude. They weren't leaving. They were gonna picket. There goes the luau, right down the tubes.

"Open the door, or I will have no choice but to call the authorities," Caroline pounded on the door. "The little prank with the friend in the mask was charming, but property destruction is serious. Do you want to be a convicted felon? Do you want to go to prison? OPEN UP!"

Prank? Mask? Caroline thought Gill Guy was a joke? Dude. I wish.

"Authorities? Prison? You summoned your knights to forcibly remove us? You wretch!" Big Ohana snatched me up with his manta fin. Man, those things were dexterous. "I shall hold the president hostage! His subjects will have no choice but to join forces with us. They do not understand the dire nature of this situation, but they will." Big Ohana raised a fin and prepared to strike me down. He said to Pond Thing, "I told you to seize the woman!"

"That's it. Back off my boy, or this means war!" Kevin crawled onto the top of my head.

"You refused to help us in our time of need. Your actions have doomed us all!" Big Ohana yelled. "Perhaps your new president will

come to our aid.”

New president? He bared his fangs, ready to eat me. Oh, he meant the guy who replaced me after he killed me. Well, now that we're all on the same page. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Kevin jump-flew off the top of my head, right onto Big Ohana's face. He poked him in his beady black eyes. He let go of me, fwapping his manta fins, madly trying to get Kevin off. Kevin gave him one last kick straight in the eyeball before he dipped into the water, then flew straight up at Pond Thing. Kevin held some sort of small, clear plastic bottle, and he squirted whatever was in it right in Pond Thing's mouth as he opened it to speak. “Hi ya!”

“This is your last chance to open up!” Caroline's voice was as stern as her pounding.

Aw, man. How would we ever explain this?

“That's it. I am calling the authorities!”

Pond Thing's screaming drowned out Caroline. “Ah aahh. Ahhhh! It burns! Noooooooooo!” He brought his slimy algae limbs up to his mouth and started scraping his tongue. Kevin kept right on spritzing his smooth green face.

“Nothing personal,” Kevin said. “I can't let you eat the kid. I hate training new employees.”

“Aahh. Aaaah! Stop! Stop please!” Pond Thing yelled. He morphed, like it was partially melting him away. “What is that foul concoction?”

“Hand sanitizer.” Kevin shrugged and spritzed. And spritzed again.

“It burns!”

“Duh. You should see the pond you came from,” Kevin said. “You gotta be half bacteria.”

All of Pond Thing's planty appendages retreated. I was suddenly freed from my ivy chains. And just as Big Ohana recovered from Kevin's eye pokes and moved in for the kill, Pond Thing's rubbery vines slid off the door. It flung open, and the water gushed out with such force, it rushed and swirled and sucked like we were being flushed down a giant toilet. The water pulled. I struggled to stay on my feet.

Big Ohana and his fishy henchmen rode the wave of rushing water up up and right on out the door. So did Pond Thing, who swirled like green diarrhea as he was sucked straight down and out. Kevin jumped onto the top of my head. I could feel his death grip on my hair. He screamed, “Hold your breath, kid!” as we were sucked under.

I put my hands over Kevin, so I didn't lose him in the current. I held my breath until it burned as I tumbled head over heel over and over, so fast I didn't know which way was up or when the air would ever come. Kevin wriggled in my fingers, but his kicks were losing oomph. We tumbled and thumped, lungs filling with nails.

I couldn't hold my breath any longer. I opened my mouth and gulped, terrified it'd be water. But I couldn't wait. I gulped. It's air! I opened my eyes and got an eyeball full of sky. We'd made it. We're alive! “Kevin?” I pulled him out of my hair. He wasn't moving. I shook him. “Kevin. Wake up. We made it!”

Oh God. He's not moving. Shit. How do I CPR a roach? I moved his legs aside and pushed my index finger up and down. Chest compressions—carapace compressions? Well, whatever. Mom once told me you're supposed to pound to the beat of “Stayin' Alive.” She put the song on the stereo and did a really embarrassing disco hip thrust right along with the “ah ah ah” part, so I'd always remember. Well, it worked, Mom. I remembered. I pressed and sang “ah ah ah.” Kevin coughed up some water, then moaned. “Uuuuuuuh. I need a drink, kid. Hey. Watch your finger, pervert.”

An angry scream cut through the air. “I don't believe it. You foul boy! My club. What have you done to my club?” A soaking wet Caroline Ford Vanderbilt sat on her butt in the grass. She was so angry, her face had broken through its Botox freeze. “You low-class, no good loser! I never should have let you and your white trash mother step foot in here!”

Oh. Hell. No. She did not just call my Mom white trash. Those are fighting words.

She stood up, soaking wet, and made a vain attempt to smooth out her hair and her dress. Too late. That blow out was ruined. She came at me. Or started to, but she stopped, like she'd been flash

frozen with a super villain freeze ray. Because she just now noticed all the flopping, slimy sea creatures scattered on the lawn. Her lower lip was the first thing to thaw, because it was quivering. Then her eyes darted back and forth between Pond Thing, the fat mermaid, and the flopping Big Ohana. Gill Guy approached her, holding a tropical flower in his hand, like he was asking a girl to prom. Man, that guy was desperate for love.

Caroline's eyes were so wide, they were circles. I could see the whites all around. Um. Yeah. That wasn't a guy in a mask. It wasn't a prank. And she knew it. If there was any doubt in her mind about monsters before, it was gone now. Yes, Caroline, they're real. And her precious manicured garden was littered with them, flopping like fish on the deck of a trawler. Caroline watched with horror and revulsion as that siren's catfish tail split into legs and her fin rolled up into two fat feet. Hogras smiled at her, revealing her rows of spiky yellow shark teeth.

Caroline turned tail and ran. Like way faster than anyone in high-heeled sandals should be able to run.

"Shit. Again? Go get her, kid!" Kevin screamed. "We gotta keep this outbreak contained! Go!"

We sure did, so I ran. Okay. No, I didn't. Well, I did. But the grass was super wet, and I slipped around a lot before I got my footing. Dude. You try running in waterlogged flip flops when your legs have turned to panic noodles.

My heart beat triple time. I had no idea what Caroline would do. But whatever it was, it would be bad. Epic-level bad. She may be president of the Charity Ladies' Auxiliary, but her heart was anything but charitable. I rounded the topiary just in time to see a stream of cops rushing in to bust up the party. A dozen men in blue beelined through the French doors, heading straight at Mom and all of her friends, hand cuffs sparkling in the moonlight. Well, that's it. Party over. We're all going to jail.



CHAPTER 12

“SEE, kid? This is what I'm talking about. You panicked, and Caroline got away. Now we got bigger problems. Doc can't brain erase her remotely.” Kevin crawled up on the head of a very buff evergreen, so he could get a better look at the cops. “Geesh. Took 'em long enough.”

“What?...No!...Do?” My blood pressure was so high, my lips went numb. What I really meant to say was, “What are we going to do?”

Kevin scanned the party. “I don't see Caroline anywhere. We gotta find her fast.”

“Cops.” My brain spun. “Jail!”

“Relax, kid. I called them. They got here just in time.”

“You WHAT?” The room suddenly stopped spinning. It turned red. With rage. Because, it'd turned blue. With cops.

A dozen policemen in crisp blue uniforms filtered through the crowd of now silent, wide-eyed, very confused ladies. Kevin said, “Party saved. You're welcome.”

“This is a disaster!”

“Relax. Just watch. Crap. Almost forgot. Be right back.” Kevin pulled his old pink Zune out of God knows where and stepped through a tiny, swirling neon green portal.

“Where are you going? Don't leave meeeee!” Nope. Too late. He was gone. And God—well, the devil—only knew where the other end of that portal would spit him out.

Never mind. A bright green light flashed above the DJ, and something small and pink fell out. Kevin and his Zune. How did I know? Because all of a sudden, the calm, mostly bored DJ's arms started flapping around in the air like he was swatting away a huge bug. A huge, talking bug with a bad attitude. Who just happened to use his winged, legged ass to run that DJ screaming and swatting right on out of the booth. A split second later, the classical music switched off, and a heavy metal—but honestly kind of dancey—guitar intro rattled all the speakers. Some guy started singing about a chick with a drink in her hand and her toes in the sand.

Yep. It was definitely Kevin. Stupid roach. Rock 'n' roll couldn't possibly save the day this time. As soon as the music changed, a cop stepped forward and pointed straight at Mrs. Miller, who was so tipsy—not from Grandma Linda's spiked sherbet punch—she nearly knocked the canapes off the table from the shock.

Huh. That cop looked familiar.

The cop grabbed Mrs. Miller and yanked her toward him. *Ah! Police brutality!*

Wait. Maybe not. His hips moved to the music, grinding against a now blushing Mrs. Miller. He ran his hand down the back of his pants, grabbed tight, and yanked them straight off. I mean, those things ripped off his bottom like they were velcro tear-away pants. Pretty soon, he wore nothing but a smile and a rhinestone-beaded thong.

Then it hit me. Oh God. They *were* velcro tear away pants. Stripper pants. These weren't cops. They were stripper cops. And that hot cop waving his blue glitter package all over a giggling Mrs. Miller? That was Morty the incubus. I'd recognize that Hershey bar of rippling abs anywhere. And all the other cops? Strippers. Male incubus strippers. Kevin hadn't called the cops. He'd called the demon stripper cops.

This. Can't. Be. Happening. All the blood rushed straight to my head. My skull felt hot, like molten lava. Yep. I'm having an aneurysm. Kevin invited *more* monsters to my Mom's charity luau. More. Monsters.

Speak of the six-legged little devil. Kevin fell out of a tiny portal, right into my eye, which was actually a blessing, because he blinded me right as a buff incubus started grinding on Grandma Linda. The joke was on him. That poor demon was never gonna get away from her in one piece. Grandma Linda had two secret super powers. One, she could produce a three-inch thick wad of singles out of thin air at will. And two, she had an iron-fist grab so tight, no male exotic dancer had ever wrestled free from it.

"You're welcome, kid." Kevin smoothed himself and crawled to the top of the topiary to get a better view. "Party saved."

"How is the party saved? How?"

“Look, kid. This party was dying. Fizzling. Now it's hopping. These broads are gonna have a night they'll remember forever—for the right reasons. Morty and his pals will get these broads so horny and distracted, they'll never even notice the fish sticks picketing on the lawn.”

“But they're demons,” I whisper screamed.

“So? You and me? We know how to handle demons. It's the sea monsters we gotta worry about. Now pull yourself together. We gotta get 'em outta here, quick.”

Kevin thumbed a leg back. The angry sea creatures had gathered their soaking signs and formed a flopping picket line behind us, clucking “hell no, we won't go”—well, I mean, I think. It was all ark arrrk ack ack—as they flopped and stomped across the grass.

It was the world's saddest protest. The tidal wave had completely washed off the mud letters and turned their signs to brightly colored mush. Gill Guy and Hogras—buck naked, tube-sock boobs flying free—were clearly the amphibious ones. They were able to march around while waving the watery remains of their protest signs. But Big Ohana and his fish minions really needed to be in water to do anything. They just flopped there, pushing their faces into the grass, trying to be as deep as possible in any puddle they could find. Pond Thing had taken a more woody form and was trying to grow some sort of branch tank around the fish guys to hold water.

“Wow. What is going on here?” DeeDee stood next to me, staring at the picket line. “This is worse than I thought.”

I was so flustered by the strippers and the picketing, I didn't even see DeeDee walk up. And she was in a white bikini. Yeah. That tells you how jacked up this whole situation was. DeeDee. Bikini. Didn't notice. Let that sink in.

“Where you been? You missed all the excitement,” Kevin snipped. “Where's that other merchick? Is she eating a waiter?”

“Don't worry. I took care of it. She calmed down once I got her a bucket full of shrimp and two Long Island iced teas.”

“Long Island iced tea.” Kevin shook his head. “Told you. Rednecks. Blech. I don't know how anyone can drink that.”

Says the cockroach who drinks Wild Turkey 101 straight out of a mini bottle.

"I heard that." He side-eyed me.

"She was in really bad shape. I pulled two fish hooks out of one of her fins. She promised not to eat anyone to thank me for patching her up," DeeDee said. "She told me why they all came here. We have to help them."

"What? No!" Kevin snipped. "They gotta go!"

"They came to us for help, so we need to help." DeeDee had a red first-aid kit in her hand.

"They tried to eat me!" I squeaked.

Big Ohana raised his head and said, "I certainly did not. I only thought about eating you. If I had tried in earnest, I wouldn't be feeling so peckish."

"Seriously? You are such a sap," Kevin said to DeeDee. "The real world isn't cruelty free, you hear me?"

Oh, she heard him, but she didn't care. DeeDee had that look she gets when she's about to guilt us into doing the right thing, rather than the easy thing. "Look at them. Just look. The world is a shit show. Right now, you have a choice to make. Choose to make it better. Or choose to be part of the problem."

"Here we go again. I'm gonna ask Faust to stop paying for your college. Your philosophy degree's giving me a headache." Kevin crossed his arms and looked away.

"We don't have much time." DeeDee sprang into action.

Sigh. She was right. And I loved it and hated it all at once. Because my instinct was always to run, to be the lazy guy, to put my hands over my eyes and sing, "la la la la nothing to see here." But she always did the right thing, even when it was the hard thing. I had no choice but to assist. I followed her to the fish people.

