

THE GARDEN



Renée Angers

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RENÉE ANGERS

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Chapter 1

June 1986 — Ponoka County, Alberta

Every sound in her world seemed to have faded: every peep, every rustle, every chirping bird — all exiled to some far off, unreachable reality, each replaced by the sounds of her own heavy breathing, her escalated blood pressure swooshing through her head, the thudding of her footfalls against the dry earth, and tall weeds brushing against her as she raced through the field toward safety. She glanced back over her shoulder as she ran to see if he was following her like he would sometimes, taunting her, but she couldn't see him. As she continued running, a thick weed stock struck her face roughly, stinging her skin and sending a cloud of seed fluff every which way in the warm afternoon air.

Seeing her house in the distance — the image of it bouncing up and down as she ran — she checked behind her once more before slowing her run to a trot, then to a winded walk. He hadn't terrorized her on her way home for several months, but there was no way she was going to take any chances, not after what he had done today. The humiliation she felt right now was more than enough for a lifetime, let alone one day.

The screen door slammed behind her as she headed by her mother and up the stairs to her room. She dropped her weight down on the edge of her bed and allowed the tears to come, each gushing freely from her eyes and rolling down her flushed cheeks.

Francine clicked off the vacuum cleaner, her eyes following her obviously upset daughter as she stormed up the stairs. She pushed a straggling strand of her fire red hair back to curl it around her ear and made her way up the stairs to her daughter's bedroom.

Standing outside the door, she could hear her daughter trying to stifle her sobs. She knocked on the door lightly and then opened it, peeking inside. "Ani, sweetie, can I come in?" she asked, stepping inside anyway. "What's the matter? What happened?"

"Nothing," Ani sniffed.

"Well, something must have happened to make you cry like this."

"Cameron Keller," Ani hissed, trying to control another wave of tears. "I hate him. I really, *really* hate him!"

"Cameron Keller? The boy that teases you all the time? That boy on the bike with the long sandy hair?"

"Yes... I hate him," Ani answered, nodding her head and sniffing. She wiped her face and winced from the sting of a salty tear as it worked its way into the inflamed welt the weed had left on her cheek.

Francine crouched down, examining the wound on her daughter's face. "Ani," she started, sounding suspicious. "Did that boy do this to you? Did he hurt you?"

"No. It happened in the field. A weed hit me."

“OK, well, let’s go to the bathroom and clean it up, OK?”

She took Ani by the hand and urged her to the washroom where she sat her down on the edge of the bathtub and gathered a few first-aid items. Ani held the bottle of alcohol while her mother dabbed at the small swollen gash with a cotton ball. Ani jerked away. “It’s not as bad as it looks,” Francine assured, applying some ointment and then a small bandage. “It’s just a little puffed up. So, what did this Cameron do to make you hate him so much this time?”

“He’s just so horrible. He’s mean and nasty and horrible.”

“Why? What did he do?”

“At lunch,” Ani began, her eyes still sparkling with the threat of tears, “he sat down with me and my friends at our table and says ‘*Ani’s wearin’ a bra today*,’” she explained, her impersonation of him using a much thicker and quicker Albertan prairie drawl than he really had. “Then he says, ‘*It’s about time, Ani-boob. But me ’n Jamie don’t think ya should wear it in gym class... might stunt yer growth*,’” she mimicked.

Francine felt a slight giggle bubble up inside her, but held it down. As cute and harmless as the joke was from the little pubescent boy, her heart still ached for her daughter’s embarrassment.

“Then after school,” Ani continued, after sniffing, “he took my bag and said he wouldn’t give it back unless I lifted up my shirt and showed him my special training bra. I said no and told him to leave me alone and then he said that if I didn’t do it, he would do it for me. I didn’t believe

him, so I grabbed for my bag. He pulled it away so I couldn't reach it and threw it over to Jamie, and then he pulled my top up. Everybody saw it, Mom. All the boys were laughing and calling me Ani-boob and stuff. Jamie threw my bag back at me, so I grabbed it and ran away."

"Oh, Ani, it's OK. So what, some boys saw your bra? It's just like a bathing suit top. It wasn't very nice of them, but they'll all forget about it soon enough."

"No, it's not like a bathing suit top. It's my underwear!"

"Well, doesn't that Cameron boy always tease you?"

"Yeah, but not like today. Why does he hate me so much?" Her large dark eyes welled up with another surge of tears and it broke her mother's heart.

"It sounds to me like he *likes* you," Francine observed.

"He wouldn't do things like that if he liked me."

"Oh yes he would."

"He would?"

Francine nodded. "Absolutely."

"But why?"

"Because that's what twelve-year-old boys do. I think he just wants your attention Ani. He wants to be near you. Teasing you is a convenient way to be near you," she explained, stroking her daughter's hair. "You see, he'd rather embarrass you to be near you and get your attention, than not get your attention at all."

"That's stupid," Ani spat.

"Yes it is, but that's the way boys work. Don't worry though; they change as they get older. They start doing nice things to get your attention... well, most of them do."

"Do you think Cam will ever be nice to me?"

“Yes I do. I bet you’ll see a big change in him next year.”

“I hope so.”

“So, other than Cameron, how was your last day of school?”

“OK I guess,” Ani mumbled, staring into her lap.

Francine tilted her head down to see her daughter’s face. “Ani, do you like Cameron Keller? Is that why you’re so upset?”

“No!”

Her mother smiled at her. “I don’t believe you.”

Ani couldn’t hold in her own smile any longer and she blushed a cute pinched pink. “Maybe a little.”

Francine sat on the edge of the tub with Ani, her own comforting smile surfacing. She pushed Ani’s long, wavy, auburn hair out of her face. “It’s OK to like him,” she affirmed, still playing in her daughter’s hair and noticing that something was missing. “Ani, where’s your barrette?”

Ani reached up to feel her hair and realized that her barrette was indeed missing. “Oh no, it must’ve fallen out when Cam... when I... I’m sorry Mom, I don’t know where it is,” she panicked.

“That’s OK, sweetie, it’s just a barrette. Why don’t you come downstairs — I made some strawberry Kool-Aid.”

* * * *

Cam rode his bike up the front walk and dropped it down onto the lawn. Immediately as he entered the small dilapidated house, his father Jared Keller began shouting at him: “Where the fuck have you been all day?”

“School,” Cam replied. “Just like every day.”

“Don’t you get smart with me, boy,” Jared barked. He glared at his son judgmentally for a harsh instant while he took a sip of beer. “School. Like it does ya any good.”

Cam turned away from his father and headed to his room. Jared stood up from his sloth-like posture on the sofa and followed his son down the hall. Cam turned around to face him again. “What?” he asked.

“Didn’t I tell you not to throw your God damn bike on the front lawn?”

“I’m goin’ right back out, Pa.”

“I don’t care what the fuck you’re doin’!” Jared barked, smashing Cam across the face and sending him backwards into the wall. Cam lifted his head up to look at his father and prepare himself for the next blow as Jared took a step toward him... “School. Why do I even send ya to school? You’re too stupid to ever amount to anything anyway,” he slurred, poking his son in the chest with his beer bottle. “C’mon little man, answer me. Why do I send ya to school?”

“I dunno, Pa,” Cam muttered, hoping he might defuse the impending bomb by giving a diluted answer.

“You don’t know? *You don’t know?* See? I told ya you were stupid,” Jared said, a sickening grin spreading across his unshaven and weathered face. “Don’t ya got nothin’ to say, boy?”

“No Pa,” Cam said, pushing his hair back over his head.

“*No Pa,*” his father mimicked cruelly. “*No Pa. No Pa.* You’re some sorry kid, ya know that?” he further remarked, yanking up one side of his pants. Cam stood

silent thinking it was a rhetorical question and hoping Jared would simply turn around and leave him alone in his room, but no such luck. “ANSWER ME!” he screamed, bashing Cam in the face again, but this time with enough force to drop him.

“Yeah Pa, I know that,” Cam muttered, tasting blood in his mouth.

“My own kid and he don’t got a back bone,” Jared seethed coldly. He stared down at Cam for a long time, occasionally swilling from his beer. “You’re a pathetic shame,” he finally said as he turned and left Cam’s room.

Cam remained on his knees for a few seconds, pawing at his jaw, his shoulder length hair hanging in his face. When he was sure his father was gone, he stood up, steadied himself, and then snuck out of the house quickly before Jared could decide he was pissed off about something else.

After spending the next four hours wandering around town and playing a few games of pinball at the old pharmacy, he made his way over to Lou’s Diner. He had made a deal a year earlier with owner and cook Louis Walker, that Cam would get a meal in return for doing the dinner rush dishes and mopping up. He had learned in the past that staying home was just asking for trouble from Jared. He was forced to come up with alternative means to survive, since Jared was not someone he could count on for anything other than a real nice shiner. His father was usually passed out on the couch by the time he finished at the diner and went home, which allowed him to avoid more beatings.

Cam locked his bike up in the ally next to Lou's and stepped inside, the smell of food welcoming him. As always he worked hard for his dinner, which came at around 9 p.m. Louis always gave him a generous plate knowing that it would probably be the only meal he would have until the same time the following day. "Hey there, how ya doin' Cameron?" Louis asked, sliding into the booth across from him.

"Alright," Cam answered, glancing up from his plate.

"Ya did another fine job back there tonight, kid," Louis stated while eyeing him, but Cam didn't say anything in response; he just gave a nod of appreciation. Louis folded his hands in front of him on the table and took in a deep breath. "He hit you again, didn't he?"

"No."

"I know you pretty well by now boy. I can tell that he did."

"Whatever," Cam mumbled through a full mouth.

"It's not right, Cam," Louis declared, sitting back and lighting a cigarette. "Him doin' what he does to ya all the time and you comin' here to eat every night."

"You got any better ideas?"

"Turn him in. What he does to you is against the law, and it just straight isn't right. I tell ya, I got a good mind to go over there and kick the living..."

"Yeah, well, don't!" Cam interrupted. "I know what's right and what isn't, Lou, you've told me a million times. But if I turn him in, I'll end up in some stupid foster home that's a lot worse. No thanks. Things are just fine the way they are."

“Cam, I don’t wanna have to turn him in myself.”

Cam sat back in the booth and put his fork down. “Look, I won’t come around anymore if it’s a hassle for you, but it isn’t like I’m begging or anything. I work for my supper, don’t I? And I do a good job, don’t I? I’m not turning my pa in, and if you do, I’ll just run away.”