Gill Guy had given up picketing. He lay blubbing in the trickle of water that was still running out of the men's room from the overflowing sinks, gills flapping, trying not to dry out. Pond Thing's woody tank was a fail, because he didn't have any way to fill it.

"Fine." Kevin landed on the grass next to me. "But hurry up, because we gotta get 'em outta here before Morty's strip-o-gram

loses steam and Caroline comes back with the real cops, got it?”

Pond Thing's red eyes zoomed in on DeeDee. He immediately abandoned his viney fish tank project and wrapped a slimy algae hand around DeeDee's. He said, “Is this your queen? She's radiant!”

He puckered his algae lips and kissed DeeDee's hand like a complete effing gentleman. “Milady. You're a human flower. Your very existence brings beauty, loveliness and light to a cruel world.”

He looked longingly at her with his glowing red eyes as a row of roses sprouted up and out of his forearm and then kept right on going. His entire body erupted in fragrant red and yellow blooms. DeeDee blushed and smiled.

You gotta be kidding me. I can't compete with that!

“Back off, Gromeo.” Kevin jump flew onto DeeDee's shoulder. “Here's the deal. She's gonna patch you sad sacks up, and then you gotta go, got it? You can't stay here.”

“But first, may we get them to water?” Pond Thing pointed at the flopping fish men.

“We can't put them back in the pool!” I wasn't proud of my tone of voice, but come on. I was panicking.

“We don't need to,” DeeDee said. “I've got an idea.”



CHAPTER 13

FAMOUS LAST WORDS. Five minutes later, at DeeDee's behest, I tiptoed across the lawn, dragging an armload of inflatable palm trees. Remember the beer cooler part on the bottom? Yeah. That was DeeDee's grand plan. Those were about to be paddling pools for our watery party crashers.

I moved as quickly and as quietly as I could, inflated polypropylene squeaking with every step. But, dude. It didn't matter. I could have led a brass marching band through that party, tubas on full blast. No one would have noticed. Those ladies' eyes were glued to the muscled, thong-clad bottoms of Morty's demon stripper friends. Hips were bumping. Bottoms were grinding. Ladies were hooting and howling. This party was riding a rhinestone thong straight into the Charity Ladies' Auxiliary hall of fame.

I wrestled those plastic palm trees around the topiary as fast as I could. DeeDee was on her knees next to one of the fish minions, using a pair of first aid scissors to cut the six-pack holder off his fin. Pond Thing whispered to her as she squirted antibacterial goop on the wound and bandaged it. She giggled and blushed. AGAIN!

Dude. I was seriously being out charmed by a pile of talking algae from a drainage pond by the interstate. I really needed to up my game.

"Amen, kid. But first, come over here and look at this." Kevin stood on the grate above that creepy rusty drain by the men's room door, looking down in. "It's disgusting! Oof. Something nasty's brewing down there."

Yeah. Whatever. That bad drain smell? Old news. It was the least of our party problems.

Gill Guy still lay in the water trickle in the doorway, trying to stay moist. I plopped the palm trees down and stepped over him on my way to the sink. The bathroom was an absolute mess. I sure hope the club had insurance. Because wow. It was wrecked. The pressure from the tidal wave had sucked the hunks of toilet straight through

the stalls, ripping them into bits, which hung there, still wondering what went wrong. Chunks of wall and tile lay scattered on the floor.

It only took about thirty zillion trips between the sink and the plastic palm trees to fill those beer coolers with oh, I'd say ten gallons of water each, max. Not nearly enough, but that was maximum capacity. DeeDee helped Big Ohana scoot his bottom in. Gill Guy stuck his head all the way in, so deep his butt was straight up in the air.

Pffffffffttttlllllllllp.

Gill Guy let one rip. So loud. So so loud. Everyone looked.

Kevin waved four legs around his nose. "Excuse you. Geesh! They don't teach manners at Buckeye Lake?"

Pfffft.

"Seriously? Again?" Kevin screamed.

Pfffft. Rrrrrrt.

Just then, a cloud of noxious gas shot out of the grate. Well, Gill Guy was off the hook. It wasn't him. It was the drain. Whatever was in there rumbled, throwing Kevin off balance. "Woah woah woah!" His arms wriggled.

Pfffft. Fllllllpppppp. Pfffft. Rrrrrrt.

That drain farted and rumbled so hard, the ground shook. The rumbling spread. It felt like there was an earthquake right under us.

Pond Thing snatched Kevin with a vine, just as he was about to plummet into the drain, then moved in close and peered down in. "Oh, no. It followed us. It's here!"

The fish sticks looked at each other nervously. Gill Guy hopped up and ran. He made it as far as the last topiary god's carefully trimmed evergreen buttock. He ran gill first into Grandma Linda's overflowing bosom as she rounded the hedge. "Oh. Excuse me, big boy. Wow. Get a load a you!" She eyeballed Gill Guy up and down like he was fresh sashimi.

Oh. No. I felt all my blood run out of me, along with all hope. We were busted. The secret was out.

Pond Thing must have read my mind, because the second Gill Guy's face hit Grandma Linda's cleavage, he had a growth spurt. A row of what looked like bamboo and vines shot up out of the grass,

in a straight line between Grandma Linda and the rest of the watery party crashers. I ducked behind the edge.

"I'm looking for my grandson. I haven't seen him all night." Grandma Linda raised a single eyebrow as she spoke. "Are you a friend of his? Is this what you boys were up to? Costumes? I love it! Jenny and Lloyd really go to the outer limits to make parties special. They get that from me."

She winked at Gill Guy and smacked her gum. She ran her finger down his scaly green pec. "Now this is a high quality costume. So realistic. Where did you get it? You know, the Creature was always my favorite. So handsome. But sad. Minding his own business in that lagoon when those men came and messed it up. Although, I didn't mind those hunky scientists swimming around with their shirts off. Come on, honey. Let's get you a drink. You have to be dying of thirst in there!"

Gill Guy looked back at me in horror when Grandma Linda looped her arm through his and led him away. "Wait 'til the girls see you. You just made the party!"

I was thankful he couldn't talk. Because he had no way to explain what was really going on, and at this point, it's easier if he just rolls with it. The party couldn't get any worse, right?

"Phew. That was a close one," Kevin emerged from the carefully trimmed butt crack of a topiary god.

Pond Thing's bamboo wall retreated. He breathed a sigh of relief. It was short-lived. He said, "Gather your weapons. We must slay the beast!"

"Beast? What beast?" Kevin said.

"This way. Hurry! Hurry!"

Uh oh. That was Caroline's voice. I peeked between the evergreen biceps, and saw a soaking wet, ruffled Caroline speed walking straight at us, followed by two pudgy, hen-pecked security guards. She stopped to give them a quick once over. "Where's your gun? What do you mean you don't have a gun? What kind of security guard are you? I'm calling your manager. We need men who carry guns. There are dangerous creatures here. Monsters. Real monsters! Do you have any weapons at all?"

The men glanced at each other, and I swear I saw an eye roll when Caroline said the word “monster.” Caroline caught it and laid into them with a streak of threats so menacing they could make Sylvester Stallone quake in his socks. Their cheeks went white.

“They’re coming,” I said. “Run! Hide!”

I heard leaves rustling behind me. Before I could take cover, Caroline jumped out from behind the topiary and barked. “A ha! I caught you! The jig is up!” She turned to the security guards. “Get them. Now!”

The security guards rounded the corner.

Gulp. Well. This is it, then. Busted. I stood up stick straight and tried my best to make my face say, “nothing to see here, move along.”

It didn’t work. Their eyes went wide and round. Their mouths dropped in shock. Then one of them winked at me? “Sorry, son,” Officer Winky said. “Sorry to, uh, interrupt.”

Wait. What? I looked around. Everyone was gone. All gone. DeeDee, Kevin, the fish people, too.

The other officer stood up extra tall and straightened his collar, like he was trying hard to look professional. “Son, we all enjoy the company of beautiful ladies, but next time, can you two lovebirds wait until you get home?”

“What?”

“Ahem.” The officer pointed down.

Hogras was on her knees in front of me. From their view, it looked like she was—Oh. Oh. God! She looked up at me. Her mouth split into a wide, shark-toothed smile right next to my—Nope. No way. My hands immediately covered my crotch.

“But seeing as we didn’t actually catch you in the act, you haven’t technically done anything wrong.” He turned to Caroline. “See Ma’am? No monsters here. No one has used this pool in months. I don’t see any damage, but I do see neglect. Would you like me to call the gardening staff to come clear away the vines before they do permanent damage to the building?”

Vines?

“Psst. Here, kid.” Kevin waved at me from inside a very thick wall of vines, which had completely covered the side of the Parthenon pool house, and just happened to have concealed three fish monsters, a bombshell in a white bikini, and a dickhead cockroach in its canopy of leaves. Two red eyes blinked at me. Well played, Pond Thing. Well played.

I looked back as a security guard shook his head, rolled his eyes, and pulled his walkie talkie to his mouth. “Yeah. False alarm. Hold off on the police. No crime, no perp.”

The guards left, but not before one tilted his hat at me and gave me a thumbs up. Oh, my God. So embarrassing.

Caroline did not leave. “You,” she pointed at me. “You did this!”

Her face turned so red, her spray tan clicked from Palm Beach to stranded on a desert island. She looked like she was about to blow. Her lips pursed, and she huffed like her mouth was a pressure valve. She eyed the overgrown pool house, the naked—apart from a badly soiled country club towel, but thankfully with legs, not fins—siren on the ground in front of me. “Where are they? I saw them. I know I saw them!”

She kicked Hogras out of the way and grabbed me by the collar. “Those things. Where are they? I’m not crazy. I saw them. I know I saw them. Where did they go?”

She had gone from absolutely certain to sounding like she was convincing herself that she wasn’t crazy.

“What things?” I said. Man. I felt bad for her, because I could see her mind unraveling behind her streaked mascara, behind her wide, wild eyes. Been there. I get it. But the less she knew, the better off we would all be, so I lied.

“Another commandment broken.” Angel eight ball stopped behind Caroline to shoot me some mean triangle. “I’m writing that down. Let’s see here. Oh yes. Number eight. Wow. Slow down. Your spreadsheet is filling up fast!”

Ppffffffffftllllllp.

“What on God’s green earth was that?” Angel’s triangle shot side to side, up and down.

Shit. Literally. It was the drain again.

Caroline and I were overwhelmed by a cloud of noxious gas, so foul it smelled like a thousand boiling pit toilets. Angel eight ball rolled away. Caroline let go of me and covered her face. So did I. Unfortunately, so did Pond Thing, who could no longer hold form. Fish creatures fell, exposed, to the ground.

Caroline flipped into a combination of terrified and vindicated. "I KNEW IT!"

The ground shook, like the earth was about to crack open underneath us. It sent the siren and Caroline stumbling, intertwined, into the grass. I held on to the topiary to keep from falling.

"What the hell is that?" Kevin screamed as he squirmed, stuck in Pond Thing's slimy fingers.

"That is why we can't go home." Big Ohana dug his flippers into the grass, trying to get enough leverage to scoot away. "The creature has followed us!"

"What creature?" Kevin screamed.

They didn't answer. They didn't need to.

The rusty grate over the drain by the men's room door rose slowly into the air, held aloft by a thick viscous brown thing. It wasn't quite solid. It wasn't quite liquid. It looked like the rubbery crust on top of a really thick chocolate pudding. Except totally not delicious. Because it had clumps of garbage and turds stuck in it.

Vurp. Gonna barf. It looked as foul as it smelled.

The turd pudding thing hovered there, undulating and rippling, moving the top blob of itself back and forth slowly, as if it were looking around? Yep. It was looking around. Which meant the brown undulating garbage-filled turd blob was sentient.

The fish men and the siren retreated, flopping across the lawn past the terrified and paralyzed Caroline. She didn't know what she was more afraid of: The fish monsters or the sentient poo rising up out of the drain. Pond Thing wrapped around DeeDee to protect her. *Gah. Jerk!*

I screamed. "What is that thing?"

"That is the monster that has driven us from our homes," Pond Thing said. "We must join forces to slay it!"

"But what *is* it?"

The blobby thing shook, tossing the grate into the grass. Whatever it was, it didn't want to stay in the pipes.

"The plant kingdom gifted me with consciousness so that I could fight the waste of humanity."

"Yeah, yeah. We know," Kevin snipped. "Get to the point."

"The waste of humanity has gained consciousness, too. It has formed this creature, made of the excrement and littery waste of humans."

"What the hell does it want?"

"It's hungry. Insatiable. Eating everything in its path," Pond Thing said. "It won't stop until it's devoured the world."

Caroline screamed. Like a banshee, at the top of her lungs, in absolute terror. Which turned out to be a big mistake. Huge. Because the poo thing locked in on the sound. Then it attacked.



CHAPTER 14

THE POO CREATURE descended on Caroline Ford Vanderbilt, and by descended, I mean it swallowed her whole, like a giant poo boa constrictor eating a spray-tanned rat. It then spread out into the grass, looking very much like a very fat brown snake.

DeeDee hopped into action. She rolled through the grass and landed on her knees next to the creature. She hesitated, as if she wasn't quite sure what to do, then sunk both hands right in, elbow deep, in the fat part where Caroline was. Well, okay. It wasn't that fat, because Caroline was super skinny. DeeDee had to guess, but still.

"Help!" She turned to Big Ohana, who was closest. No luck. Those fish were all chicken. They turned tail—fin?—and ran, flopping across the grass like they were trying to win the hundred yard dash at the fishlympics. Sorko the siren dragged Big Ohana across the lawn, as far away from the creature as fast as she could move. "Lloyd, help me! She'll suffocate in there."

To Caroline's credit, she wasn't going down without a fight. I could see the lump of her punching around inside the poo monster, French manicure clawing at the bottles, caps, and junk blubbing around her in the goop. It wasn't enough, so I moved in next to DeeDee and took a deep breath. A very deep breath, because I didn't want to do this, but I didn't have much choice. DeeDee was right. We had to get her out of there. No one deserved to die like that, not even a stuck up sticky beet like Caroline. So I dropped down on my noodle knees, then went elbow deep into a puddle of sentient poop, trying—ironically—to rescue a total asshole. Remind me to apply for a new job on Monday.

I could feel her in there, wriggling. But oh my God, what an unholy feeling. The creature was constantly moving, undulating, like custard on a seesaw, up and down my arms. It felt like pudding, squishy and thick, but smelled like the Port-a-Pot at the county fair. The stench made my eyes and mouth water. I choked the bile back down, trying really hard not to barf. Because come on. We all know

the only thing that can make a backed-up, overflowing toilet worse is the guy who comes along and vomits right in the middle of it all.

I tugged and pulled. So did DeeDee. But we couldn't free her. Every time we'd pull a bit of Caroline out, the poo monster would just blub up right around her again. "This isn't working! Do you have any ideas?" DeeDee looked at me and said, "Don't. Move."

I followed her eyes. *Oh. Shit.* The poo creature had snaked all the way up to my shoulder. I tried to pull away, but it tightened around me. It had me. "Help!"

The creature grabbed the wad of plastic leis on my neck. It wrapped around and around, moving like a crank, pulling one flower at a time into some sort of poop brown pudding mouth. It munch munched them down, pulling my head closer with each bite. *It's gonna eat my face! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!*

Yeah. My mouth was too dry and hot to scream out loud.

DeeDee let go of Caroline and grabbed the leis. The poo monster yanked harder, my head lurched closer. Yep. Mom's soft spot for theme parties was literally going to kill me.

"Fight it, Lloyd. Fight!"

"I am!" But it was sucking in those plastic flowers like they were Fla-Vor-Ice, and I was the juicy syrup in the bottom of the tube. DeeDee tugged, trying to lift the leis up over the back of my head, but we didn't have much slack.

A voice rang out behind me, followed by the buzz of flapping tiny wings. "Back off, creep! No one eats my employees!" Kevin jump flew through the air, right at the creature, spritzing that small plastic bottle of hand sanitizer, screaming, "Bonzaiiiii!"

The poo monster stopped chomping. Kevin was enough of a distraction that DeeDee managed to yank the leis completely up and over my head as a cool, germ-killing mist rained down over us. The leis popped off me like a slingshot, catapulting straight into the poo mouth so hard the blob recoiled. DeeDee and I fell into the grass and watched the poo monster glug down those fake flowers. The creature rumbled and urrrped. I swear it grew fatter.

Kevin fluttered, wings buzzing, raining hand sanitizer down all over it.

“Keep spraying. Look!” DeeDee pointed to some divots in its body, teeny pinpricks where the hand sanitizer hit and it tried to draw away. “Corral it back into the drain!”

Kevin looped behind the creature and swooped in, wings buzzing, tiny arms pumping up and down as fast as that little plastic pump would pump. The creature didn't like it one bit. With every squirt, it rolled back, closer to the drain, recoiling. DeeDee rummaged around in the first aid kit.

“Here. Hurry.” She handed me a pile of alcohol swabs, then popped the top on a tube of antibacterial goop. She moved in next to the Caroline bump and squirted. The creature reared up and blurred, releasing gas in *pppppplttts* and *flllllpppts* in each spot DeeDee hit it with the goop. Caroline's face emerged, free of the muck. “It's working! We need more ammo. Hurry!”

Uh. I was, but EZ Tear my ass. These little packs were impossible to open. Kevin and DeeDee had corralled the poo beast to the drain—Caroline still stuck inside—before I even got one pack open. Finally, I made a dent in one with my teeth. I was so happy I yelled, “I got it. I got it!” And waved the wet sheet around in the air like a victory flag.

The poo monster looked at me, drawn by the noise, and reared up. *Uh oh.*

It lunged at me. My arms shot out, and no, not in a punch. That would be dignified. It was more of a “not in the face!” move.

The poo monster smacked directly into that open alcohol sheet. It stopped. It waved its blobby head back and forth, trying to shake the sheet free, but it was stuck on there really good, because hello. That creature was poo pudding. Sticky. The poo beast recoiled and bucked, flipped and flopped, pounding the grass, but that sheet stuck. It tried to retreat into the drain, but the slightly fatter bit with Caroline in it was too wide to fit through the opening.

Kevin managed to pop the lid off the bottle of hand sanitizer and flew in for the kill. He hovered above the thrashing monster and squeezed. A giant blob of clear antibacterial goop plooped right on the Caroline bump. The poo beast spit her out so fast, she flew through mid-air—a long, completely turd brown projectile, that in an

amazing feat of gymnastics, managed to perform a flawless tuck and somersault roll the second she hit the grass. Wow. All that SoulCycle, Pure Barre, and Zumba paid off. Caroline had some moves.

“Lloyd, help!” DeeDee lifted the rusty grate. I grabbed the other end.

Because sure enough, the foul smelling beast made of poo and litter fought valiantly, but was no match for the Country Club hand sanitizer. The poo monster made one last attempt to shake the alcohol sheet free, then retreated into the drain, defeated, but not before grabbing and absorbing one last empty, discarded water bottle out of the toppled trash can on its way out. DeeDee and I dropped the rusty grate over the drain the second its blobby head went in.

DeeDee gathered up the alcohol swab packs I'd dropped on the lawn and unwrapped them so fast her hands were a blur. Of course. Because she was a fucking ninja. EZ Tear for ninjas only, apparently. She laid the opened sheets carefully across the top of the grate, completely covering it. “I have a feeling that won't hold it for long. But it's worth a shot.”

“Man, I'm outta shape. I gotta get back to the gym.” Kevin panted. He lay in the fat curl of an evergreen bicep in the topiary, totally out of breath. “I hate to tell you this, but the fish sticks need to stick around. We need 'em to help us with this crap. Literally.”

The aforementioned fish sticks were nowhere to be seen. Neither was Pond Thing. He had officially made like a tree and split.

“So much for teaming up. Jerks,” Kevin said. “We need a plan for when that thing comes back.”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” A squeal, long and high like a pin prick in party balloon, cut through the air.

We all turned to the sound. It was Caroline, mouth open, eyes wide, lying in the wet grass, right where the poo monster spit her out. She sounded like she'd sprung a leak.

Well, at least she's alive. That was the only positive thing I could say.

She was absolutely coated head to toe in a thick layer of glistening, gelatinous brown poo slime. She looked like a giant dinosaur turd. For real, apart from the two bright white eyeballs punctuating a long, brown lump.

“You two find the fish people. They need to tell us everything they know about that thing. Any weaknesses, any way we can fight it if it comes back,” DeeDee said. “I’ll deal with her.”

Um, no. She won’t. Because the second DeeDee pointed at her, Caroline jumped up and ran screaming around the topiary, straight across the lawn, right into the now raucous crowd of drunk ladies and demon strippers. Strippers stripped all the way down to their underpants. They were tiny. So. So. Tiny.

Gah. No. Get your mind out of the gutter. Their *underpants* were tiny. Impossibly tiny, straining against the clench of impossibly tight buttocks. Man. Those demons really raised the bar for us regular human dudes.

The ladies and their nearly nude demon companions went dead silent when Caroline drew near, arms waving, fast and random, like a wacky wiggler water toy. Caroline, nearly unrecognizable in her coating of poo, screamed, “Monsters! Monsters! Monsters!” at anyone brave enough to look at her or get close. Thankfully, hardly anyone did, because hello, covered in poo. But this was a charity volunteer event, so of course some ladies moved in and tried to help. They quickly pulled back, in part because of her crazed yelling and arm waving, but mostly because of the smell.

And boy, did she smell. Really bad. So bad I could smell her all the way over here. That, and it had become clear she was naked under all that muck. The poo monster had eaten her dress.

“Well, then. Secret’s out,” DeeDee said. “Her dress was polyester blend. Off the rack. Imagine the scandal.”

Caroline kept yelling and jumping and wacky wiggling, until she tripped and fell over some pool chairs, and nearly landed face first in the hot tub. She came eye to eye with Gill Guy as his scaly green head rose out of the steaming bubbles.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Caroline in sheer panic, stumbled to her feet. She ran, screaming, “Monsters! Monsters!” right on out through the

French doors.

The entire party went silent for a moment. All you could hear was a guitar riff of...I don't even know what that is.

"Really, kid? It's Whitesnake. Duh. Do you live under a rock?" Kevin shook his head. Yes. He was judging me. He suddenly perked up. "Hey. You think we could get one of these MILFs drunk enough to roll around on the hood of a Jaguar like Tawny Kitaen? Now that's a party. What kinda car does Caroline drive? Let's make this happen."

"Seriously? That's what you're worried about?"

"Hey. I have dreams, too, you know."

Morty didn't like the silence. Any interruption in the party mood was what he would refer to as a "boner killer." He grabbed Mrs. Miller by the hand, and the two of them cannon balled straight into the pool. The ladies erupted in hoots. Then all of them—every single one—broke out into a sprint. In under a minute, the pool was filled with splashing, laughing, completely drunk, fully clothed middle aged moms and grandmas. And mostly naked demons in thongs, of course.

"That's more like it," Kevin said. "Friday night, am I right?"

"Those demons better stay away from my Mom."

"No promises, kid," Kevin shook his head. "If I were you, I'd be more worried about Grandma Hot to Trot. She's about to bone a frog man. Look."

Sure enough. Grandma Linda had her cha cha heels off, discarded in a pile by the hot tub. She had shimmied her dress up and sat on the side with her feet in the bubbles, running her hand up and down Gill Guy, eyeing him like he was filet mignon. Wait. He's a fish, so more like a bacon-wrapped scallop. And worse, he seemed to be warming to the idea.

"Well." Kevin shrugged. "He said he was lonely."

"Wow. You were right, Kev. This place is posh. Did you try the soap in the shower?" DeeDee emerged from the remains of the Parthenon pool house, sparkling clean from head to toe, smelling like an exotic fruit basket, rubbing her hair with a clean white club towel.

Oh. My. God. Part of my soul died. Clean? DeeDee just got all soapy in a steaming hot shower, in a bikini, like ten feet away from me and I totally missed it. Worst. Friday. Ever.

"My guess is our party crashers retreated to the deep end. We better feed them, so they don't eat any of the guests." She tossed a towel at me. "Now get cleaned up. We don't have much time."

Kevin scuttled to the drain and stuck his head under the edge of the alcohol sheets we'd laid across it. "Huh. Will you look at that? The drain's totally clear. No sign of poo guy," he said. "Looks like we scared it off. The day is saved. Time to party. Now, which one of you is gonna go to the bar and get me a drink? And where did you put my Milky Way, kid? All this monster slaying worked up my appetite."



CHAPTER 15

YOU CAN PROBABLY GUESS who had to go to the bar to get Kevin that drink. It was me.

But DeeDee's job was worse. Trust me. She filched the tray of tuna sandwiches off the potluck table and took them to the deep end, where she sat slipping them to the fish monsters on the sly to keep them from eating Mom's friends.

When I circled back to the pool, Kevin floated by me in a pink flamingo drink holder. I slipped him his Milky Way, and he cradled it like it was a bar of solid gold. "Mmm. Come to papa." He gently peeled away the corner of the wrapper and drew in a long, deep breath. "Delicious. I earned this."

One of Big Ohana's minions crested the water by the diving board and snatched a tuna salad sandwich triangle out of DeeDee's hand, like a dolphin in a Sea World show.

"How can you think of food at a time like this?" I stood on the pool ledge, watching the fish guys circling in the deep.

"Geesh, kid. Relax! The poo monster's gone. We sanitized it into oblivion. Problem solved."

"Problem not solved!" I glanced at Grandma Linda, whispering sweet nothings into Gill Guy's ear. Well, not an ear. It was a hole where an ear should be. Because the DUDE IS A FISH!

"Look. I called Doc. He's coming to erase Caroline's memory as soon as he's done digging through that dusty old pawn shop for a map of the sewer. We feed the fish sticks, then we send them to Washington so they can scare the shit out of Congress. We get to drink and party. Everyone wins. Everyone's happy."

I watched a fin crest just as my Mom, cheeks pink, smiling ear to ear—totally drunk—floated by in an inner tube, green cocktail in hand, with a nearly naked Morty paddling along behind her. Morty flashed a small rubber ring at Kevin. "Mind if I borrow this?"

He winked at me as he kicked by.

I broke out in a cold sweat. Oh. Hell. No. That was Kevin's cock ring! Morty better keep that demon dick away from my Mom!

"Kid. As your manager, I order you to relax. Have a drink. It's summer!"

"I can't relax! Get these demons out of here!"