“OK, OK. I’m sorry. I just hate to see this going on, that’s all. You’re a good kid.”

“Yeah, well, tell my pa that,” Cam murmured, picking up his fork again.

“Ya want some milk with that?”

“Yeah, please.”

* * * *

After Ani and Francine finished their dinner, Ani stepped out into the backyard to see if any new blooms had appeared in the garden while she was at school that day. Francine followed with her habitual evening cup of tea. “We’ve got some red columbine opening up.”

“Wow! But all the other columbine are finished, aren’t they?”

“Yes, the red ones *are* a bit late,” Francine replied. “I guess they wanted the stage all to themselves.”

“I didn’t even know we had red ones.”

“You chose them, remember? Last year when we went to that roadside nursery in Bluffton...”

“Oh yeah, I did. Well, how come they didn’t bloom last year?” Ani asked.

“I don’t know. A lot of plants won’t flower their first year, or if they’re planted a little late in the season,”

Francine said, crouching next to her daughter. “Ya know, my mother told me if you crush the seeds of a columbine while making a wish and then blow the powder into the wind, your wish will come true.”

“Really?” Ani asked, her eyes filled with fascination.

“That’s what she said. Problem is the seeds are so tiny and so hard that they’re almost impossible *to* crush.”

“Then how do you make your wish?”

“That’s just it, I think,” Francine said standing up. “You work so hard trying to crush them that you forget your wish and you end up wishin’ you could crush the darn things.”

Ani laughed and rose from her crouch. Her smile quickly faded and she looked down at the ground thoughtfully. “Mom, is my chest too big?”

Surprised by the question, Francine gazed into her daughter’s face and saw that the day’s events were weighing very heavily on her mind. “No! Sweetie no, not at all. You’re just blooming a little early, that’s all; like this columbine is blooming late. I was just like you when I was a girl.”

“Well, none of the other girls have them like this.”

“Oh they will, you’ll see, I promise. Next year when you go back to school, all the girls will have them.”

“I hope so. I don’t much like these things.”

“Well, Cameron Keller sure does,” Francine teased.

“Mom!” Ani gasped, nudging her mother’s arm lightly with embarrassment.

* * * *

Cam pedaled home in the dark hoping beyond hope that his father was asleep. He coasted quietly up to the side of the house and leaned his bike on the old and weathered siding just under his bedroom window. He walked around to the front of the house and as silently as he could, pulled the screen door open and stepped inside. Jared was passed out on the couch and snoring loudly. The stagnant smell of his alcoholic breath seemed omnipresent in the house and an empty scotch bottle rested on his chest. The TV set was on, its blue flickering glow filling the otherwise darkened room.

He snuck past the living room entrance and into his own room. He closed the door without a sound, wedged a chair up under the handle, and then loosened the screen in his window for easy escape; his bike waiting ready for him just below. Still fully clothed — he even kept his running shoes on — he lay down on his bed and switched his walkman on, leaving the volume low and one headphone behind his ear so he could hear if his father was coming. His jaw hurt but not too bad and not nearly as bad as his heart did when the memories of his mother decided to start poking at him.

He remembered his mom, how beautiful and gentle she was and how things used to be sort of better when she was around, or at least when his father wasn't beating on her. The memories came flooding back to him...

* * * *

Camknew he didn't like what was happening. It was scary to hear his father's big, booming voice hollering at

his mother. It was scary to hear his mother crying and begging for Jared to stop, and it was really scary to hear him punching her but it had been going on for as long as he could remember and it was all that he knew. It was just the way things were, scary or not. As long as he stayed in his room when the screaming started, everything was OK and he was safe.

It was one particularly frightening night two years earlier when Jared came home from work late and very drunk. Cam's mother sent him to bed twenty minutes before his usual time, giving him her walkman and telling him to shut the door and listen to some music until she came to tuck him in. Cam did as she said, just like he always did, and then it began: the yelling, the sound of glass breaking, and the sound of his mother being slapped, punched, and kicked repeatedly. As similar as it was to all the other times, this night was somehow different. Usually it didn't go on for very long and after all the anger and a short silence from his parents bedroom, his mother would come into his room, click off the walkman and kiss him goodnight. This night, it just went on and on. There would be some breaks in the storm outside his door when Cam would believe that it was over and expect his mother to come in, but just as he would drift off to sleep, it started up again, waking him.

It was very late when the sound of the screen door slamming and a car door shutting outside prompted his curiosity. He pushed the covers off and placed his mother's walkman on the pillow, then quietly crept out of his bedroom and to the front door, peering out. A taxi cab was

pulling away with his mother in the back seat. She looked out at him vacantly but made no effort to tell him where she was going, say goodnight to him, or even wave.

“Your mother hurt herself,” Jared informed from the living room, startling Cam. “She’s goin’ to get herself fixed up. I’d take her myself, but your pa’s real tired right now.”

Cam looked into the room at his father who was sitting on the sofa staring back at him. “Is she hurt bad, pa?” Cam asked, tugging up his pyjama bottoms.

Jared’s strong hands rubbed at his face. He sighed, letting his red eyes meet his son’s. “Nah. She’s OK. Go back to bed, boy.”

“How’d she hurt herself? Where’s she going?” Cam asked.

Jared’s stare changed quickly from tired to bothered, and burned right through Cam. “I told ya — she’s goin’ to get fixed up,” he said, his voice shaking slightly with his escalating rage. He sat up straight, his eyes not leaving his son. “And I told ya to go back to bed, boy! NOW!”

Cam backed away a step from his father’s thunderous command as if its force had pushed him, then he trotted back to his room and closed the door quietly behind him.

The next day, Cam headed off to school feeling exhausted and confused. His mother had not returned home and Jared just barked at him to wake up for school as he left for work, leaving all of Cam’s questions unanswered. He had taken a bath the night before like his mother had told him, but because she wasn’t there to greet him with juice and toast when he woke, he left for school with only

the juice. Little did he know at the time that it would be only the first of many mornings without breakfast.

At school Cam took his desk and dug into his school bag for his arithmetic book. He pulled it out along with a piece of paper he didn't recognize as his own. He unfolded it and began to read, realizing that it was a note from his mother. It was printed clearly for him...

Dear Cameron,

I have gone to visit a friend in BC for a while. I'll be back soon.

Your pa will take good care of you.

Love Mom

Cam stared at the note for what felt like a long time. The rest of the class had already begun their lesson but Cam hadn't even opened his book. He couldn't quite understand why his mother's note and what his father told him the night before were two completely different things. Why would his mother lie to his father like that? Or, why would his father lie to him like that? Why didn't she say good-bye to him last night? Why couldn't he go with her?

The teacher's voice sounded as if it were under water and ages away. Cam's attention was firmly adhered to his mother's note and all of his questions began to overlap one another. Finding the whole thing to be too much and too scary, he shoved the note back in his bag, got up, and left

the classroom. His teacher began calling out to him as he headed into the hall but Cam picked up his pace to a jog.

He rode his bike to his private thinking place down at the creek and sat by the edge, throwing rocks into the water and trying to figure out what was happening. He wondered if he had missed something that might explain why his father said one thing and his mother said another. He wondered about British Columbia. He knew it was the province beside his own and as big as any, but he had no idea how far away it was or how long it might take someone to get there.

After running over his questions so many times that his head ached, he wondered what time it was. He knew he must have been sitting there for quite a while because the sun was very high in the sky and unspeakably hot. He gave up trying to understand what had happened the previous night, electing to ask his father what it all meant. He would show him the note and just flat out ask him. Feeling firm with his decision, he hopped on his bike and rode home to wait for his father to return from work.

He fell asleep on the couch an hour before Jared walked in the house. It was late and he was drunk again, kicking the leg of the sofa to wake his son. “What are you doin’ out here?” his father asked, tossing his keys on the table along with his cap.

Cameron sat up, wiping the groggy feeling off his face, then reached for the note on the table and handed it to Jared. “I wanted to show you this. Mom put it in my school bag. She went to BC. That’s pretty close, right?”

“Well, well. Looks like your ma left us, boy,” Jared snickered. “That bitch.”

“Left us? Why? Where is she? When is she coming home?” Cam asked, beginning to feel a little worse than worried.

Jared checked the reverse side of the note, and continued to grin. “Vancouver, no doubt.”

“Where is that?” Cam asked.

“That’s where your stupid old cow of a grandma lives,” Jared muttered.

“Is it near here? Is Mom OK?”

Jared crumpled up the letter and tossed it back at Cameron. “No, it ain’t near here. Don’t they teach you this shit in school? Don’t I pay taxes for them to teach you this?”

Cam uncrumpled the piece of paper and peered down at it again, struggling to comprehend. He looked up at his father, wanting nothing more than an answer. Jared’s unreadable smile beamed down on his son. “You ain’t too sharp, are ya kid? Go to bed, I don’t want to talk to ya anymore.” He turned and headed for the kitchen.

Cam obeyed, not wanting to be yelled at the way he had been the previous night. He went to his room, closed the door and sat on his bed, staring at his mother’s note. A wave of panic swelled in his belly as he realized and feared that he knew exactly what was going on. His mother was gone, and she wasn’t coming back — ever.

* * * *

Cameron never did see or hear from his mother again after that. His fears had been accurate back then, she never

did return nor did she ever call or write. For the first little while he trusted that she would return. He believed she had told him the truth in her note and she would come home. He believed it with all of his being, until a couple of months after she had left when his father told him otherwise...

Jared had come home from work one evening to find Cam watching television in the living room. For no reason that Cam could figure, his father grabbed him by the arm and yanked him off the chesterfield, screaming at him: “What the fuck do ya think you’re doin?”

Cam was so startled by Jared’s outburst that it took him a few moments to answer. “Watching TV,” he timidly replied.

“Do you pay the utility bill around here? No! I do! You’re just like your mother! Ungrateful and selfish. Ya know she’s gone because of you, don’t ya? She left me because of you, ya stupid little asshole!”

“Pa, I... you’re hurtin’ me,” Cam begged, squirming in Jared’s grip.

“Hurt? You don’t know what hurt is, boy!”

“Pa, please. Mom’s coming back, she said so,” he pleaded, tears welling up in his eyes.

“Comin’ back?” he roared. “How stupid are you? She’s not comin’ back. She’s never comin’ back!”

Jared threw his son to the floor and glared down at him. Cam’s face — now wet with tears — displayed just how completely shocked and horrified he was. He scrambled to get up and ran to his room, slamming the door behind him.