"What's the rush? I don't see anybody complaining." He opened wide and was about to bite a massive hunk out of his Milky Way when a huge bubble blurbled right up under him and nearly tipped him out of his flamingo. "Wha? Woah!"

It wasn't a lone bubble. More came and bigger. Kevin buffeted in the waves like one of those arctic crab boats on *Deadliest Catch*. DeeDee looked at me. I looked at her. We both peered down into the black depths of the deep end.

"Hey. Fish king. Take it easy down there!" Kevin yelped as he rolled around loose in the cupholder, trying to decide if he should hold on to the candy bar or the Wild Turkey 101 neat in a rocks glass I'd dropped in the flamingo with him.

A clump of leaves floated by on its way to the filter. Scratch that. It wasn't leaves. It was Pond Thing. A tiny bump of algae with a face on it rose up out of the center and turned to Kevin.

"Oh. Look who it is. Pond Chicken," Kevin snipped. "Thanks for the assist earlier. Oh no, wait. My mistake. You hung us out to dry back there. Leave me alone. I wanna enjoy this hunk of milk chocolate caramel nougat deliciousness in peace."

"I am ashamed to say you are correct. We had no choice but to run. We have faced the brown beast before and failed. It is insatiable. We cannot defeat it alone." Pond Thing's slimy lower lip quivered, and I swear a tiny green tear oozed down his cheek. "Take up your arms, for the monster has returned. We must clear the water at once. The leg women are in danger."

"What? Hell no. We scared it away. It's gone." Kevin peered over the edge of his floaty. "See? I don't see anything!"

But I did. The pool lights on either side of the diving board dimmed, then went completely black as poo pudding seeped over the bulbs, filling the covers. This was not good. Not good at all. My heart nearly kicked out of my ribcage. I could see the outline of three fish guys and two fat sirens heading for the shallows. Gill Guy knew what was up, too. He had gone white with terror. Oh. No. Wait. He

didn't see the poo monster. Grandma Linda was just trying to get to second base.

DeeDee backed away from the pool when a viscous blob pushed out through a jet. Its bulb of a head looked around, then snatched a pink pool float as it bobbed by. It sucked it in, eating it whole. The beast trembled, grew fatter, then slid blob first into the water, its long brown body stretching out of the drain, down the pool wall into the black deep.

She said, "Get everyone out of the water, now!"

The pool was absolutely packed with ladies, laughing and swimming, having the time of their lives, oblivious to the threat closing in.

"Everyone. Out." A whisper squeaked out of me. I intended to scream. I was definitely screaming on the inside. But it's like my throat got tight the second my knees went weak. Yes. Panicking. Because that monster was *still* squirting out of the pool vent like evil chocolate soft serve, no end in sight.

Kevin sighed, then looked at his Milky Way longingly. He ripped the wrapper completely off and threw the hunk of chocolate into the water. "Watch and learn, kid. THIS is how you clear a pool."

Then, he jump flew up out of his floaty just as the poo monster reared up and grabbed that small plastic flamingo and pulled it down into the depths. It didn't eat the Milky Way, which floated silently toward the shallow end, looking, ironically, more like a turd than the actual poop monster lurking in the water.

Kevin buzzed away. Then, the music abruptly stopped and the voice of a terrified DJ sounded across all the speakers. "Attention, everyone. Someone pooped in the pool. I repeat. Someone pooped in the pool. Please exit the water immediately so we can clean it up." Before the mic clicked off, I heard the DJ mutter, "I quit. This place is a zoo."

Swimmers, demon and human, turned to look at the humble Milky Way floating innocently across the water, buffeted by the ripples of the real poop monster lurking in the deep, and they splashed out of there like they'd just spotted a great white shark.

Kevin flew up and landed on my shoulder. "I stole that move from Caddy Shack. It's a classic for a reason. Works every time."

Grrrrlp.

No. That wasn't the poo monster. That was Kevin's stomach rumbling. "Those fish sticks owe me a candy bar. I'm starving."

In two minutes flat, that pool was empty. All that was left were a few lone leis and neon shreds of plastic grass skirt floating on the waves. The poo monster rolled across the bottom, rearing up to eat them.

"Look at it. Everything it eats, it gets bigger," Kevin said. "I don't know if you can even call that eating. More like absorbing,"

"Absorbing?" DeeDee walked up. She watched the beast suck in a plastic pineapple drink cup, tremble, then expand. "I've got an idea."

"All right. Let's hear it," Kevin said.

She said, "Steve McQueen."

Kevin huffed. "Is that one of your new boyfriends? I don't think the flavor of the month is gonna help clean the angry poop out of the pool, not even for you."

"No. Steve McQueen!" She looked at me. She looked at Kevin. "I'll explain later. Just call Doc and ask him to make the portal bigger, ASAP. I have an idea. It's crazy, but it just might work."

"Yeah, sure, sweets. Sure. But just so we're on the same page here, we're not sending the strippers back," Kevin said. "We need the distraction. Plus, Morty's got a party bus parked outside just in case we need to evacuate. That's the *emergency* emergency back-up plan."

"Oh, the strippers are staying," she said. "But Caroline's missing ice sculpture is about to be delivered."



CHAPTER 16

THIS WAS A MISTAKE. A really big one.

Mrs. Miller stepped up and rubbed Bubby right on his icy belly. “Caroline has really outdone herself. I’ve never seen an ice sculpture so...*big!*”

Bubby tried really really hard to stay still, shoulders back, claw-tipped arms artfully posed like a ballet dancer. Well, if that ballerina was a giant blue centipede. Made of Arctic-cold jelly. From hell. Unfortunately, he was ticklish, and Mrs. Miller had unwittingly zoned in on his most sensitive bits. His eyebrows squinched together, and some of his back legs were shaking. I could hear them splashing in the pool.

He looked like a golden retriever getting a belly rub from his favorite human, until Mrs. Miller said, “Such attention to detail. But damn, it’s ugly. If you’re gonna pay top dollar for an ice sculpture, why on earth would you choose a giant fat insect? First she runs around naked, covered in poop, screaming about monsters, and now this? Look out, girls. Caroline’s having a mental breakdown. Her perfect life is finally starting to crack.”

Did I mention Mrs. Miller’s filter completely shuts down when she consumes alcohol?

Bubby tried his best to stand up straight and tall, but he was a sensitive soul. He deflated ever so slightly under Mrs. Miller’s barbs. It didn’t help that Kevin, sitting on his shoulder, said, “You wouldn’t be so fat and ugly if you hadn’t eaten all my Milky Ways.”

Yeah. Let me back up. That big portal DeeDee wanted? It was for Bubby. He was the stand in for Caroline’s ice sculpture. Doc and I—with the help of three waiters and four dollies—had managed to wheel him from the pool house to the end of Caroline’s fancy buffet. The charity ladies were so busy oohing and awing they didn’t notice DeeDee moving around behind Bubby, pushing his long, fat backside and zillion legs into the pool.

And the Milky Way? Kevin told Bubby to bring him a new one, since he’d sacrificed his in the Caddy Shack incident. But Bubby,

who had never tasted a Milky Way, wanted to know what the fuss was about. So he ate one. He loved it so much, he ate three whole boxes. Which unfortunately equaled the entire stock on hand at the 24/7 Demon Mart. The next shipment didn't come in until Thursday.

Bubby had a shame-ring of chocolate all the way around his mouth, and Kevin was salty, to say the least. "Look at me. I can't just walk into any store and buy another one. I'm a roach! I blame you, too, you know."

Kevin turned around to yell at Doc, who stood behind Bubby's rump, sniffing, eyes glued to the tipsy yet determined Grandma Linda flirting with Gill Guy on the other side of the pool.

"Silence, Bug man. You did not tell me the large lovely woman was here!" Doc's bottom lip quivered, and then he projectile cried. Like seriously. Tears shot straight out of his eyes horizontally, so hard they sprinkled my face.

"Well, duh! You wouldn't have come!" Kevin said.

"It is too late. I have lost her," Doc sobbed. We're talking a shoulders-heaving sob, just so we're all clear here. "She is in love with the turtle man. I am replaced."

Kevin shrugged. "Eh. I'm thinking it's more of a rebound."

"Bwa huh huh." Doc collapsed into a pile of incredibly buff, ugly-crying muscles.

My head spun. *What. The. Fuck. Is. Happening?* My Mom's party is filled with demons, hell bugs, sea monsters, and—hello!—a huge sentient poop monster, and now Doc's crying about Grandma? Like I needed to be reminded of their Christmas Eve shenanigans?

Kevin sighed. "Wow, kid. You really didn't know? Doc and Grandma Hot Pants have been going heavy since Christmas. Doc said it was all true love and shit. Until she dumped him."

"Grandma?" Woah boy. I didn't think tonight could get worse, but it's worse. Oof. Was the room spinning or was it just me? I fell against Bubby, for moral and physical support.

"That's it, kid. Pull yourself together." Kevin pointed a very angry leg at me. "We have to save the day whether you like it or not, and in order to do that, you need to have your head on straight. For once. And YOU."

He pointed at Doc. "Man up and win your woman back. Or don't. Either way, we have a job to do. Got it?"

Kevin put his tiny legs on his hips. His chest puffed up. I'd never seen him look so...so...managerial. He looked at me. "This is how you team-build, kid. Now. DeeDee. You have the floor. Tell us the plan."

DeeDee stood next to me. In her bikini. Man, I hate to say this, but Kevin was right. I really did need to pull myself together. Because *bikini*. Men, including me, dreamed of the day they'd get to watch DeeDee walk around in so little, but I was so flustered I kept missing it. Oh shit. She'd already started talking, and I missed that, too! Head definitely not on straight. I shook it off and tried really hard to tune in on the conversation. Unfortunately, it didn't sound like things were going well.

Kevin had unpuffed. "That's it? Did you hit your head? Do you need to go to the hospital?"

"No, silly. Steve McQueen!" She looked at me, like I was supposed to back her up. "Wow. Really, guys? Steve McQueen? Star of The Blob? The poo monster reminds me of The Blob. The way it moves, the way it grows after it absorbs the things around it. It's just like the movie. Well, except it's only eating poop, plastic and garbage. Not people. At least not yet. If it's anything like the movie, we have to freeze it to kill it. Bubby is arctic cold. Most of his body is in the pool. The water should freeze solid in no time."

"We went to all this trouble." Kevin rubbed his eyes like his head hurt. "For a grand plan you stole from a movie?"

"Do you have a better idea?" She dug her hands into her hips.

Kevin looked at me. I looked at him. We looked at Doc. No, we did not have a better idea.

"That's what I thought," she said.

"We are out of time." Doc pointed at the pool.

The water was no longer blue. It was completely brown. It had turned thick, viscous, a Presidential Pool full of angry chocolate turd pudding. A round blobby head rose up like a periscope and started looking around, like it was deciding where to go and what to eat next. That blob was right next to Gill Guy, who tried to flee, but was

trapped, unable to escape the glitter-manicured clutches of my inebriated, horny grandma.

His yellow eyes went wide as we all watched the poo monster snatch one of Grandma Linda's cha cha heels off the pool deck, flip it up in the air, open wide, and swallow it. Grandma Linda's back was turned, claws gripping Gill Guy's shoulder as she balanced on one cha cha heel, looking for her missing—now eaten—shoe. “Help me find it, sugar. It's around here somewhere. I can't lose it. This is my favorite pair!”

Click. Thump. Click. Thump. Click. Thump.

That was the sound of Grandma Linda pacing the pool deck in one high- heeled shoe, as she sipped on her extra large glass of spiked sherbet punch. She looked like the world's tackiest merry-go-round horse, her bright orange wig moving up and down with every step. Until she stopped suddenly and peered down into the pool. “Dear Lord! What's wrong with the water? I've never seen a pool that looked like that.” Her nose squinched. “Geesh. You'd think a place this classy could afford to clean the filter more often.”

She didn't realize she was talking to no one, because Gill Guy tucked and rolled out of there the second she let go of him. She turned to say something to him, but he was gone. A ghost. She looked around, confused. I spotted him hiding behind a palm tree. A suspiciously mobile, out of place palm tree with glowing red eyes. A palm tree that also shielded three trembling fish men and two rode hard sirens.

“Useless. All of them.” Kevin huffed. “These guys are the chickens from the poo lagoon.”

“Guys,” DeeDee whispered. “I think it's working.”

Sure enough, the water around Bubby's tail had begun to freeze. But stop right there. It did not look like one of those blue arctic streams you see on the Travel Channel. No way. It looked like a muddy puddle flash frozen into diarrhea-brown ice. Kinda like a Coke slushy, except stinky, and with layers of bottle caps, grocery bags, dog turds, and fast food cups suspended in it. The ice patch ran the length of the pool above Bubby's tail. The edges undulated, churning

in rough, thick waves, as the poo monster fought against the freeze. It was trying to get away.

What if it gets away? “Uh, are you sure this is gonna work?”

DeeDee squeezed my arm. “I sure hope so. I'm out of ideas.”

Great. Just great. Because y'all know I don't have any ideas.

Fortunately, Doc was already working on a Plan B. We spotted him on the other side of the pool, wobbling out of some sort of utility shed, absolutely loaded down with buckets and bottles. Pool cleaners. Clarifiers. Disinfectant. Shock. Bleach. Just about every chemical that could possibly treat water.

He stopped at the edge of the hot tub and positioned himself behind one of the Greek columns, out of view of Grandma Linda, who was completely oblivious to the poo monster's ever more violent swirls and blurbs. It fought against the expanding deep freeze from Bubby's behind, and man. It looked mad.

Doc popped the top on a bottle of chemicals, positioned himself by a skimmer, and began to pour. The creature immediately recoiled, pushing away from the bleachy disinfectant with such force that it formed a reverse tidal wave, pulling away from the pool edge, moving up up into a thick pudding-like wall. It was like a biblical parting of the brown sea.

Angel eight ball rolled across the pool deck. “Tell me about it. Although, Moses was a much snazzier dresser than you are.”

DeeDee squeezed my arm even tighter. Yeah. I feel you, girl. This had better work, because I did not want my Mom on a party bus with Morty.

Mrs. Miller squealed behind me. “Oh, Caroline. Look! Your ice sculpture finally arrived. It's so...*original*. But, do they usually melt this fast?”

Caroline? Melt? Dear God. No!

I turned around, but trust me, it took work. Because my feet felt like they had suddenly filled with lead. Good thing, though, because my heavy feet were the only thing keeping me upright on my panic noodle legs.

Caroline Ford Vanderbilt stood in front of Bubby. She was clean. She'd clearly taken a shower. She stood soaking wet—in a very

Sports Illustrated Swimsuit model kind of way—wearing only a plush white club robe. Unfortunately, she looked more frozen than Bubby did. She didn't move. Her eyes were as round as silver dollars, staring up at his round blue face.

This is bad. Really, really bad. But—and I never thought I'd say this—we had bigger problems.

Bubby didn't look so good. He looked like a snowman on a hot asphalt parking lot in mid-July. He tried his best to stay still, but he was sweating bullets. A puddle of bug perspiration had formed on the concrete all around him. He was absolutely dripping with sweat. His claw arms were shaking.

DeeDee whispered, “He wasn't built to withstand hot summer nights.”

And worse, all the ladies had gathered around him, eyebrows squinching together in concern over their quickly deteriorating art centerpiece.

Morty—rhinestone thong sparkling under the disco party lights he'd installed in the DJ booth—stepped up, inserting himself between the ladies and Bubby. He winked at me and said, “I'll take it from here, champ.”

He had a garden hose in his hand. He turned to the ladies, and said in a loud, smarmy voice, “Mmm mmm mmm. How did I get to be the luckiest man in the world, surrounded by so many delicious, hot young babes?” His hips moved in circles as he spoke, like he was a batter winding up to hit a ball out of the park. Suddenly, none of the ladies were looking at Bubby. “Let me hear the sexiest ladies in C-Bus shout.”

Mom's kindly charity ladies reared their heads back and howled at the moon like they had suddenly transformed into freaking werewolves. Including my Mom. MY MOM!

“Let's go. He's got it handled.” DeeDee pulled me away, just as Morty—punctuated by bare-bottomed hip thrusts—said, “Mmm yeah. That's right, ladies. Me and my boys will do whatever it takes to get you absolutely soaking wet!”

He pointed that hose at the sky and sprayed. Water arced up in the air, showering down over the ladies, who had now whipped

themselves into full Dionysian frenzy. Ice cold water rained down over everyone. The ladies, Morty—who somehow managed to make wielding a garden hose look straight-up pornographic—and all over Bubby, who absorbed the ice cold water like a dry dish sponge in Death Valley. Bubby looked relieved.

Phew. Crisis averted!

Or not. No. Definitely not. Because a face rose before mine, mere inches from my nose. An angry face. Caroline Ford Vanderbilt's face. "You. YOU!" She grabbed my arm and dug her French manicured nails into my flesh. "You and your family. The monsters. My restaurant. My car. It's YOU! You're CURSED!"

"Lady, you don't know the half of it," DeeDee said.

Caroline had her full-on crazy eyes locked on me. Seriously, I could see the whites all the way around her pupils. Literally crazy eyes. She growled, "*Cursed!*"

Then she pushed me. Hard. I fell flat on my butt. Caroline darted around the pool, fast as a bullet, straight to Grandma Linda. Caroline jabbed her finger in Grandma Linda's chest, barking something at her. Accusing? I couldn't hear exactly, but it sounded like Grandma said, "Who are you calling a witch?"

Dude. Mistake. Arguing with Grandma Linda was like poking a bear. A big, tacky technicolor bear.

And worse, when I looked at the pool? Bubby's ice patch had receded. His powers had lagged. Even with the hose, he couldn't stand the heat. Kevin had a pool net and stood by the pool, chopping at one of the many blobby solid bits rising along the edges, trying to escape. DeeDee grabbed a rescue hook off the lifeguard stand and joined Kevin in the fight.

"Keep pouring, Doc! We gotta clean this bitch like it's a gas station toilet!" Kevin screamed. "This monster is all germs and turds. We kill the germs, we kill the monster!"

"I am pouring, Bug Man," Doc said, as he literally double-fist dumped pool shock into the water. "The bleach is circulating through the filter. The beast is surrounded!"

Sure enough, the creature had retreated from every jet blowing the chemically treated water back into the pool. And Bubby had deep

frozen it right down the middle. Oh my God. I think we might pull this off. We might actually be winning! Yay!

Just as a smile spread across my face, the poo monster formed a huge blob and rose above Grandma Linda and Caroline, who were so busy arguing, they didn't see the monstrous turd. It wobbled, following the bright orange of Grandma Linda's wig as she sparred with Caroline.

Uh oh. It's hungry. It's looking for a meal. And Grandma Linda's cheap plastic wig looked delicious. "Grandma!"

Too late. In a flash, the poo monster snatched them both up and pulled them in.



CHAPTER 17

“GRANDMA! Noooooooooooooooooooooo!”

I screamed. And this is going to sound crazy, but that scream rattled something loose inside me. It's like the vibration flipped a switch and activated the action man I always knew was lurking deep down inside me. Well, maybe. My brain most likely short circuited, and the wires between the part where my video game memories lived got crossed with the part that actually made my body move. Because I jumped. Literally, right onto the patch of ice Bubby had made in the pool. I careened across that thing, slip sliding across the poo ice on my belly, like it was the world's most disgusting, dirtiest Slip 'N' Slide.

Which sounds like yet another panic-fueled Lloyd move. But it wasn't. This was different, I swear. Because I did it on purpose, not by accident. I made the choice. Why? Because it was the fastest route to Grandma, and I had to save Grandma.

Of course, I still wasn't sure how I would save her, but I had until I hit the other side to figure it out.

Crrrrr. Kreeeee. Crrrrr.

Uh oh. I looked down. That was the sound of cracking ice. The pudding poo blobs punched and churned, breaking apart the frozen Bubby bridge beneath me. Not good. I looked up to see how far I had to go.

Smack. Ow. Never mind. I made it. I hit the metal and concrete pool edge. With my face.

“Get up, New Man,” Doc barked at me. “Hurry!”

“Yeah. Sure. Be right there.” When I stop seeing stars.

It took a few very long seconds, but I somehow managed to pull myself up onto the pool deck. Just in time, too. Bubby's ice patch broke apart, and the poo monster slurped down and reabsorbed the loose frozen chunks, one by one.

Doc was on his knees. He had both hands down in the water. Or so I thought. When I scrambled up next to him, I couldn't believe what I saw. The poo monster hadn't eaten Grandma or Caroline.

They were in the pool all right, but the poo monster had formed a pocket around them, just big enough for the two of them. Walls of angry poo churned up and down all around them, but didn't attack.

I could tell it wanted to. Like, it really wanted to eat Grandma's big plastic beehive right off her head, but every time it reached out for her, it snapped back, like she had some invisible protective force field around her. Weird. But bonus, they were fine. For now. Grandma Linda even had her drink in her hand, and it was still full. Mostly. Caroline's robe had a pink patch on the collar where some of it had spilled.

"Grab the mean woman," Doc nodded at Caroline. "I will save Linda."

Great. Not exactly who I came here to save, but clearly Doc had Grandma Linda covered. The two of them had locked eyes. Doc held tight to her one drink-free hand with both of his.

She said, "What are you doing here, sugar cheeks?"

"I am here to save you, my love," he said.

Ahem. Awkward. I did *not* need to know which of his cheeks she was referring to as sugar. Nope. Don't tell me. We will never speak of this again.

Caroline, however, was not having an epic romantic moment in the bottom of the pool while surrounded by thousands of gallons of angry, sentient poop. She stood there staring at the churning wall of poop goop not moving. At all. She didn't even blink. She was so still, she could be a statue. It's like she'd been Botoxed head-to-toe.

Angel eight ball rolled up to the pool ledge. "Well, she looks surprised. You know, Lot's wife had that same look on her face when she turned to salt." His triangle turned. "Next time, I recommend being a little more careful with your wishes. Caroline is not handling the whole monsters are real thing very well. Quick question: You've never engaged in bestiality, right? I put a zero in that column, but one can never assume."

"What? No!"

"Okay. Great. Because that's a sin. Plus, it means you're super desperate. And, ew." Then he rolled away. Without helping me.

Again. Did I mention he's the least helpful guardian angel in the universe?

He shot me some shade triangle. "I told you. I'm busy. I have to work *all* weekend. The paperwork is unbelievable!"

I reached for Caroline. "Take my hand. Come on. You need to get out of there." She didn't move. It's like I didn't even register as existing. So kinda like any normal day with Caroline. I cleared my throat, and said in my sternest, manliest voice, "Caroline Ford Vanderbilt. Grab my hand!"

She didn't respond. Huh. She loved it when people called her by all three of her snooty names. If that didn't work, she must really be in bad shape. Doc grunted behind me as he attempted to lift Grandma Linda out of the pool. No easy task. He was strong all right, but Grandma Linda was hardly petite. He did manage to move her up a bit. And as soon as Grandma Linda's cha-cha heel lifted off the bottom, the poo quickly filled the spot where it once stood.

The wall wasn't gonna hold for long. And Caroline would be eaten, so I jumped down in next to her. Dude. I know. Stupid move, but that inner action man was still rattling around in there. The second my feet touched bottom, the poo monster slurped the flip flops right off my feet, and *nom nom nommed* them down. Okay. Action man gone. Chicken shit returned. I grabbed her and shook. "Caroline! Caroline!"

She didn't move. Angel was right. All these monsters had short-circuited her brain. "Snap out of it! We gotta go!"

"Hurry, New Man. The wall will not hold! Guuuuuuuuh. Drop the drink, woman. I need both your hands!"

Doc strained, wrestling Grandma Linda up out of that pool like he was reeling in a marlin in a fishing rodeo. Grandma Linda didn't make it easy. She held that spiked sherbet punch to her chest like it was a newborn baby.

"No way. My brother only makes this once a year. I won't waste a single drop!" So instead of offering Doc her other hand, she planted her one remaining cha cha heel into the pool plaster and pushed herself nearly out of the pool with one thrust of her giant thigh. Which

I only know because her massive behind hit my head on her way up, nearly knocking me into a wall of poop.

Speaking of, the poo wall closed in tighter and my heart nearly stopped. Because oh shit. Literally. We were about to be eaten by shit! My whole body tingled, like someone started poking me with live wires. That must have been my survival instinct kicking in, because a heat rose inside me and suddenly, I grabbed Caroline and pushed her up up up as hard as I could. She rolled out, right onto the pool deck. Manly, right? Yeah. Hello adrenaline! But before you're too impressed with my brute strength, remember Caroline hasn't eaten carbs since the 1990s and weighed maybe a hundred pounds on a cheat day. So yeah. It was like lifting a sack of air in a terrycloth robe. But still.

The poo wall blurred closer, so I started to crawl out, which was way harder than it sounded. I couldn't get much of a grip on anything. Pool sides weren't made for climbing, and unlike Grandma Linda, I didn't have a spike heel to use as a crampon. (Hey. I said crampon, not tampon. You know, those metal spiky mountain climbing shoes? I saw them on the Nature Channel. See? I know things!)

Anyway, I grunted and strained, and kicked and pulled, until I managed to wrestle my top half up and out. I flopped onto the pool deck. It didn't look pretty, but who cares. I lay there for a hot minute, face on the concrete, catching my breath.

Doc grunted and heaved, and finally, FINALLY managed to pull Grandma Linda completely out of the pool. The second her fat, naked foot rose above the plaster, the poo wall collapsed, and the monster reclaimed the bubble. Unfortunately, my legs were still in it. The monster wrapped around my bottom half and pulled. "It's got meeeeeeeee! Aaaaah!"

The poo monster sucked, trying to slurp me off the pool deck like Lloyd pudding off a spoon. I held onto the concrete for dear life. The poo monster sucked and slurped and squeezed, trying to eat the swim trunks right off me. "Help! Hurry!"

Woah. Boy. They better hurry, or this was going to be a *really* embarrassing save.

Angel rolled up, casually. Too casually. “Guess what. Zack from accounts receivable popped by. Fun fact: This party just broke a record for most lustful thoughts in menopausal women! Jennifer's friends are a bunch of horny perverts. Yes. I was surprised, too. You never can tell by looking.”

“Help!” I squeaked, then grabbed for the waist band of my soon-to-be-eaten swim trunks.

Angel's triangle looked up. “Well, holy crap. Or should I say unholy crap? This situation went downhill fast.”

Shlooooooop!

That was the poo monster. It sent a sticky brown feeler out, and grabbed hold of Angel, who was now trying desperately to roll away, but couldn't. “What? What's happening? Let go!” His triangle turned. “I've got a month's worth of paperwork to catch up on. I don't have time for this!”