* * * *

That day was only the beginning. From then on Jared took his anger out on Cam every chance he got. It really wasn't that bad; his pa had been beating on him for three years now and Cam had become somewhat desensitized to it. He had set himself up a system that allowed him to avoid most confrontations, and it worked most of the time but when his pa did get a hold of him, he got him good. Today after school, when he dropped his bike on the front lawn, was just a couple of little taps; the calm before the storm.

The sun had just started to rise when Cam's alarm quietly sounded, waking him. He got out of bed, gathered his dirty clothes off the floor and stuffed them into a duffel bag. He tossed the bag out the window, and then replaced the screen. Pressing his ear up to the bedroom door and listening for any signs of life, he could hear that the TV set was still on but that was all. He moved the chair that had been wedged under the knob and opened the door quietly. Jared was still asleep on the sofa as Cam skulked silently by to the front door.

"Cameron," Jared grunted, from behind.

Cam stopped dead and pulled in a deep breath of absolute dread. "Yeah Pa?"

"C'meer boy."

Cam turned and walked into the living room, looking at his father as he sat up on the couch. The empty bottle he had been drinking from the night before slid off his gut and fell to the floor. It clanged and rolled toward the wall on the slanted floorboards. "When's your summer break. Soon ain't it?"

“Today’s the first day, Pa.”

“Jesus H, where does the time go?” Jared asked, more to himself than to Cam. He looked up at his son and tried to look fatherly. “Did ya get your report card?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, where is it? Lemmee see it, boy.”

Cam obeyed his father and returned to his room to retrieve his report card from his schoolbag. He returned quickly and handed it to his father. Jared lit a cigarette and peered down at the letter sized yellow card while revoltingly clearing his throat of morning phlegm. “Hmmm, is this the right card? This isn’t yours is it?” he asked, sounding suspicious.

“Yeah, it’s mine.”

“It’s got your name on it.”

His heart beginning to pound with uneasiness, Cameron stared at his father trying not to let his mounting fear show.

“It says here: *‘Cameron is extremely bright and mature for his age. He exhibits... extra-ord... extrodary... extra-ordin-arily... ad-vanced problem solving and reasoning abilities. Does sats... satisfact-orily in all subjects but very obviously isn’t working up to his full po-ten... poten-chee-uhl... potential. Also shows some issues with preocc-upation; seems bored with not only his lessons but the other children. May do better if challenged in advanced classes that match his intelligence...’*” Jared laughed and peered up at his son. “So this is what I pay taxes for: so some bitch can tell me my kid’s a little loner weirdo retard with no friends that needs to go to some special school with the other little loner weirdo retards?”

“Can I go now?”

“Where ya off to this early?”

“Out Pa.”

“Always ‘out Pa’. Don’t ya wanna spend some time with your old man?”

This had to be the creepiest and most unexpected question ever asked of him. Would he really have to live through the torture of spending even five minutes with this man he detested so immensely? Just the notion of it nauseated as well as petrified him. “Sure Pa. What do you wanna do?” he asked, sounding less than enthusiastic.

“How’s about goin’ to get your pa some beer? I’m fresh out,” Jared said, pulling a twenty from his wallet and holding it out.

The relief he felt was immeasurable. “Sure Pa,” Cam said, taking the money and stuffing it in his pocket.

He left the house and made his way around to his bedroom window where his bike sat waiting for him. He pedaled away feeling quite pleased. Every time his father gave him money for booze, he’d pocket a dollar or two. Jared never noticed and Cam had saved somewhere close to eighty dollars. He kept it stashed in a large Mason jar beneath a loose floorboard in his room. It came in handy for laundry, food, and the clothes he seemed to be outgrowing so fast. Just six months ago he spent a whole twenty-seven dollars at the Salvation Army Thrift store. He walked away with three pairs of jeans, four T-shirts, and a pair of sneakers that were in fairly good condition. He also had plans that when he had saved up enough, he could run away and find his mother in Vancouver, which he had

since learned was a large coastal city in the province of BC, and over a thousand kilometers away.

* * * *

Ani woke up feeling excited; it was, after all, the first day of summer vacation. The sun was shining brilliantly into her room, beckoning her outdoors and to the wonders of the garden.

Her mother had made her favourite: banana pancakes sprinkled with a dash of powdered sugar and cinnamon, and drowning in melted butter and syrup, and after they ate and dressed they headed out back to start weeding and dead-heading the faded blooms.

Crouching bare foot in the warm but solid earth, Ani began pulling what her mother had taught her over the past several years to be weeds. She filled a small basket, occasionally getting up to dump its contents into a large bag over in the yard. The sun warmed her back and made her feel glad to be alive. She had no friends out this far in the rural area of the county, but she didn't mind not seeing her schoolmates very frequently over the summer; she and her mother seemed to have fun all on their own. There were only three kids that lived nearby, two young kids that were still wobbling around in the single digits of age, and Cameron Keller.

So it was just her and her mother for the summer and Ani was just fine with that. It had been this way ever since her father left four years earlier. Ani was only eight at the time but was old enough to know that her father had been physically abusive and unfaithful to her mother. One night

the fighting between them became so heated that the police arrived. Ani wasn't sure whether it was her mother or their closest neighbour that called for help, but she wouldn't be surprised to learn it was the latter. Normally they wouldn't hear a thing — their house was over three hundred yards away — but that night was by far the loudest fight her parents had ever had.

She could remember very clearly the night that the police came. She remembered how small her father looked standing out by the police car in handcuffs, the blue and red lights spinning around and shining up on the house and in through the windows. Ani watched from just inside the door as they read him his rights and stuffed him into the backseat of a police cruiser.

There had been some legal negotiations that went on after that, none of which Ani understood. She even had to dress up for court and sit in that box next to the judge on one occasion. “Did you ever see your father hit your mother?” they had asked, and “Did you see your father hit your mother the night the police came?” and “Has your father ever hit you?”

She answered the blizzard of questions as best she could, sometimes truly struggling not to cry, but in the long run she had no idea where any of it was leading. The judge said something about a restraining order, and a whole lot of other things about divorce proceedings, child support, and court supervised visitation that flew far too far above Ani's head. All she knew was that her dad was gone and wouldn't be back. But that was fine with her; she hated him for what he had done to her mother.

Over the next few years her mother asked her several times whether Ani wanted to spend one day a week with her father, but Ani refused, telling Francine she would rather die than ever see him again. She had spent the first eight years of her life in fear of the man and never wanted to feel that kind of fear again. Her mother never argued her wishes when it came to this and never forced the matter.

* * * *

Cam washed his clothes at the Laundromat in town and then headed off to the YMCA to take a shower. He usually showered after school, and only every third day, so the onset of summer was welcome, allowing him to shower in the morning — every day if he wanted to. He had already purchased his father’s beer at the small grocer down the road from his house and delivered it to a luckily passive father. The clerks at the grocer knew Cam well at this point. They knew that they had better sell him the liquor or *that big burly drunk fucker from down the road would come in and start screaming his head off.*

The beer delivered, his laundry done, and having showered, he rode his bike out to the field behind Ani Sauvé’s house. He didn’t know why, really; he just did.

* * * *

“Ani,” Francine said. “Isn’t that the boy who teases you, out there in the field?”

Ani peered up and out into the knee-high grass where she saw Cam, his sandy blond hair blowing in the breeze.

He appeared to be holding a long stick and beating down some of the weeds as he wandered. “What’s he doing out here?” Ani asked, almost to herself, then looking up at her mother. “Let’s go inside.”

“Maybe he wants to apologize, Ani.”

“Oh my god, he just looked over here,” Ani blundered, sounding quite panicked. Putting her basket down, she retreated into the house quickly.

“Ani!” her mother called, but Ani had disappeared inside.

Francine shaded the sun from her eyes and watched Cam as he occasionally glanced over to the house. He had roamed a bit closer but didn’t seem to have the courage to finish the trip. She followed her daughter into the house and found her at the kitchen window hiding behind the curtain and peeking out at the field.

“What do you think he wants?” Ani asked, staring through the glass at him.

“I’m sure I don’t know, honey, but I do know that he isn’t coming anywhere near here with me outside. Why don’t you go on back out there? He probably just wants to be friends.”

“Cam Keller? No he doesn’t!” she hissed. “He’s horrid!”

“Ani, go on out there,” Francine urged.

“No! He’s just gonna grab at my bra and say horrible things to me. He’s gonna call me Ani-boob again.”

“I bet you he won’t.”

“I bet you he *will*.”

“OK, what do you want to bet? How about some chocolate chip cookies? If you win, I’ll bake some. And if I win, you do the dinner dishes: wash, dry *and* put them away.”

Ani pondered the offer while taking one more peek outside at Cam. “Chocolate chip?” she asked.

“Yeah. Big gooey ones!” Francine confirmed, widening her eyes.

“OK,” Ani accepted, heading for the back door. “You better preheat the oven, Mom.”

Ani confidently returned outside, peeking up at Cam out in the field as she walked back to the garden and resumed her weeding. Cam started making his way toward the yard, although slowly and appearing as though he were trying to get there completely by accident.

After a near eternity he reached the well-groomed grass of Ani’s back yard and strolled over to where she was working. “Hey Ani, whatcha doin’?” he asked, spooking her from behind.

“Weeding. What are *you* doing here?”

“Nothing. Just messin’ around,” he replied, taking a few steps closer to her to watch her work. “How do ya know which one’s are weeds? They all look the same.”

“No they don’t. And I just know,” Ani snipped.

“*How* do you know?”

“My mother taught me.”

“Well, how does *she* know?” Cam asked, poking at the ground with the stick he was still carrying.

Ani thought about Cam’s question for a moment and became frustrated that she wasn’t able to come up with a

good answer. “What do you want, Cameron?” she sneered, without looking up.

“Nothin’.”

“Well, go pick on someone else.”

“What? I’m not here to pick on you.”

“Yes you are. You’re nasty and I don’t like you and I want you to go away.”

Cam stood silent for a few seconds looking down at her as she tugged violently on a dandelion. “I bet it’d come out a lot easier if you wet the ground,” he suggested.

Ani glared up at him angrily. “Go away!”

“Why?”

“Because I want you to.”

“You’re just mad ’cos I’m right.”

“No I’m not,” she argued as she tugged and tugged. The dandelion finally snapped at its base but left its roots firmly embedded in the dirt.

“Told ya,” he smiled.