Thankfully, Doc noticed that angel and I were up shit creek. Or in poo pond. Either way. He held Grandma Linda in his arms like a hero on the cover of a romance novel. He said to her, “I must save him,” then her toes gently touched the cement as she slid down off of him like he was Fabio.

Blech. If I wasn't busy hanging on white knuckled to the pool deck, I would definitely run away. Or barf. No one needs to see that.

Doc kissed Grandma Linda's hand, then grabbed the last full bottle of pool shock out of the pile of empties. He poured it directly onto the poo monster, in the spot above my legs. The thing didn't like it one bit. It sucked harder and not in a good way. At. All. So hard, it started pulling me slowly across the cement. “Aaaaaaaaah!”

Grandma Linda jumped into action, as if my scream triggered some sort of deep reptilian instinct to save one's offspring. Or in my case, her offspring's offspring. She kicked into full-on trailer-park cat-fight mode. In one smooth move, she slipped off her one remaining shoe and raised it over her head, wielding the heel like a weapon. She leapt through the air, yelling, “Get your filthy hands off my grandson!”

Cocktail still in her other hand. Because Grandma Linda did not leave good men, nor cocktails, behind. But her spiked sherbet punch

was not gonna survive the move. As she arced through the air, the frothy pink syrup splashed up up over the rim, cresting like a Japanese wave painting. She thumped to the ground directly above me, one fat foot landing on either side of my body. She thrust the heel straight down into the poo wave as it opened wide to gobble me up. “No one eats my grandson! Die! Die! Die!”

The poo monster let go. My legs were free! I kicked and crawled, lightning speed, right on through my Grandma's fat thighs and cowered behind her varicose-veined knees. I watched as the beast rose, like a monolith, before Grandma Linda and Doc. Doc doused it with the last of the pool shock, and it emitted a horrified high-pitched *screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee* as the top of it thrashed back and forth, in what looked like some sort of death throes.

At that moment, I finally understood the depth of my Grandma's love for me. Because, unfazed and without hesitation, she screamed, “just die already!” and threw her glass of spiked sherbet punch right at it.

The poo beast opened wide and swallowed the glass—and the spiked sherbet punch—whole. It went completely and totally still.

Blrrrrrrrrrp. Grrrrrrrrrrp.

Its belly rumbled. Uh oh. It's growing again.

Pwwwwwwuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrrrrrrrp.

Or not. That was a fart. A noxious, horrible rotten fart. It held its poo belly like it had indigestion.

Splllllllllurrrrrrrrrrrrrrp. Splllllllllurrrrrrrrrrrrrrp. Splllllllllurrrrrrrrrrrrrrp.

That was the sound it made when it sucked itself into the pool drain, so fast, and so hard, the entire pool was completely empty in two minutes flat. Even the water disappeared. All that was left was Bubby's tail, two very wet, gloppy cha cha heels, and one very unhappy guardian angel.

We did it. We won.



CHAPTER 18

“No, no, no. You got turned around in Pittsburgh. Go *this* way, and once you get to the Potomac, head southeast. You can swim straight into Washington D.C.” Kevin pointed at a very old, very large map Doc had brought from the Pawn Shop. Pond Thing and Big Ohana listened with rapt attention.

“How will we know we're in the correct building?” Pond Thing asked. “We do not want to make a mistake again.”

“See this round white place? That's the Capitol building. Those are the people you wanna see.” Kevin handed them a yellowing strip of old tourist post cards, safely waterproofed in a sealed Ziploc bag. “Plus, if ninety percent of the people are really old white dudes who walk like they've got sticks shoved up their butts? You're in the right place.”

We—and by we, I mean the fish minions, me and DeeDee, Gill Guy, the sirens, and Doc. Wait. Where was Doc? Huh. Anyway, we had gathered around the potluck table to celebrate. We munched the sole remaining tray of tuna salad sandwiches down to crumbs. Okay. DeeDee and I didn't. Our aquatic visitors did, which was pretty gross because clearly table manners didn't exist where they came from.

But it was also kinda nice, because now that we'd defeated the poo monster, they had lightened up. They weren't so growly and angry and bitey. They were smiling, happy, splashing in the plastic basins at the bottom of Mom's inflatable palm trees, click clacking at each other.

DeeDee had nearly finished wiping all the poo slime off of Angel eight ball. She held him in her hand, spritzing him with a bottle of coconut-scented hand sanitizer she'd filched from the ladies' room, then rubbing him with one of the plush white pool towels. His triangle pointed straight at me. Of course. “I think I finally understand what you see in her. Smart. Tough. Compassionate.” The triangle turned. “And she has the best breasts God ever put on a human woman. I'd venture to say they're absolutely angelic. No wonder you have so many impure thoughts in your file.”

My jaw dropped, but before I could say anything, Big Ohana splugged up to me and grabbed my hand with the tip of his fin. He shook. Hard. "We owe you a great debt. You, the brave king of the Columbus leg men, and your band of knights saved us from the beast. You aided us in our darkest hour. We are eternally grateful. But we must be vigilant. Victory is ever fickle—"

"Spare me the philosophy lesson, fish stick. I get enough of that from this one." Kevin thumbed a leg at DeeDee as he flew onto my shoulder. "Now chop chop. Gather up your pals and make your way to the sewer. Party's over."

Big Ohana shrugged, grabbed the tuna sandwich tray, and poured the crumbs into his mouth. As soon as he turned away, Kevin looked at me and DeeDee and said, "Now, which one of you is going to the bar to get us a round? Can you believe this party's almost over, and I haven't had a single drink? Team building sober sucks. On second thought, I don't want to wait. Pour me some of that. I'm feeling brave."

He pointed at the sherbet punch. The whole bowl of it. Untouched. Because Grandma Linda ruined it. Speaking of. Where was Grandma Linda?

Kevin poked my neck, "Get moving. We're burning daylight."

"Fine!" I grabbed a pineapple drink cup and filled it. The fumes made my eyes water. Oof. No wonder the punchbowl was still full.

A green light flashed in front of me. At first, I thought the fumes were making me hallucinate. Then I realized it was a portal.

"Is this yours?" Kevin asked. "I didn't call for this."

Just then, a huge red hand with long black claws came out of the center. It snatched the pineapple drink cup right out of my hand, retreated into the green vortex, and disappeared.

"You really need your own apartment," DeeDee said. "Your roommates are the worst."

"Tell me about it." Kevin then yelled at the spot where the portal used to be. "Get a job already. Buy your own booze, you no good freeloader!"

The portal reappeared.

"Oh shit. He heard me," Kevin said.

The red hand reemerged. It dropped that pineapple drink cup—still full—onto the table, flipped us the bird, then disappeared again.

“Wow. It must be bad if he won't drink it,” Kevin said. “Oh well. You know what? I still want it.”

“Uh. Are you sure?” Grandma Linda's hooch was clearly unfit for consumption. Well, human consumption. Maybe Kevin would be okay. I mean, he was a roach. They're hard to kill, right?

“Come to papa.” Kevin didn't miss a beat. He hopped onto the rim. He dunked his head right in, and sucked so hard I could see a current in the melting sherbet. He drank way too much, way too fast, and he was gonna regret it. He had no idea what he was getting into with my hillbilly family moonshine.

“Oh, I know exactly what I'm getting, kid. Have some. It's Friday night! Celebrate. We won!”

I thought about it, because I really wanted to, but I couldn't relax. No way. Not until the fish monsters and the smarmy sex demons were all gone. Even then, someone would eventually figure out the men's room was flooded, and the pool didn't have any water in it. We'd basically destroyed the Presidential Pool. Mind-erasing Caroline couldn't fix that.

“It's fine, kid. Your Mom and her pals got no clue. We pulled it off. Hic—Hic.” He pounded his chest. “Geesh. This stuff's giving me the hiccups. Oh, no wait. I just need to burp. *Uuuuuuuurrrrrrp.*”

The severe gastrointestinal distress wasn't enough to dissuade him. He stuck his head back into the cup and drank some more.

I couldn't watch, so I peeked through the lady boob topiary at the charity ladies instead. He was right. Mom and her friends had no clue. They were having fun. With demon strippers, sure, but desperate times, right? Bubby stood at the end of the potluck table, still pretending to be ice, sucking on that garden hose like it was a scuba diver's air tank. Slow jams poured from the speakers. Demon cops and charity ladies had coupled up, slow dancing to old, sappy...Huh. I don't even know what songs these are.

“It's Chicago, dipshit. You hatin' on Peter Cetera? Don't even start with me.” Kevin swayed, visibly tipsy. “I don't love the ballads, but the

chicks do. Man. You know how many broads I made out with to this stuff? Total panty dropper.”

I suddenly had a vision of two little cockroaches, entwined, doing naughty things. Blech. TMI.

“25 or 6 to 4 was a fucking classic, *Chicago II*. You hear me?” Apparently, Kevin was still talking. “Oo wee. Grandma's got an iron liver. This stuff is harsh, but she's not wrong. It's pretty good once you muscle through the burn.”

Hogras slithered up to me and stuck her fingertip right down the lip of my swim trunks, the second I turned around. Ding. Hello. My heart kicked up and so did something else. It was instinct, not attraction. Trust me. That was the only reason.

“My hero,” she clicked and bared her ragged fish fangs as she slid up my leg like a horny snake. And this time, she meant it.

“Oh snap, kid. You might actually get laid! Up top!” Kevin said, clinging to the rim, tipsy, barely able to hold one leg up for a high five.

I stood stick straight and stone still. I was terrified. Dude. Once you've watched a woman's legs melt into a fish tail, sexy time is off the table. But Hogras didn't know that. She proceeded to slither up to crotch height.

Pffffffftttttt.

The crooked, ragged smile fell from her face. A smell, like a thousand rotten eggs and cabbages that had stewed for a month inside of an orc with irritable bowel syndrome, overcame us. My eyes watered. Hogras looked horrified. And boy. No wonder. That smell hung in the air. Those tuna sandwiches did not agree with her.

“Jesus, excuse you!” Kevin waved a leg in front of his watering eyes. “Wow, girl. What did you eat? Talk about a mood killer.”

She collapsed face first onto the ground and began to grunt and sob.

“You hurt her feelings, Kevin,” DeeDee said. “You need to apologize.”

“No way.” Kevin swayed. “Shit.”

“Really? Just tell her you're sorry!” DeeDee said.

“No.” Kevin pointed. “SHIT!”

A shadow fell over the potluck table. I looked up. Oh, shit indeed.

Hogras was off the hook. She didn't fart. The poo monster did. It loomed over us, not as large, but certainly angry, poo brow furrowed. Apparently, we didn't kill it. We'd just pissed it off.

"Think fast, kid. We're all outta bleach! Doc! You got any tricks in that magic bag of yours?" Kevin screamed. "Doc? Doc! Where the hell is Doc?"

There was no time to find out. The poo monster looked at me and *pfffffffffffffft*. A green noxious cloud rolled up off of it. I gagged. Oh, man. Weaponized stink!

Turns out, Hogras didn't collapse from embarrassment. The poo monster had grabbed her by the leg/fins and tried to suck her in. I grabbed her pudgy arms and pulled, but that poo monster was determined. It yanked her right out of my hands. But she didn't go down without a fight. That trailer park mermaid fought like a champ, thrashing and fwapping her tail like a rabid mako shark. She opened wide and sunk her ragged teeth right into the monster, getting a huge mouthful of poo. But it didn't make a difference. The poo monster didn't even notice.

The other fish creatures scattered. Angel eight ball dropped out of DeeDee's hand and rolled underneath the potluck table. To hide.

"Really?" I said.

He shot a triangle back. "Don't judge me. This ball is plastic. Who knows what God will put me in if this gets eaten. I do not have time to stand in line at the Divine Embodiments department right now! It's worse than the DMV!"

DeeDee slowly backed away from the poo monster. "Does anyone have any ideas?"

"Grab a weapon." Kevin fell off the plastic pineapple rim and staggered around my feet. "Any weapon."

Nom. Spurpl. Nom.

The poo monster snatched the corner of the white tablecloth and sucked, spurping and slurping in the potluck dishes, one by one, along with the wood tables they were sitting on. It was trying to get bigger. It was trying to grow.

The monster swallowed everything up. The inflatable palm trees. Bits of Tupperware and chunks of wood veneer table. It lapped up plastic wraps and Pyrex lids like they were filet mignon, burbling and growing with every bit of flotsam it consumed. It ate and ate until all that was left was the tail end of one wood buffet table. The end with Mom's punchbowl, filled with sherbet punch. The bowl tottered dangerously close to its mouth. Well, its whole body was one big mouth, but you get the idea.

Unfortunately, the poo monster was quite the multitasker. While it was eating, it grabbed Pond Thing and wouldn't let go, despite his transformation into a ball of thorns. It grabbed Gill Guy by the legs. It had Sorko by the hair, licking the litter and fishing lines out. Because it was still hungry. And out for blood. And now it was after me. Its poo blob head loomed above me, zeroing in.

"I got nothing, kid. We're screwed." Kevin stood by my foot, shaking a totally empty bottle of coconut hand sanitizer.