Ani stood up courageously and eyed him. “OK. If you’re so smart, you get it out,” she dared.

“Go get me some water.”

Ani stormed up to the house and filled a watering can from the hose. Returning to the garden, she handed the can to him. He dropped the stick and approached the stubborn weed. He poured a generous amount of water on it and let it seep into the soil. Then, taking a sturdy grasp on what was left of it, he yanked it out effortlessly. “See,” he said, a quiver of pride radiating from him.

“Why did you do that to me yesterday?” Ani asked, suddenly.

“What?”

“Why did you do that to me yesterday?”

“Do what?”

“Don’t play dumb. You know what.”

“What? Bug you about your bra? I was just teasin’, Ani,” he explained.

“Well, it wasn’t very nice,” she scolded.

“C’mon Ani, I was just messin’ around with you.”

“No! It was horrible and I’m really mad at you!”

Cam stared at her for an instant and then he looked down at the ground. “Hey, ya wanna see something cool?”

“No.”

“C’mon. It’s pretty cool.”

“What? What’s so cool?” she asked, keeping her tone unbearably cold.

“C’meer, I’ll show ya.”

Ani came up beside him as he crouched down. “See this web?” he asked, motioning at a spider’s tunnel work next to a rock in the garden.

“Yeah, it’s a spider web, so what?”

“You ever seen the spiders that make these?”

“I dunno, I guess not. Why? Are they big?”

“This one will be. C’meer, I’ll show ya.”

Ani crouched down next to him looking at the hole in the web. “I don’t see anything.”

“Watch, I’m gonna drop a little stone on the web and he’ll come out thinking it’s a bug,” Cam said. He picked a tiny pebble from the ground and dropped it on the web. A moment later, a penny sized spider zipped out of his tunnel and checked out the pebble. Ani screeched and jumped

back a bit, the spider responding by scooting back into its hole. Cam laughed. “He won’t hurt you,” he assured. “You don’t have to be scared of him.”

Ani smiled and moved back up next to Cam. “Can you do it again?”

“Maybe,” he replied, picking up another pebble and repeating his trick, but the spider didn’t come out. “Nah, he’s wise to us now. He was a big one, huh?”

“I’d say,” Ani agreed.

He peered over at her to see her smiling, but his own smile faded. “You hurt yourself,” he said, noticing the cut on her cheek.

“What?” she frowned, not knowing what he was talking about.

“You cut your face,” he said, looking at her.

Ani’s eyes looked into his and then she looked away quickly. “It’s just a scratch. It’s nothing.”

Francine had been watching the two kids through the kitchen window as she made lunch. They appeared to be getting along, so she made an extra sandwich for Cameron and pulled an extra glass out of the cupboard for him. She hung her head out the back door and yelled to them across the yard: “Hey, you guys want some sandwiches? Lunch is ready.”

Cam looked up and then stood. “Yeah,” he breathed.

“You two sit at the patio table. I’ll bring them out.”

Francine placed a plate full of sandwiches, a pitcher of Kool-Aid, and glasses on the table. Sitting down herself, she glanced at both the kids, and saw that Ani was giving

her a very disapproving look, bordering on furious. She smiled at her anyway while pouring the drinks.

“Do you like chicken salad, Cameron?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am. I like everything ma’am. Thank you.”

“Good. There’s plenty,” Francine told him.

Ani grabbed a sandwich off the plate and sat back hard in her chair, still sneaking angry peeks over at her mother, but Francine ignored them and made small talk with Cam.

After they had finished their lunch, Ani got up from her chair and disappeared back into the garden to continue her weeding. Cam quickly finished his drink and then wandered over to continue watching her. “Do you have to do that everyday?” he asked.

“No, not every day,” Ani answered, feeling his eyes on her back. A moment passed when she could no longer tolerate his stare on her. She turned around quickly to bark at him again, allowing her still ailing feelings from the day before to get the better of her, but he spoke before she had the chance.

“Well, I guess I better take off,” he said, picking up the stick he had left by the garden.

“Where are you going?” Ani asked, finding an odd sensation of sadness stick into her. It struck her as curious because she knew that she hated him for what he had done, but somehow she wanted him to stay.

“I dunno. Wherever,” Cam responded, heading back toward the field.

Ani turned her attention back to her work, refusing to let go of her anger, and she heard him shout his thanks for lunch over to her mother.

“Are you leaving so soon, Cameron?” Francine yelled back.

“Yes ma’am.”

“OK, bye Cameron.”

A few minutes later, Ani stood up and peeked out across the field to see Cam on the other side, riding off on his bike. She walked up behind her mother and put her hands on her waist. “Why did you give him lunch?” she spouted.

“Because it was lunch time, Ani. Besides, it looked like you two were making friends. I was just trying to help.”

“Well, we weren’t making friends. He just came here to pick on me.”

“And did he?”

Ani was quiet for several seconds before blurting out a truth she didn’t want to admit. “No.”

“Was he nice to you?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Ani answered, her gaze drifting away from her mother and down to her own feet.

“That’s why I gave him lunch,” Francine said. “He just wants to be friends with you, sweetie.”

“Well, I don’t wanna be friends with him.”

Francine teased her daughter with a smile. “He really is kind of cute though, don’t you think?” she asked. “He has real pretty eyes. They’re the nicest green; very unusual.”

Ani stared at her mother with unwavering seriousness for a moment, not allowing her own smile to slip through, but then failing. “Yeah.” she agreed, quietly, as if keeping a secret.

*She rises early from bed
Runs to the mirror
The bruises inflicted in moments of fury
He kneels beside her once more
Whispers a promise
'Next time I'll break every bone in your body'...*

David Sylvian

Chapter 2

“You ain’t goin’ nowhere ’til you clean this place up!” Jared screamed, pushing Cam into the door. Cam pursed his lips tightly to keep from blurting out some very choice words he had for his father. “Well? What are you waiting for, boy? Didn’t you hear me? I said *clean this place up!*”

“Yeah Pa, I heard ya,” Cam said, heading for the kitchen.

Jared grabbed Cam by the back of his T-shirt collar and yanked him back. “Don’t you walk away from me when I’m talkin’ to ya!” he snapped, throwing his son down to the floor.

“I’m goin’ Pa... I’ll clean up.”

Jared kicked him in the stomach and as Cam lay holding on to his middle and trying to pull back the pain, Jared came around behind him and gave him a solid boot to the kidneys, and then another. “Well, get a move on, ya useless little fuck!” He glared down at his son who didn’t appear to be making much of an effort to get up and grabbed him by the shirt sleeve, yanking him to stand. “*Get up!*”

Cam knew that if he didn’t do as his father said, the beating that was coming — the *real* beating — would hit home today. He struggled to his feet, biting the inside of

his lip to re-focus and ignore the growling pain that was swirling in his core.

He collected and washed all the dirty dishes, every one in the house caked with dried food and none of which Cam had dirtied. After an hour and a half he finally finished. His fingers were red, cracked, and peeling from having to use steel wool to get everything clean. He scrubbed his father's ashtrays and placed them back where he had found them so as not to further anger the man. He wiped everything down with a damp rag, collected all the empty bottles and cans, swept up and took the trash out.

When he was done cleaning the house, he stood in the entrance of the living room peering at his father and hoping he had done a satisfactory job. "I'm done, Pa. Can I go now?"

"*You're done Pa?*" Jared echoed callously.

"Yeah, unless you want me to get the vacuum and..." Cam started, but Jared quickly interrupted him.

"No. Get the hell outta here. You were already makin' so much of a God damn racket I couldn't hear myself think."

Cam waited a second longer to make certain his father wasn't going to change his mind. When that didn't happen he turned and headed out the front door.

He winced with pain as he got on his bike and pedaled away, each movement aching and throbbing.

"Ani," Francine called. "Cameron is out front."

Ani got up from the kitchen table where she was leafing through a gardening book and headed out to the living

room. She peered through the front window to see that Cam was indeed there. She watched for a few seconds as he rode his bike around in sporadic circles while glancing up at the house.

Francine noticed that the expression on her daughter's face was softer than the one she sported the day before. "Why don't you ask him if he wants some Kool-Aid?" she suggested.

Ani watched him a moment longer then walked over to the front door and pushed it open, calling to him. "Ya want some Kool-Aid?"

Cam rode around in one last large circle, then steered his way up to her walk. He crossed the small cement bridge that spanned over the ditch and coasted up to the house. "OK."

"C'mon in," Ani invited, allowing herself to smile at him.

Cam dismounted his bike and then stood there, seemingly confused. "Where can I put my bike?" he asked.

"You can just leave it there," Ani told him.

"Really? Right here?" Cam asked, needing confirmation that it was permitted to break one of Jared's rules.

"Yeah, why not?"

Cam shrugged his shoulders and then laid his bike down on the grass. He climbed the porch steps slowly using the handrail to help him over his pain, determined not to let Ani see that he was injured. He followed her inside the house and took in the beautiful surroundings; the furnishings, the pictures on the walls, the vases of fresh cut flowers in the foyer and living room. There was an

atmosphere of calm about the home that was welcoming and comfortable; very unlike what he was accustomed to. There was also a soft floral scent in the air that was soothing and gave everything a peaceful air about it. “Wow, you got a nice house,” Cam commented as he followed her down the hall to the kitchen.

Ani’s mother smiled at him as he appeared. “Well, hi there, Cameron.”

“Hi.”

“Have you had lunch yet?”

“No ma’am,” he replied.

“Call me Francine. I like that better, don’t you?” she asked, her expression warm.

“OK... um, Francine ma’am.”

Francine chuckled with amusement. “I’ll fix you a sandwich.”

“Thank you ma’am.”

Ani had seated herself back in her place and glanced up at Cam. “Sit,” she instructed.

“What are you reading?” he asked, eyeing the book.

“It’s a gardening encyclopedia. My mom and me are trying to identify a few plants,” Ani answered. “You wanna help?”

“Sure. What kind of plants are they? Are they poisonous? Carnivorous?”

“No,” Ani giggled. “And there’s no carnivorous plants.”

“Sure there is. Venus Flytraps are carnivorous. And there are others, lots of them; big ones in South America — they eat pigs and stuff,” he grinned.

“They do not!”

Cam laughed. “No, I’m kiddin’. They don’t eat pigs. They do eat insects though. I read it in a book.”

Ani brushed off his fact spouting release and refocused on her current task. “Well, I hope they’re not poisonous. I don’t think they are. C’mon, I’ll show them to you.”

“Where are they?” Cam asked, hoping he wouldn’t have to get out of his seat.

“They’re out back, in the garden. C’mon.”

Cam sighed quietly as Ani pushed her chair out and started for the back door. Cam got out of his seat, his face having trouble hiding his extreme discomfort. Francine turned to smile at the kids, pleased that they were making friends, when she caught the look on Cam’s face as he stood up. “Cameron? Are you OK?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, straightening up.

“Are you sure?”

He simply nodded and followed Ani over and out to the backyard.

In the garden, Ani pointed out the three plants in question, trying to memorize the shapes of their leaves and blooms.

“Why don’t you just cut a small piece off and bring them inside?” Cam suggested.

Ani looked up at him as he stood just behind her. “That’s a really good idea,” she said, sizing him up and deciding that she thought he was smart. “I’ll go get the secateurs,” she said, sounding excited and then trotting over to the shed.

Cam took the opportunity to return to the back steps and sit down. The ache seemed to be all around him now, hot

and thumping wickedly. Ani came romping back outside with a small pair of pruners and jogged past him into the house. She soon returned with a jar filled with water. “Mom thinks your idea is good too.” She bounced by him on the steps and headed back to the garden, assuming that he would follow.

Francine had been watching through the kitchen window, suspicious and concerned about the boy’s behaviour. As her daughter walked across the yard she observed Cam touch his stomach and then lift his T-shirt to look at himself. Seeing nothing on his belly he lowered his shirt back down but Francine was stunned to see an enormous, dark reddish-purple bruise on his middle back that disappeared up under his shirt and down below the waistband of his jeans. Shocked, she rushed to the door and came out, sitting next to him and smiling a little. “You’re hurt, aren’t you, Cameron?”

“No ma’am.”

“Cameron, I saw a bruise on your back. What happened?”

Cam scanned his mind for a good and plausible story to tell her. “Oh yeah, that. I fell off my bike.”

“Do your parents know?”

“Yeah, my pa knows.”

“Does your mother know?”

“My mom doesn’t live with us anymore, but my pa knows.”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

“No ma’am. It’s nothing; just a bruise.”

“OK, well, would you mind if I took a little look anyways?” she asked.

“It’s really nothin’,” Cam promised.

“Please, Cameron. I just want a quick peek, that’s all.”

Not having seen the bruise on his back himself and deciding that it couldn’t be that bad, he lifted his T-shirt up for her and strained to see it himself, but couldn’t.

“Oh my god, Cameron...” she breathed, looking at his discoloured skin and the obvious swelling affecting the area. She touched the area lightly which caused Cam to flinch a bit. “You really should have your father take you to the doctor, Cameron.”

“Nah, it’s nothin’. I’ve been hurt worse,” he assured her, letting his shirt back down.

Francine searched Cam’s face but saw no signs that he wasn’t being truthful. “OK, well, your sandwich is ready. You’re sure you’re OK?”

“Yes ma’am, I’m fine,” he said to her as Ani returned from the garden with the three plant cuttings in the jar.

He and Ani sat in front of the opened book and skimmed the pages for similar looking plants. Having found them, Ani read the facts on each plant and took a few notes for Francine so she could take proper care of them. They often found a strange new resident in their garden that wasn’t a weed. Seeds would obviously travel long distances on the wind in the prairie expanses and from time to time make it into their garden and germinate.

Cam had finished his sandwich and was working on his second glass of Kool-Aid when Ani proposed that they go back outside. Cam agreed, less reluctantly this time,

feeling better with some food in him. He pushed his chair out and carefully stood up as Francine watched his movements. Her eyes followed him to the back door, but he seemed to be doing alright, so she decided to relax her concerns.

The two kids sat in the grass by a shaded area of the garden for the remainder of the afternoon. Ani described what it would look like by the end of July, painting a colourful and fragrant picture for him with her words. She told him what each plant was and which of them attracted butterflies, hummingbirds, or bumblebees.

The shadow of the house had stretched out across the yard, shading almost all of it and informing Cameron that he better be careful not to overstay his welcome. He heaved himself up off the ground and looked down at Ani. "I better go. It's getting late."

"OK," she said quietly, also standing.

He said his good-bye and thanked Francine for lunch, then started for the front of the house where he had left his bike.

"Cam!" Ani shouted after him to get his attention before he disappeared. "Ya wanna come back tomorrow?"

He gave her a cooked smile and nodded, encouraging her own smile to emerge.

Climbing on his ten-speed bicycle was extremely painful but he was able to act like nothing at all was wrong. His father had never got him in the kidneys before, and he was learning with each stabbing reminder that he never wanted to be kicked there again. The most painful he had experienced yet was a bruised rib and a broken arm the

year before. Louis from the diner had taken him to get x-rays the evening after that beating. Although the rib was the least serious of the two injuries in that instance, to Cam it was worse because it hurt like the nastiest possible hell every time he took in a breath, and breathing just happened to be a necessity he couldn't avoid. Having a bone set was certainly a screaming pain of intolerable measures, but it was fast and soon over. This new kind of back and core pain had been equitable competition for the rib, but now it mostly just hurt to move certain ways and he knew which ways those ways were from feeling them all afternoon.

He parked his bike alongside of his house hoping that his father was asleep. As much as it was true that he had suffered through worse, he didn't think he could take another punch, slap or kick today; all he wanted was to lie down for a while. Keeping as quiet as he possibly could, he entered the house and headed directly to his room.

"Cameron?" Jared called.

Dread rose up in Cam's belly and his thoughts began praying... *Please Pa, not now... please.* "Yeah?" he called back.

"C'meer, boy."

Cam tracked his father's voice to the kitchen in the rear of the house and oddly enough found him sitting at the table, showered, shaven and eating. "Yeah, Pa?"

"Ya did a good job cleanin' in here, son. Ya want somethin' to eat?"

"No thanks," Cam replied.

“I got some good news, boy. I was called back to work. I start tonight — graveyard shift.” His mouth was full as he spoke and he spit a little food out with his words.

“That’s great Pa,” Cam remarked, his tone flat and emotionless.

“Yup, it’s good for a man’s pride to work,” his father boasted, glancing from his bowl of... whatever it was he was eating and up to Cam. “You’re a man now; you’ll be OK here by yourself, right boy?”

Cam found the question amusing, seeing as how he spent all of his time alone anyway. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

He stood in the entrance of the kitchen for a few more moments waiting to see if his father had anything else to say to him, but he just sat there cramming food into his face. Cam turned and retreated back to his room, feeling relieved that his father was in a good mood and that with his father out at work he had at least one night of restful sleep coming.

* * * *

Francine was unable to get Cameron out of her mind after seeing the bruise on his back that afternoon. He seemed to be OK but there was something in the tone of his voice that had her perplexed. It was as if he were trying just entirely *too* hard to sound sincere. And that bruise: she’d seen her share of bruises in her life but never one quite that sizable and painful looking. His excuse about falling off his bike was a believable one but it would have had to be one helluva fall and he didn’t seem to have any scuffs or scrapes on his elbows, hands, or anywhere else

that might validate his story. She had heard rumours about the Keller household, but she never had a reason to give credence to them or dismiss them either.

One of the things she had heard was that Jared Keller was a raging alcoholic who had absolutely no control over an exceptionally violent temper. It was also rumoured that he ferociously beat his wife Suzy Keller daily and she eventually left him as a result. After seeing Cam with that bruise and having him verify the fact that his mother no longer lived with them only gave the rumours some solidity. All throughout the afternoon and into the dinner hour her thoughts were fixed on Cameron and the Keller family rumours. Although she knew it was none of her business and she really didn't want to get involved in such things, a child's welfare was at stake and *that* she couldn't discount.

After she and Ani finished eating she decided to question her daughter on what she knew of Cameron Keller.

"Ani, do you know what its like at home for Cameron?"

Ani shook her head, and Francine continued.

"Has he ever come to school hurt, or missed a lot of time?"

"What do you mean?" Ani asked.

"Hurt, like he'd been in a fight? Like beat up?"

Ani thought for a moment before answering. "Mmm, yeah. A couple of times he had a black eye. Oh, and last year, he had a cast on his arm for a while, but everyone calls him a scrapper; I guess he gets in a lot of fights or something. I've never seen him get in one though, why?"

“Just curious,” Francine said. “Does he ever talk about his father?”

“No. I mean, I’ve never really talked to him except for today and he didn’t say anything about his dad... Why?”

“He just seems like such a nice kid. I guess I’d just like to know more about the boy my daughter has a crush on,” Francine grinned.

“I don’t have a crush on him,” Ani insisted, blushing and giggling.

“You *do*. And he has a crush on you, too.”

“Really? You think so?” Ani begged, her smile twinkling.

“I know so.”

“He’s coming back tomorrow. I can’t wait,” Ani confessed, just above a whisper.

“I’m sure he can’t either.”

At 9.30 p.m., Cam was lying on his bed reading when his father’s voice stole his attention away from the comic book. “I’m goin’ now boy.”

“OK Pa.”

Jared stared at his son for a moment with his hands shoved down into the pockets of his work pants. Cam buried his face back in his comic book, feeling his father still staring at him. It disquieted him but he didn’t lower his book to see what his father may be waiting for. He focused on a picture, ignoring the word balloons, and listened carefully to his father’s movements to make sure

that he wasn't actually coming into the room. A moment later, Jared spoke again...

"I'll be back around six-thirty tomorrow mornin'. Chain the back door and lock up the front if ya plan on takin' off somewhere again."

"OK Pa."

Cam listened to his father's footsteps as he walked down the hall toward the front entrance of the house. He heard the screen door squeak open and then slam shut, followed by his father's heavy boots as they clomped down the porch steps. The engine of Jared's old van ground painfully a few times before it started up and then barked out a loud backfire. He could smell the stench of burning oil in the evening air as he watched the light from the one working headlight beam in through the doorway and across the wall outside his door as the vehicle backed out of the drive. When he could no longer hear the van, Cam got off his bed, grunting with pain, and looked out the window just to make absolutely sure Jared was actually gone. He shut and locked the front door, then went to the phone so he could call Louis and excuse himself for the night.

"Louis' Diner."

"Lou, it's Cam."

"Cam, where are ya kid? You sick?"

"No, I'm OK, but I won't be comin' by tonight."

"Is it your pa? Is he..."

"No. I'm OK. Things here are OK."

"Alright kid. I appreciate the call. Will I see ya tomorrow?"