I broke out in a cold sweat. My knees started to noodle again. I wanted to run. Like really wanted to. But. No. Not this time. I took a deep breath, and for what may have been the first time in my life, I tried really hard to screw my head on straight. My heart fluttered and my palms were sweaty, sure. But I didn't panic. I thought it through instead, and I made a decision. I looked at DeeDee and said, "Run."

The plan: Go down fighting. Distract the poo monster. Buy DeeDee and the others enough time to either find a way to kill this beast or get away. Someone had to get Mom on that party bus, even if Morty was itching to use Kevin's cock ring.

But first, the fighting part. I grabbed a weapon. A mason jar of hooch. It was the closest thing. The poo monster hadn't yet eaten the wheelie bin of booze Grandma Linda had stashed under the potluck table. "Hey. Ugly. Let them go!" I screamed at the poo monster's blobby head. "Yeah. That's right. Eat me. I'm the fattest!"

And I immediately regretted saying that. The poo monster spit out Pond Thing and came at me with everything it had. I chucked that mason jar as hard as I could. And missed. The poo monster dodged, and the jar crashed to the ground between us. Glass shards and hooch arced through the air, gently spraying the poo monster's gut.

Well. It was worth a try, right? But ultimately, a jar wasn't much of a weapon. It'd just absorb it. Then it'd get bigger. That's what it did, right? Absorbed garbage? And what was more garbage than foul-smelling, backwoods West Virginia moonshine in a glass mason jar that had been washed and reused a hundred times? Still, if I could buy time for DeeDee and the rest to get away, it'd be worth it.

I grabbed another jar and threw it straight into its gut.

Scree!

The poo monster twisted and spit Hogras out like a cannonball. I ducked. She flew through the air above me and landed face first in a topiary. On the way, her tail fwapped the remains of the potluck table, sending Mom's punchbowl airborne. The pink sherbet punch and the bowl arced up up up, and smacked the angry thrashing poo monster right on his blobby periscope head. Seriously. The bowl landed right on top and sat there like a hat. Pink sticky punch oozed down over it.

Scree.

Scree!

It didn't like it one bit. It thrashed and screeched, emitting a high, unholy sound that rattled my ear drums. It formed melty poo blob arms, which blubbed up and over and around the punch bowl, desperate to remove it. Huh. I don't know why it didn't absorb it. Maybe it didn't like glass? The broken bits of mason jar still lay on the patio, too. It hadn't absorbed those either.

It desperately blubbed away from the streaks of pink sherbet punch rolling down over its head and pooling around the drain. That's when all the pieces clicked. Oh. My. God. I'm so stupid. The answer was right in front of us the whole time. Grandma's karate chop move with the cocktail glass? The pink stain on Caroline's robe? The air pocket in the pool? The poo monster wasn't scared of the pool shock or the chlorine. It was scared of Grandpap's moonshine.

I grabbed another jar out of the wheelie bin, popped the top, and chucked it as hard as I could. It smacked the poo monster dead center. Clear 190-proof moonshine erupted out of the jar like a hillbilly volcano.

Scree!

The poo monster recoiled, hitting the wall of the Parthenon pool house. I popped another jar and threw. And another. And another. Every drop of Grandpap's moonshine shrunk the monster a little more and made its polluted poop body run a little more clean and clear. Disinfected. "It's the booze!" I screamed.

DeeDee sprinted toward the wheelie bin, ninja style.

"What are you doing? Run away!" Duh. Didn't she know I only did this so she could escape?

"I'd never leave you alone!" She was in the air, hurdling Gill Guy—who was holding onto the grass, knee deep in poo—when the monster snatched her right up and swallowed her.

"Nooooooooooooooooo!"

Pond Thing rose, a slimy algae blob, next to the moonshine. He grabbed a jar and yelled, "Release the fair maiden or die, you foul beast!"

I'll give him credit. He tried. But his algae hands were too slimy to unscrew the jar. He couldn't get a grip. "Oof. This is on tight. Pardon me. When you have a moment, would you be kind enough to loosen it for me?"

"Gah!" I didn't have time for this. A DeeDee shaped blob undulated, punching the poo monster from the inside out.

I popped another jar and threw. The monster didn't let her go. It fwapped and thrashed, uprooting palm trees and pulling tiles off the pool house. But I popped and I threw, over and over, dousing it in alcohol until it put its hands up, like it was surrendering.

Huh. I hesitated.

"What are you doing? Keep throwing, kid." Kevin clung to the rim of a moonshine jar, trying desperately to unscrew it. "It's trying to stall you!"

Sure enough, during that brief moment of hesitation, a poo blob managed to snake up around my leg. That's it. I dug in, more angry than ever. No sentient turd eats the love of my life and gets away with it.

I rained jars of moonshine down on it. With each jar, the poo monster dissolved, getting smaller and smaller, running clearer and clearer, until he was about as tall and wide as me. DeeDee punched,

and her fist broke through. Her mouth emerged, gasping for air. It was getting weaker.

Ha. I've got you. I reached into the wheelie bin, ready to load up on ammo. And grabbed an angel instead. "I have never enjoyed being the bearer of bad news. Not since I had to tell the Egyptian Pharaoh—"

"What do you want?"

"You're out of moonshine."

"What?" Uh oh. There was only one jar left.

Unfortunately, the poo monster had figured it out, too. It churned and bubbled, its turd brown body splugging and dripping. Bottle caps and six-pack holders, and crunched up water bottles oozed. It dug in and stared me down. Well, I'm guessing. It didn't have a face, but the vibe was definitely very wild west shoot out. Sheriff Lloyd versus the outlaw poo monster. A stand off. And I had one bullet.

I grabbed the last jar. My palm was sweaty. My hand shook. I had to make this count. I gripped the metal band around the lid and loosened it ever so slightly.

Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

The poo monster attacked. Everything went dark. I couldn't breathe. Aw, man. It swallowed me. Slimy, rotten turd pudding licked me up and down like I was a lollipop—Lloydipop?—but I held tight to that jar. My life—DeeDee's life—depended on it.

The poo monster wrapped around the jar, trying to yank it out of my hands. I pressed it hard against my belly and tried to jimmy the lid open. The poo monster sucked at my fingers and hands, trying to pull them away. My lung filled with needles. My head started to spin. *Air. Need. Air.* The metal band sprung loose. *Drowning. Can't. Hold. On. Much. Longer.*

My thumb somehow found the lip of the lid.

Pop.

The hooch poured out. My skin burned like chemical fire as it rolled up my hands, my arms, burning my chest as it rose up out of the jar. Or fell, rather, because I didn't realize until then that the poo monster had flipped me upside down.

Suddenly, it dropped me. On my head.

Ow.

The world spun. My head throbbed, but I could breathe! DeeDee lay next to me, gasping for air.

Screeeeee. Screeeeee. Screeeeee.

The two of us watched the creature thrash and kick, retreating. It sucked itself violently back into the stinky drain. Until just the tip of it was still out.

Kevin scuttled up to it, dragging his plastic pineapple cup of sherbet punch behind him. He said, "There is no poop in team!" Then poured the last of his drink right on the poo monster's head.

Shlllllllllllluuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuup.

That did it. The poo monster sucked down into that drain so fast even I felt the suction all the way over here. Kevin held tight to the rusty grate, screaming.

I grabbed DeeDee. She was covered, head to toe, in a glistening sheen of poo water. “Are you okay?”

She looked at me, smiled a crooked smile, and said, “Your family's parties are always one in a million.”

I looked right into her gray eyes and said, "Only since I met you."

We were totally having a moment. Until an unholy sound, like the *sppppppplllllllllllloooooosh* of an erupting geyser, cut through the night.

Pond Thing shrieked. “Look!”

He pulled apart the palm fronds along the fence. We had a straight view out into the parking lot. Well, now we knew exactly where the pipe under that rusty grate led. Into the parking lot. Right under the tire of Caroline Ford Vanderbilt's fancy sports car.

A gushing geyser of dirty brown poo water shot straight up through that grate with such force, it flipped Caroline's car upside down, tires to the sky, and lifted it. It rose up up up off the ground, into the air, higher and higher. It hovered until the poo beast, in its final death throes, exploded in a giant POP. Caroline's car hung in the air for a brief, glorious moment. But gravity is a harsh mistress. The car crashed down. Right on top of Mom's minivan. Metal crunched. Glass shattered. And when the dust settled, both cars were crush-layered together like lasagna. I mean, it looked like Godzilla had two-stepped on them.

But the poo monster? Yeah. It was dead. Like capital D dead. No longer thick. No longer pudding. No longer sentient. Just dirty brown water rolling across the parking lot, a gentle rolling wave lapping at the sidewalk like the gentlest surf on a sandy beach. Sure, it still had turds and garbage in it, but you get the idea.

“Huh. I'll be. The creature from the poo lagoon was no match for Grandma Linda's hooch.” Kevin crawled up to the top of my head for a better view of the carnage. “That reminds me, who needs a drink? Next round's on me!”



CHAPTER 19

“NOW THAT WAS A GREAT PARTY. I don't know what I was so worried about!” Mom said as we stepped out into the parking lot.

Yeah. I said parking lot. Hello. Disaster pending.

“I mean, did you see those dancers? Hubba hubba! I never thought Caroline would plan something like that!”

While making a grand, joyful gesture, Mom tripped on her glitter flip flop. She had to grab onto a big white column to keep from falling down the stairs. Did I mention Mom's totally lit? Like, don't smoke a cigarette next to her, because she might catch on fire, because she's completely saturated in alcohol. Yes. That level drunk. She didn't even care that all the potluck dishes had mysteriously disappeared, or that her punch bowl had ended up upside down on the grass. The punchbowl that I now held in my arms.

Of course, I nearly dropped it when Morty hip-bumped me out of the way so he and several other faux policemen could dance past me, followed by a conga line of inebriated, randy ladies. Morty stopped, whisked my Mom up into his arms, dropped her in a deep dip, and said, “Baby. When you gonna dump that old ball and chain? I need you. NEED. Give in. It'll be the best night of your life. I promise.”

“Hell no!” I screeched. “Move along!”

Morty huffed at me, then spun Mom around in some fancy old-fashioned dance move. He finally let go of her, then bumped and grinded down the steps, wiggling his eyebrows at her the entire way. He called after her, “You'll always be my number one, Jennifer!”

She giggled. Giggled!

“Mom!”

“What?” She straightened her coconut bra. “I'm married, I'm not dead.”

Morty and his sexy hellspawn pals jiggled and gyrated straight through the parking lot, right on up into the party bus, followed by a dozen Charity Ladies' Auxiliary members who certainly did not know what they were getting into. Morty hung his head out the window and

shot me a big thumbs up as the bus roared to life, sending disco balls spinning and the stereo thumping to—huh. Well. I don't know what song this is, but it sounds naughty.

“Geesh, kid. Do you live under a rock? It's Ginuwine. Morty's going full Magic Mike. Those broads don't stand a chance.”

Kevin sat in my shirt pocket. Which was soaking wet, but clean. Because I'd stood in the hollowed out remains of the men's room and showered the shit monster off of me. Now who smelled like coconuts? Hah! Take that, Kevin. Wait a minute. “What are you doing here? You're supposed to be helping the fish people into the sewer!”

“Relax, they're fine. Besides, I can't miss this. I gotta see the look on Jennifer's face when she sees the car.”

Mom hadn't seen the car. Not yet. Even though the Country Club was winding down for the evening, and the parking lot was mostly empty. She was still recovering from Morty's perv swoon. That and a crowd had gathered around the carnage, blocking it from view. And boy, I'll tell ya. They were a determined bunch of looky-loos, because the entire lot smelled like stagnant, fetid sewer water. Discarded water bottles, drink straws, and ripped up grocery bags littered the ground, the only remnants of The Poop Blob That Nearly Ate The Country Club.

Mom squinched her nose at the smell, as she staggered down the steps, out into the lot. “I don't know why Caroline's so proud of this place. It's kind of disgusting. Now. Where did we park?”

“Oh, yeah.” Kevin wiggled excitedly in my pocket. “It's go time!”

I followed Mom, clinging to her glass punchbowl like a life preserver, as I drown in a sea of dread. Poor Mom. That crushed minivan was about to ruin her whole night.

“What's going on?” Mom said as she approached the crowd. They tittered to each other, something about methane build up, an explosion, some problems with old plumbing. Mom didn't pay attention. She just muscled her way through. “Excuse me. Pardon me. Coming through. I need to get to my ca...”

The word fell off her lips as the crowd parted, and Mom finally got a full view of the carnage. Her jaw hit the pavement. She stared at the sports car/mini van lasagna in front of her. She didn't move. She

didn't speak. She just stared, clutching her ring of plastic flower leis. Mom's bottom lip quivered, then her mouth moved, but no sound came out. She started breathing really, really fast. Like hyperventilating fast.

"Dial 911, kid," Kevin said. "I think she's having a heart attack!"

Her shoulders popped up and down, and she made an awful snuffling noise. I scooted in next to her, ready to drop the punch bowl and catch her if she fainted.

"Mom?" Oh boy. Kevin was right. The crushed car was literally killing her. "Mom? Are you all right?"

Suddenly, her head flipped back. She snorted and wheezed. Laughing. Hysterically. Great. We'd knocked a screw loose in Mom's brain. She'd literally gone nuts. Between pig-like snorts she said, "This has been the absolute greatest night of my life. I can finally get a new car! Praise Jesus!"

The looky loos, at least the ones Mom knew personally, erupted in cheers.