"Yeah, maybe."

“Listen, Cam, if ya need help...” Louis started, but Cameron interrupted him again...

“Louis, I’m OK, I swear it. Pa got called back to work. He just left. I just wanna lie around tonight, that’s all.”

“OK kid, I’m trustin’ you on the truth,” Louis said, backing down. He knew that if anyone deserved a night of rest it was this poor kid.

With the house all to himself, Cam heated up a can of ravioli, washed his dishes when he was done, and made very certain that everything was just as he had found it, going so far as to hide any evidence of the empty can in the bottom of the trash. He made himself an ice pack and refilled the ice trays, replacing them in the freezer before retreating back to his room.

As the ice began to take effect, easing the throbbing in his back and side, he thought about taking the money he had been saving, getting on a bus and finally tracking down his mother. Somewhere during that thought he caught himself thinking about Ani Sauv e and how he enjoyed being with her that day. He looked forward to going over to her house again to see her, and realized that, in fact, he couldn’t wait.

After setting his small alarm clock for 5 a.m., he got up and wedged a chair under his doorknob, just as he always did, and loosened the screen in his window for quick and easy escape should the need arise. He climbed back onto his bed, manoeuvring himself onto his ice pack, and as the ache numbed, he drifted off to sleep.

At 5 a.m. his alarm sounded, its unusually low volume always startling him into an almost panicked and ready

consciousness. He sat up carefully, searching his body for pain, but found that there was not nearly as much as the day before. The ice in his pack had completely melted over the course of the night but no water had leaked out of the bags. He grabbed some clean clothes and the water filled bags and headed for the washroom.

After dumping the water into the tub, he stripped down and showered quickly. When he was done and dressed he dried out the dirty old bathtub completely, leaving the room as if he hadn't been anywhere near it. After hiding the bags and towel he had used under his bed he snatched five dollars from his mason jar and was out of the house by six-o'clock, pedaling away as the sun rose.

He rode into town and waited out in front of the old pharmacy for them to open at seven. He bought himself a few new comic books, a donut and an orange juice, then casually rode out to the creek. He read his comics while lying in the grass under a large willow tree, and spent the rest of the morning exploring the creek itself and the creatures that called it home.

The water was filled with tadpoles, guppies, snails and even little turtles. That along with the many varieties of wild flowers blooming around the small clearing had Cam thinking that Ani would really like this place.

He had let what felt like an eternity pass before going over to Ani's. Coasting up her front walk, he dropped his bike on the grass and then walked up the front steps to her door, not needing the handrail at all this time. He knocked on the wooden frame of the screen and within moments,

Francine answered, seeing him and giving him a friendly greeting.

“Hi. Is Ani home?”

“Sure is. C’mon in.”

Cam stepped into the foyer glancing around for his friend, but couldn’t see her. “She’s out back,” Francine informed, gesturing for Cam to follow her. “I was just getting us some soda; ya want some?”

“Yes ma’am, please.”

Francine glared at him sternly. “Now, what did I say you could call me?” she scolded, mildly.

“Francine, ma’am,” Cam muttered, slight embarrassment tinting his smile.

She handed him a glass of cola, then filled two more. “How’s your back today?” she asked.

“A lot better. My pa put ice on it.”

“Oh, he did... well, that’s good.”

“Yes, Francine ma’am. It’s a lot better.”

Francine smiled while searching him for the sincerity she needed to see, but just as she had felt the previous day, something wasn’t quite right. She eyed him a moment longer and then invited him to follow her out into the backyard where Ani was.

He greeted Ani somewhat shyly, having realized the night before that he actually enjoyed her company. It wasn’t just that he thought she was *kind of* cute anymore; he thought she was *real* cute. There was no longer an insatiable urge to tease her anymore; it was a strange desire to see her smile, and even better, to be the one that made her smile. It wasn’t just the need to get her attention

anymore, negative or otherwise; it was the need to be the *center* of her attention. As much as he didn't want it to be true, Cam knew without a doubt that he really liked Ani in a way that he had never liked anyone before. She was pretty and smart and fun to be with, and it made him feel really good to just be around her.

"Hi," she smiled back at him, causing him to feel a little nervous.

"Is today weeding day?" Cam asked.

"No. We pulled a few earlier, but we're done now," she answered, stepping out of the garden.

Cam nodded, looking over the large collection of flowers for a moment and trying to decide what Ani might say if he asked her to go to the creek with him. Did she still hate him? Was she still mad at him? "I know a garden you would like," he said.

"You do? Nicer than ours?"

"No, not nicer, just different."

"Where?" she asked, feeling intrigued.

"I'll take you."

"You'll tell me where, first," she insisted.

"Down at the creek."

"The creek?"

"Yeah. Haven't ya ever been to the creek?"

"No."

"Well, go get your bike and let's go."

Ani peered down at the ground and appeared almost ashamed. "I don't have a bike," she mumbled.

"Well, I'll double ya," Cam offered. "C'mon."

“I’ll have to ask my mom,” she told him, feeling a little unsure on the whole matter. Cam stood motionless and rather expectant looking, obviously waiting for Ani to go get the required permission. As appealing as this invitation was, Ani had the feeling her mother wouldn’t allow it and would see fit to embarrass her supremely in front of Cam by treating her like a child.

She made her way over to where Francine was working as if she were walking to her own execution. Francine was busy dead-heading a grouping of cosmos. Ani corrected her posture and cleared her throat. “Mom, can I go to the creek with Cam?”

Francine looked at her daughter and then past her to Cameron as he stood behind her looking as strangely harmless and hopeful as a boy possibly could. She measured up all the possibilities of what could happen but remembered going to the creek herself when she was a young girl. Although she wasn’t crazy about the idea, she couldn’t find any real reason why she should deny her daughter a little bit of fun with her new friend. “I suppose...”

“Really? I can?” she squeaked excitedly.

“Yes, but you be very careful, Ani. And be back before dinner.”

“I will,” Ani agreed, peeking over at Cam and smiling at him.

“Cameron,” Francine added. “You take good care of her, OK?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I mean it, Cameron.”

“Don’t worry ma’am. I promise.”

Cam straddled his bike, tipping it slightly for Ani to climb up on the seat behind him. “Ya got your feet on the bolts?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She’d never ridden double on a bicycle before and she was terrified but hid it well. She seemed to be frightfully high off the ground and all she could think about was how far the fall would be and how much it would hurt. She wondered how fast he was going to go and how scary it would be. She then wondered if he were about to take her somewhere where his friends from school were waiting to torment and disgrace her. “You on OK?” he asked.

“Yup.”

“OK, hang on to the seat, or to me. OK?”

“OK,” she agreed, searching around the seat with her hands, hunting for a comfortable hold but not being able to find one that felt safe. She gazed at Cam’s back for a second before reaching up and grabbing on to his waist firmly. “Is this OK?” she asked.

“Yeah, that’s cool,” he answered, feeling secretly elated that she chose to hang on to him as opposed to the seat. “All set?” he asked.

“All set.”

He started slowly, then picked up a bit of speed out on the road. After reaching a good pace he stopped pedaling, rested his weight on the very edge of the seat and straightened his posture. He felt Ani’s hold on him tighten a bit with his movements and he smiled faintly. “Ya still

there?” he asked, with his voice raised so she could hear him over the clicking gears.

Ani giggled at his humour, assuring him that she was, indeed, still there. “Don’t you dare drop me,” she added, still smiling. This wasn’t nearly as scary as she thought it would be, but was actually fun.

“I ain’t gonna drop ya, Ani. I promise,” Cam said, his own smile growing. “We’re going down a hill in a minute, so hang on real good, OK?”

“OK,” Ani assured.

He turned off the road on to a wide dirt path and her hold around his middle tightened which smarted where his father had kicked him in the gut, but strangely enough he didn’t mind and sort of liked the way it felt to be touched by her.

As he had warned, he coasted quickly down a relatively steep slope to the creek below. At the bottom he braked cautiously so as not to throw Ani from the back and then tipped the bike for her to get off. He himself dismounted the bike and laid it down in the grass as Ani looked around at the hundreds of colourful blossoms surrounding the clearing. At least five butterflies that she could see fluttered around in the breeze, visiting each bloom. “Oh my god, it’s beautiful here,” she breathed.

Cam felt a pleasant rush fill him, watching her bright smile and knowing he was right that she would like this place. It was as if he were giving her a gift and that made him feel tremendous. “Cool, huh?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Ani agreed, heading off toward the flowers.

Cam followed her, noticing the way the sun played and shimmered in her long and soft-looking auburn hair and the way the breeze moved it gently off her neck. “So,” he started, “you know what all of these flowers are?”

“Well...” she replied as she looked around. “No.” She looked over at Cam and then began to laugh.

“I like when you do that,” he heard himself say, and then wished he could punch himself for saying it.

“When I do what?”

“Laugh. You look real pretty when ya laugh,” he said, hardly able to believe he had the guts to actually tell her what he was thinking. It was an odd sensation; all of his courage was being strained to its limit.

Ani herself couldn’t believe that Cameron Keller had just told her she was pretty. Her embarrassment flushed her cheeks a sweet rosy tint and she found that she had to look away from him. She gazed out at the mass of flowers again, searching for one she could identify which would rescue her from the compliment Cam had given her. “That’s a Lilac over there. It shouldn’t even have any flowers on it this late... that’s weird.” She made her way over to it.

“*This late?* Summer only just started,” Cam argued.

“Yeah, but Lilacs are a spring bloom, not summer,” she explained, taking one of the last remaining clusters of lavender blooms in her hand and breathing in its perfume. “These are my favourite. They smell soooo good.”

“You really like flowers, huh? What else do ya like?”

“Ice cream,” she smiled.

“Flowers and ice cream. Is that it?”

“No. I like lots of stuff. I like painting and reading. I like ladybugs and butterflies and dragonflies and fireflies.”

“Yeah? Ya like bugs?”

“No,” she chuckled. “I mean I do, just not on me...”

Cam laughed. “You like animals, the cute fluffy ones, right?”

“Right,” she smiled brightly.

“What about turtles. Ya like turtles?”

“Yeah, why?”

“C’meer,” Cam said, starting toward the creek.

Ani followed him down to the water and watched as he searched the bank with his eyes. Standing next to him she noticed for the first time Cam’s eyes. Just like her mother had told her, they were the gentlest green; really wonderful to look into.

It didn’t take long before Cam had found what he was looking for. He crouched down and scooped up a small turtle out of the water. He stood up and showed it to Ani as it pulled its head and legs into its shell.

“Oh my gosh, can I touch him?” she asked.

“Sure, just be careful of his face... they snap sometimes.”

Ani looked up at Cam, faintly worried, and he in turn looked at her with reassurance. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt that bad; it’s just like gettin’ pinched.”

The turtle had poked its head and legs back out, and Ani touched his shell and his tiny clawed feet. “He’s so cute,” Ani gushed, delighted with Cam’s find.

“Ya wanna hold him?”

“Yeah,” she replied, holding her hands out.

Cam gently placed the turtle in Ani's palms, the small creature responding by sucking in its head and legs again. "Oh no, I scared him."

"Ah, he's OK. Just give him a second. Once he figures out you won't hurt him, he'll come back out."

Just as Cam predicted, the turtle reappeared after a moment of hiding and Ani smiled. She offered the turtle back to him, feeling a bit wary when it tried to crawl off her hand. He took the small animal from her and put it back down in the water where it disappeared under the surface.

"What else lives in here?" she asked.

"Snails, guppies, pike, water snakes, tadpoles, frogs. All kinds of stuff."

"Do you come here a lot?"

"Yeah, pretty much everyday if it's nice out," he answered, drying his hands off on the legs of his jeans.

"Even in the winter?"

"Sometimes."

"Who with?"

"No one. Just me."

"Don't you have any friends around here?"

"No, not out here in the sticks. Most live in Rimbey or Ponoka."

"Yeah, me too," Ani said, sitting down in the grass. "I think you and me are the only twelve-year-olds out here."

"I'm thirteen," Cam corrected.

"You are? Since when?"

"Since yesterday."

“Really? Yesterday was your birthday? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Hell, birthday’s aren’t nothin’,” Cam said, tossing a rock into the water and not telling her that spending the previous day with her was the best birthday he could have ever imagined.

“Yes they are,” Ani disagreed strongly. “What did you get? Did your mom and dad get you anything?”

Cam let out a sarcastic breath of laughter through his nose. “Yeah, my old man gave me a pair of boots,” he said.

“Boots? That’s a funny present in the summer.”

“Yeah, well, my pa’s a funny guy.”

“Did you want them?” Ani asked, looking up at him and squinting her eyes from the sun.

“No, I didn’t want them, but I guess I asked for them.”

Cam recognized the look on Ani’s face as confusion and changed the subject promptly. “When are *you* gonna be thirteen?”

“Not till August,” she answered, then peered up at him thoughtfully. “So you’re a teenager now. What’s it like? Do you feel any different?”

Cam pondered her question realizing that, yes, he did feel different. It had been a slow process, but in the past year he had found himself more and more interested in girls. He liked to look at them, liked to think about them. Yes, he *definitely* liked girls... and he *definitely* liked Ani best of all. “No,” he replied. “Pretty much the same.” He sat down next to her and continued to throw stones in the water. “Where’s *your* old man?” he asked.

“He doesn’t live with us anymore,” Ani said, quietly.

“Why not? Where is he?”

“He had to leave. He had a bunch of girlfriends and used to fight with my mom all the time, so the court made him leave. My parents got a divorce.”

“Fights? Like he’d hit her?”

Ani nodded, wondering if perhaps she shouldn’t have said anything at all. Cam’s eyes were still fixed on her causing her to fidget with uneasiness. “Yeah. I hate him,” she said.

“My old man used to beat on my mom too, only, my mom is the one that left,” he told her.

“Your mom left?”

“Yup.”

“So it’s just you and...”

“Yeah, I live alone with my old man,” Cam finished.

“So you like your dad better than your mom?”

“Shit no!” Cam spat. “I don’t like him at all.”

His use of a curse word set her back for a moment and she peered at his profile, sizing him up, trying to make sense of him. It made him seem somehow more grown-up and intimidating than the boy that had been coming to her home over the last couple of days. Was it nothing more than the presence of her mother that had him behaving in such a nonthreatening manner? She chewed on the inside of her cheek as she stared at him. Was Cameron really still just that mean and horrible boy from school? She choked down this new uneasiness. “Well, if you don’t like your dad, why don’t you live with your mom?”

“Cos she just left one night. I never saw her again. I guess I wasn’t invited and I don’t really know exactly where she is.”

“She left ’cos of your dad though, right?”

“I suppose,” Cam answered. “The old man says it was ’cos of me.”

“Why? What did *you* do?”

“Nothin’,” Cam said. “Nothin’ that I can figure, anyway.”

“Why did your dad beat your mom up?”

“I dunno,” Cam replied. “He’s just angry all the time; drunk and angry. But I’m gonna find my mom some day.”

“How are you gonna do that?”

“Well, I know that she’s somewhere in Vancouver. I’ve got some money saved up — a little more than half what I need. When I do have enough, I’m gonna buy a bus ticket and go find her.”

“You’re pretty smart,” Ani remarked, peering over at him.

He looked up and let his eyes meet hers and he smiled at her, which made her feel all spinny and woozy.

“Water snakes, huh?” she said, changing the subject while she stood up and gazed out at the creek. “Are they poisonous? Carnivorous? Pig-eating?”

Cameron laughed. “Nah. They can bite but only if you really piss them off. They’re cool. They side-wind along the top of the water, but they’re hard to find.”

“Think you can find one now?” Ani asked.

“Yeah, probably,” he responded, pushing himself up off the ground. “You’re not scared of snakes?”

Cam walked along the edge of the creek looking into every dark area between rocks and under pieces of driftwood. As he hunted, Ani couldn't help but toe off her sneakers and step into the cool water. Cam glanced up at her, seeing that she had ventured into the creek. "Hey Ani, be careful in there. The rocks are pretty slippery."

Ani heard his warning but took a few more paces regardless. It wasn't long before one of her steps found an unexpected depression and her ankle twisted hard. A searing pain shot up her leg to her knee causing her to quickly catch herself from falling and then instinctively lift the weight off her foot. "Cam!" she yelled. Cameron!"

Cam headed over to her quickly. "Did ya find one?" he asked, but then noticed the expression in her now teary eyes.

"I think I hurt myself," she said, trying not to whimper.

"You're hurt? Where? What happened?"

"My ankle. I stepped in a hole and I think I twisted it."

Cam walked right into the water — running shoes and all — and crouched down beside her. She braced herself on his shoulder as he examined her ankle. "Does this hurt?" he asked, moving the joint gently.

"Yes!" she wailed, the tears she'd been working so hard on holding in, busting out of her and streaming down her cheeks. "It's not broken, is it?"

"No, it's probably just sprained. I'll take you home."

"I don't wanna go home. It's so nice here."

Cam looked down at her ankle again, touching the area that appeared to be swelling up despite the cold water. Ani's grip on his shoulder tightened as she cringed from

the pain. “Ani, I think I should take you home. Can ya walk?” he asked, straightening up and putting his arm around her to help.

“I’ll try,” she sniffed, slowly putting her foot down, but the pain screamed up her leg again. “No... ow... no, I can’t,” she said, her voice a tiny squeak through her tears.

“OK. Hey, it’s OK, don’t cry,” he pleaded, bending down and putting his arm behind her knees.

“What are you doing?” she asked, sniffing again.

“I’m gonna carry you.”

“You can’t carry me,” she snivelled, hoping she was wrong.

“Sure I can, you’re just a tiny little thing,” he disagreed, scooping her up in his arms and carrying her out of the creek.

He placed her down in the grass next to her sneakers and looked at her ankle again. It had swollen up quite badly now and was even beginning to discolour. “I’m sorry Cam. Do you hate me now?” she asked.

Cam gazed into her sad face. “Hate you? Why would I hate you?”

“‘Cos I’m stupid,” she replied, sounding rather infuriated with herself.

“You’re not stupid, Ani. Not at all.”

Ani peered over her shoulder at the hill. It had somehow grown much steeper and higher now that she knew she couldn’t climb it. “How am I gonna get back up there?” she worried.

“I’m gonna carry you,” Cam told her, standing up. “I’ll take my bike up and then I’ll come back for you.”

Ani watched Cam take his bike up the hill while she put her sneakers back on, only able to tie the one on her uninjured foot. She wondered if he would take off on her once he reached the top and just leave her there by herself because she was a big cry-baby. He didn't. He dropped the bike at the top and trotted back down the hill to get her.

"You ready?" he asked, looking down at her. Ani nodded, wiping the tears from her face.

Cam helped her to stand by placing his arm around her again. He felt absolutely terrible that she was hurt and he felt even worse watching tears roll out of her big dark eyes. "Hey, remember Skittles?"

"The Science teacher with the really short hair?" Ani recalled.

"Yeah. Wanna know how she got the name Skittles?"

She nodded but her interest was apparently having trouble staying with him through the pain she felt as she tried to steady herself on one foot. Cam saw another tear slip by her and it near broke his heart. "Well, she used to have this huge afro..."

"I remember that," she mumbled, smiling faintly. "It *was* big."

"Yeah," he smiled. "We could get all kinds of stuff to stick in there — pencils, golf tees, bottle caps, I even got a quarter lodged in there once — but no matter what it was, she always felt it when it hit her and she'd pick it out. I figured that we needed to find something heavy enough to wedge itself in there, but light enough that she wouldn't feel it. It took a while but I found it: Skittles. They had the perfect size to weight ratio and if ya sucked on 'em for a

second, that really glued 'em up great — they'd stay put for a good hour before they fell out.”

“That’s why there was candy all over the floor all the time and why everyone calls her Skittles and she cut all her hair off?”

“That’s why,” he affirmed. “It was a scientific discovery. She should have been proud of me for taking such an active role in her class.”

“Cam, you’re terrible,” she stated.

“I know,” he laughed.

“That was really mean.”

Cam nodded in agreement, still laughing and watching as Ani’s face began to brighten. Within a few moments she was laughing too.

Pleased with his success at getting her to feel a bit better, he picked her up in his arms and started climbing the hill.

“How did you get so strong?” she asked, holding him around his neck.

“C’mon,” he replied. “I can carry a tune heavier than you.”

Reaching the top of the incline, he set her down gently next to the bike and instructed her to keep her foot up. He climbed on his bike and tilted it low for her. She struggled to get on the back, and once on, Cam rode back to her house as fast as he could. He pulled up right next to her front porch so she could use the handrail to help her off. The swollen joint gave out from under her as soon as her foot touched the ground. She sat down on the bottom step and the tears overflowed from her eyes again. He dropped his bike and crouched down next to her. “C’meer,” he said,

scooping her up again and climbing the steps to the door. He pulled the screen door open with his foot and stepped inside. “Mrs. Sauv !” he called.