Okay, then. Crisis averted. Although Jesus definitely didn't deserve the credit.

Angel eight ball rolled out from under the wreckage. "Well, actually. He—"

"Nope." I kicked him back under a very flat tire.

Ten minutes later, I poured Mom and an also-lit Mrs. Miller into the backseat of Mr. Miller's sedan. I was about to slide in next to them when Kevin said, "Don't even think about it. We got work to do."

Sigh. I hate this job.

"It's not a job, kid. It's a calling. Now, get those meat legs pumping."

Oh, I pumped my meat legs all right, even though I didn't want to, back to the Presidential Pool, across the lawn, past the now-empty hot tub alcove, around the buff Greek God topiary, praying the waiters—who stood around Bubby wondering what to do with their very large, very melting 'ice' sculpture—wouldn't see me, as I headed back to the big icky drain by the men's room. With an impatient cockroach complaining nonstop in my ear the entire way.

Gill Guy and Hogras were the only sea creatures left. Mostly because she was so chubby, she was stuck in the drain. Gill Guy pushed, trying to jimmy her in while DeeDee squirted hand soap around the rim, hoping to make it slipperier. After much soaping and grunting and pushing, something gave. Hogras popped free. She winked at me and said, "If you're ever in Put-in-Bay, call me," as she licked her lips and descended into the darkness.

Gill Guy put his webbed claw hand on my chest and tried to say something. He doesn't speak so much as flap his mouth as his gills flutter, but he handed me two wet cha cha heels, glugged something that sounded like "goodbye," then slid right down into that drain and disappeared.

I looked at the dripping wet shoes. Huh. Where on earth is Grandma Linda?

"Well, that's the last of them," DeeDee said.

"Thank God."

But wouldn't you know it, just as I breathed a sigh of relief, something shook the leaves by the fence. And I mean shook. The branches moved violently, accompanied by some very loud snuffles and grunts, like some giant hungry beast was back there preparing to hop out and eat us.

"Aaaaaaaaah! Monster!" Of course, I screamed. You're surprised? Really? My inner action man wore off with the last of my adrenaline.

"Shit. I'm never getting that drink, am I?" Kevin's tiny shoulders slumped. "Well, go on then. Let's see what's back there."

Kevin poked me in the neck until I finally walked over to the bushes and mustered the nerve to pull back a branch. And I almost died. Something was back there, all right. We arrived just in time to watch Grandma Linda rip open Doc's T-shirt with her glitter palm-tree fingernails, while he sucked on her neck like she was vanilla ice cream melting down the outside of a sugar cone.

"It's a beast alright," Kevin said. "The beast with two backs!"

Gross. Ultimate boner killer. Like, forever.

"It appears the two hairless leg people are in love." One of the bushes said to me. Because the bushes were Pond Thing. He held

Caroline in his limbs, carrying her like the fainted damsel on a horror movie poster.

Grandma and Doc moaned and groaned and grinded all over each other. So naturally, I felt like I might barf.

"I do not care that our love is forbidden," Doc whispered.

Grandma Linda moaned. "Oh, sugar cheeks. I can't live without you!"

DeeDee smiled. "Aw. That's so sweet! Doc has been alone for so long. I'm glad he found someone. Although, I hope the age difference isn't an issue. They're so cute together."

"Cute?" Bile tickled my tonsils. *Vlurp*. Definitely not cute!

"You know what, kid? You should be happy for them. Love is hard to find, especially when you're a freak of an advanced age," Kevin said.

"She's seventy. She's old, but she's not *that* old."

"I was talking about Doc."

I looked at Kevin. Kevin looked at me. I looked at Doc.

"Really, kid?" Kevin shook his head. "Your boss is a talking cockroach, and you still haven't figured out things are never what they appear to be on the outside?"

"Uuuuuh." That groan, thankfully, was not Grandma Linda moaning in ecstasy. Not this time. It was Caroline.

Pond Thing had surrounded her with red frilly flowers and weird green seed pods. "The muscle man asked me to make poppies. He said some magical words, and she fell asleep. Much like your sleeping beauty."

Caroline's mouth hung open, and she snort snored as he said it, drool pooling down her cheek. Beauty? Not so much. Sleeping? Definitely.

Doc lifted his face out of Grandma Linda's massive cleavage long enough to say, "The Mean Woman will remember nothing. Poppies are the gift of gods. Morpheus and Hypnos have come to our aid." He locked eyes with Grandma Linda. "And now, let us praise Eros."

He dove right back in. To her cleavage.

Ew. I can't look.

“Genius. Doc sure knows his stuff. When she wakes up, she's gonna think it was all a dream,” Kevin said. “But you. Pond Chicken. Time to go. Stop gawking and get a move on.”

“But the woman,” Pond Thing looked down at the snoring Caroline.

“We'll take care of her,” DeeDee said.

“We will?” I asked.

“Of course, now come on,” she said.

We left Doc and Grandma Linda alone in the bushes to—Nope. I can't even think about it. Moving on.

We all went to the drain. Pond Thing laid Caroline on the grass, then bent down on one woody knee in front of DeeDee. Well, not a knee, but you know. He took her hand in his slimy algae digits and kissed it. Again. “I have never met one so brave or so fair.” He slurped her knuckles and his body bloomed red roses. “Until we meet again.”

My cheeks flushed hot. Jealous. Yes. Jealous. Of a talking pile of algae. Because my life is so nuts, this is actually a thing. I stepped in next to DeeDee and put my nice, human actual flesh arm around her. “K. Bye! Have a nice trip!”

Pond Thing slowly dripped down the drain, red eyes longing for DeeDee as he disappeared into the deep. He left the roses behind, scattered in the grass.

DeeDee was thankfully unfazed. She'd already slipped off and grabbed Caroline by the arms. “Get her legs. We don't have much time.”

I did. And the two of us slunk, like bad movie henchmen, carrying the floppy, dead-to-the-world body of Caroline Ford Vanderbilt from tree to tree, bush to bush, door to door, sneaking, all the way to the other Country Club pool. You know, the “nice” pool?

And holy shit. Let me tell you. Now I see why the Presidential Pool was the shabby one. This pool looked like the flamboyant love child of a Las Vegas hotel spa and a Caribbean resort. It was deluxe. Fountains and saunas, tropical lagoons, hot tubs and cabanas. And it was basically empty. A bartender polished glasses while staring at a TV tuned to an exotic travel show. A few tanned, toned ladies

lazed around, looking bored, sipping red drinks out of martini glasses while they scrolled through their phones. Dude. Seriously. I didn't know how you could be in a place so amazing and look so unhappy. But, bonus for us, this was the perfect place to stash Caroline. She looked about as lively as everyone else.

We laid Caroline on a chaise lounge underneath a blue and white striped umbrella. DeeDee grabbed two fresh clean club towels off the rack and a handful of discarded margarita glasses out of a bus tray. She shimmied Caroline out of her dirty white robe, and tucked new fresh towels around her—one into a turban around her hair—and put a margarita glass in her hand, salt rim half melted off, slimy green tequila residue pooling in the bottom. She put two more glasses on a cocktail table right next to her.

DeeDee set the scene perfectly. Caroline would wake up, look around, and think she'd just had one too many. She'd think it was a crazy drunk dream. Well, maybe. Maybe not. But this was at least enough to put a question mark on her memories. And even better: Everyone else would think she was a complete lush if she started screaming about monsters.

She sighed, relieved. “What a night! I'm getting in that hot tub. You guys want to join me? Wait. Where's Kevin?”

I checked my pocket. He wasn't there.

“Wait. I see him.” She pointed to a brown blob skulking through the grass. Yep. That was Kevin all right, pulling an entire bottle of Wild Turkey 101 along behind him. The benefits of a bored, distracted bartender. He also had a Milky Way, filched from a well-stocked snack stand.

“Good. The drinks are taken care of.” DeeDee grabbed my hand and led me down the steps into the bubbling stew of the hot tub.

A huge, dark shadow rippled across the bottom of the pool. My legs went noodly. “The creature. It's back!”

It crested. A blue face with eight white eyes rose up out of the water. “Jesus, Bubby. You nearly gave me a heart attack!”

His long blue body slithered along under the surface. *Blip. Blup. Bloop.* He had a dozen leg tips up, just far enough out of the water to

keep a row of cocktail glasses holding creamy green drinks, rims lined with pineapples, safely out of the water.

"It's all good. The waiters think he melted!" Kevin scuttled up. "That's right. We earned this. Friday night, am I right?"

The two of them cheersed, clinking cocktail glass to whiskey bottle.

None of the normal people seemed to notice the two-story-tall blue jelly centipede bobbing in the deep end. So I shed my shirt and slipped into the hot tub next to DeeDee. It was like a dream come true. Even better. It was a fantasy come true. DeeDee. Bikini. Hot tub. Cocktails? Okay. Not a cocktail. A bottle of Wild Turkey 101 passed around hobo style, with way too much roach spit on the rim, but that was just fine with me. The day was saved. We'd survived. Again. That's all that mattered.

Kevin floated by in a beat up but still seaworthy inflatable pink flamingo drink holder. It was filled with whiskey. Not even in a cup. Like whiskey poured straight in. Kevin lounged in it, chest deep, occasionally dipping down to swallow very big gulps. His face was covered in chocolate. "Best team-build ever. Sure beats that weekend in Point Pleasant, right Dee? Mothman is such a dick. I don't know why he gets a festival."

"Tell me about it," she said.

"Uh. What?"

"Long story. Now I hate to be a party pooper, but before we get too drunk, we gotta take care of some business." Kevin pulled a very tiny clipboard out of. Well. God only knows where.

Angel, who swirled in circles in the tub, propelled by jets, said, "God knows, but you don't want to."

"You two gotta initial here and here or tonight doesn't count." Kevin pointed at two impossibly tiny check boxes on his itty bitty paperwork. "Then, boom. Only sixteen more hours of mandatory team building left to go before New Years. Speaking of. How do y'all feel about camping? Check this out. This place is so remote, no monster would ever find us there. We'd actually be able to relax for a change. They've got cabins!"

He pulled a glossy brochure out of—nope. Don't want to know where—and handed it to me. Big white letters across the front said, “Camp Crystal Lake.”

“They have an opening on the thirteenth,” Kevin said. “It's a Friday. What do ya think?”

The End

Thank you so so much for reading.

SHERBET PUNCH

Jennifer Wallace's Sherbet Punch

1 6-ounce can of frozen orange juice concentrate

2 6-ounce cans of frozen lemonade

9 ½ cups of cold water

½ gallon of sherbet ice cream (pineapple or raspberry)

1 quart of vanilla ice cream

Combine frozen juice concentrate and water. Place sherbet and ice cream in bottom of large punchbowl. Break into small pieces. Add juice/water mixture. Stir until sherbet and ice cream are partially melted. Float orange slices and maraschino cherries in the bowl.

Makes 35 servings.

MIDORI SPLICE



Midori Splice

One shot Midori melon liquor

One shot Malibu coconut rum

Pineapple juice

Toss, then top with a splash of cream.

Garnish with cherry and pineapple.

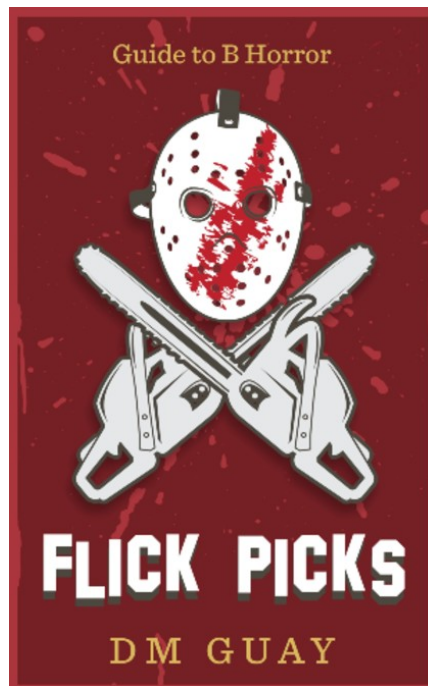
LONG ISLAND ICED TEA



Long Island Iced Tea

One shot vodka
One shot rum
One shot gin
One shot tequila
One shot triple sec orange liqueur
Sour mix
Splash of Coke
Stir or toss until it's brown, like tea.
Drink at your own risk.

GET MONSTERS IN YOUR INBOX



Get D.M. Guay's free guide to B horror movies when you sign up for Monsters in Your Inbox, a monthly email featuring horror comedy books, movies, and weird news.

Get it here: <https://BookHip.com/CLDVASF>

WHO THE HECK IS D.M. GUAY?



DM Guay is a big geek, huge horror fan, and loves stand-up comedy. She mish-mashes her love of all that's scary/gory/geeky/funny into stories about creeps and critters, ghouls and ghosts, and all of the unseemly things that go bump in the night.

She runs "Monsters In Your Inbox" a monthly round-up of B-horror movies, horror comedy books, and weird news. Sign up here: <http://eepurl.com/czs0Rr>



BOOKS BY D.M. GUAY

24/7 Demon Mart

[The Graveyard Shift: A horror comedy.](#)

[Monster Burger: This one has zombies in it](#)

[Angel Trouble: A grim reaper comedy.](#)

24/7 Demon Mart Stories

(Read anytime after The Graveyard Shift)

[Hell for the Holidays](#)

[Critters from the Poo Lagoon](#)