Francine appeared from out of the kitchen with a welcoming look on her face until she saw Cameron holding a very upset Ani in his arms. “Oh my God, Ani... what happened?”

“She hurt her ankle pretty bad,” Cam told her as she jogged down the hall toward them.

“Put her on the sofa, please Cameron,” Francine instructed.

Gently he set her down on the couch and backed away a few steps as Francine hovered over her crying daughter. “Oh, Sweetie,” she gasped, looking at the size and colour of Ani’s ankle. She attempted to gently move the joint but Ani screamed at even the slightest movement. “OK Ani, I’m gonna have to take you to the hospital.”

“No! Mom, no, I don’t wanna go there...”

“Ani, Sweetie, it might be a fracture, or worse. You need to get an x-ray.”

“No. Please. I don’t wanna go there. I’m OK, honest.”

Cam stepped up to the couch and crouched down by her. “Hey, Ani, last year I had to go and get my ribs and my arm x-rayed. It was a piece of cake. They just take a picture of it with a giant camera, that’s all.”

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

“Nah, it doesn’t hurt at all; it’s even kinda’ cool.”

Ani gazed into his soft green eyes, looking for sincerity and finding it. His words calmed her and removed the fear from her thoughts.

“Cameron is right, sweetie. X-rays don’t hurt at all. And I’ll tell you what... on our way home, I’ll rent us a movie and we’ll get some ice cream. I’ll make you a brownie sundae.”

“OK,” Ani mumbled, still looking at Cam, needing confirmation.

“Won’t hurt at all,” he repeated. “I promise.”

Francine picked her daughter up and headed for the door, Cam helping by opening the door for them and making sure it was locked behind them. He got on his bike as Francine toted her daughter off to the car and watched as Ani was tucked inside. As he coasted down the walk to the street, Ani called out to him. He stopped and looked over his shoulder.

“Thank you,” she said.

Cam smiled at her. “You’re welcome.”

“Will you come back tomorrow?” she asked.

He nodded faintly. “Yeah... I’ll come back.”

* * * *

Cam rode out to the diner in town to see Louis. It was early but he hoped that he could help out anyway and then get home just after his father left for work so he could enjoy another peaceful evening.

Glad to see him, Louis shuffled Cam off to the kitchen willingly. Cam explained why he was early, telling Lou that it was nice not to see or have to worry about his father’s moods.

“Well, I wish I could be happy for ya Cam, but I can’t. I think it’s a real sad shame that you’re afraid of your own father.”

“I’m not afraid of him. I just don’t want to see him.”

“And ya don’t think that’s a shame?”

“It’s only a shame if I cross his path.”

“Well, you do seem happier than I’ve ever seen you, so I suppose it’s a blessing.”

“Yup,” Cam nodded. “And then there’s Ani.”

“Ani? Who’s Ani?”

“A girl.”

“Cameron, do you got yourself a girlfriend?”

“Nah, not a girlfriend; she’s just a friend. But I’d like to change that,” Cam said as he finished his hamburger.

“*Hoo hoo!*” Lou slapped his knee in amusement. “That’s terrific. I bet she’s real pretty.”

“Yeah. She is.”

“Ya kissed ’er yet?”

“Hell no!” Cam spat, then his expression warmed. “But I’d like to change that too.”

“That’s my boy,” Louis laughed. “Well, you bring ’er on by here some time. I’ll make ya the biggest ice cream parfait ya ever seen... on the house.”

“Yeah? Ya mean it?”

“Course I mean it.”

“That’d be great, Lou. She really likes ice cream.”

* * * *

Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough. Cam laid on his bed feeling overjoyed by the fact that he didn’t have to

dodge Jared and that Ani had asked him to visit her again. He felt a little weird about feeling happy, though. It had been a long time since he felt even remotely happy. Things were going so well now that he was feeling an eerie sense of concern. The worry he felt toward his own pleasing circumstances, however, was nothing compared to his worry that Ani's ankle may be broken and that when he promised her it wouldn't hurt, he lied. He remembered when Jared had broken his arm just above the wrist, the doctor had to snap the bone back into place, which wasn't as exhausting as the drawn out pain of his bruised ribs, but the several seconds it took to set the bone were excruciating. Would she be mad at him? And, if so, how could he make it up to her?

Waking the next day, he followed his routine of the previous morning and was successful in avoiding Jared completely. He spent the day loafing at the creek, lying under the willow tree and reading comics. Without meaning to, he drifted off to sleep and didn't wake up until it was somewhere close to dinner time.

* * * *

Francine had propped Ani up in the lounge chair by the garden with a few of her favourite magazines. After lunch she started to feel anxious for Cam's visit. He had been right; the x-rays didn't hurt at all. The doctor said that nothing was broken and that it was just a bad sprain. He wrapped it up in a tensor bandage, telling her mother to keep her off of it for a week and to apply ice every hour for thirty minutes if she needed to keep any swelling down.

One-thirty passed, then two-thirty, then three and four-thirty, all with no sign of Cam. Ani sat quietly in the shade, broken-hearted. Francine could see the anguish clearly on her daughter's face and sat down next to her, pushing a strand of her long auburn hair around her ear.

"Maybe he just couldn't come today, sweetie."

"He didn't come because he thinks I'm a big crybaby."

"Oh, Ani, I don't think so. I'm sure he knows how bad you hurt your ankle. Anyone would cry."

For Ani it ended up being one very long and miserable afternoon. By four-thirty she'd given up waiting and asked her mother to help her inside. She was settled on the couch in the living room with the TV turned on but wasn't even vaguely interested in watching. Rather, she simply stared out the window, her eyes very visibly holding back a deluge of tears.

An early dinner of all Ani's favourites was brought out to her on a tray in an attempt to make her feel better, but she did more playing with her food than eating. As soon as they were finished, Francine offered to play cards or a board game with her but Ani turned her nose up at the idea. "Well, what would *you* like to do, honey?"

"Nothing. Thank you for everything Mom, but I'm just kind of sad and don't feel like playing," she responded, staring out the window, her feelings now hurting more than her ankle. Just then, her eyes widened and a smile broke the look of gloom she had been wearing since earlier that afternoon. "He's here!" she gushed.

Francine followed her stare out the window. "So he is. I told ya, sweetie," she said, lifting herself off the sofa and

making her way over to the door to open it for him. “Hi there, Cameron. Come on in, she’s on the couch.”

Cam went around the corner to see Ani propped up on the sofa with her bandaged ankle on a pillow. “Hi,” he greeted her.

“Hi,” she returned through an enormous smile.

“How’s your ankle?”

“It’s OK. It’s just a bad sprain.”

Cam nodded, happy that she didn’t have to endure the pain of having a bone set. “Good. Well, I mean bad, but good...”

“I know what you mean,” Ani said, still smiling.

Francine appeared in the doorway and asked Cameron if he wanted a soda.

“Yes please, ma’am.”

“Mom, can we go out back to watch the lights?” Ani asked enthusiastically.

“It’s only ten-to-seven, Ani. The lights won’t be starting for a little while yet. Maybe Cameron has to be home.”

“I don’t gotta be anywhere, ma’am. My old man doesn’t care.”

Francine found his statement odd, but dismissed it quickly. “Well, OK. Let me help you out though, Ani.”

“I don’t need help, Mom.”

“Yes, sweetie, you do. Remember what the doctor said?”

“I can help her, ma’am,” Cam volunteered.

“Alright,” Francine agreed apprehensively, smiling slightly at the boy’s eagerness. “But be careful.”

Cam helped Ani to the kitchen and to the back door. She stood on her good leg at the top of the steps outside, sizing

them up. Cam watched her seemingly try and do the math connected to each one. He went to pick her up but she wriggled away from him slightly. “No, it’s OK. I’m not a baby. I can do this. I can hop.”

“Yeah, and your Mom can kill me. Ani, I know you’re not a baby but you need help, the doctor said, so let me take you down, OK?” he pleaded, not only meaning it, but also seeing the perfect opportunity to be close enough to her to touch her and smell her hair the way he had the day before. He scooped her up and walked down the steps and across to the garden.

Francine watched from the window. She smiled at the endearing sight, knowing that Cameron would do just about anything for a chance to be close to her daughter.

At the edge of the garden, Ani stopped him. “You can put me down now,” she said.

“Ya sure?”

“Yes,” she giggled. “I’m sure.”

“OK,” Cam said, placing her down gently and getting one last sniff of her hair in the process. He kept his arm around her while she steadied herself then hesitantly allowed her to stand on her own.

She took him by the hand and limped into the garden, stopping in the center. She sat down on one of the large stepping-stones, softly urging him to sit down with her.

“I’m glad you came. I thought, maybe, you weren’t going to.”

“Yeah? You’re glad?”

“Mmmm hmmm. I like you Cam.”

“You do? I thought you said I was nasty.”

“I thought you were but I was wrong. You’re not nasty at all. You try to be, but you’re not.”

“I don’t try to be nasty. I guess I just...”

“I don’t care what you guess, Cam... I like you just the same... a lot,” Ani said, looking around her. “It’s getting darker. It should be starting soon.”

“What are we watchin’ for? UFO’s? Little green men?” he asked.

She nudged him playfully. “No, I don’t think so,” she chuckled. “Fireflies. They should start lighting up soon.”

He’d seen fireflies before but decided to humour her and keep quiet; it was nice just sitting in the near darkness with her.

They sat for a little while, Ani wondering how Cam felt about the way she confessed her feelings to him, and Cam unable to get his mind off the fact that she said she liked him “...*a lot*”.

Cam told her a few silly jokes while they waited, making her laugh and, when the joke was *really* bad, she would nudge his arm and laugh anyways. He felt like he had just conquered a mountain and he had the world in the palms of his hands. Then the lights began, starting with one, then two, then more than a few, all moving around and surrounding them. “Wow, this is cool,” Cam said, pretending to be as entertained as she seemed to be. Then something he truly wasn’t expecting happened. The few became a dozen and the dozen became what had to be close to a hundred. It was as if the sky full of stars had lowered itself right down into the garden with them.

“Holy crap!” Cam breathed, meaning it this time.

Ani smiled at his amusement. "They're mating."

"Mating, huh?" Cam repeated, laughing a little.

"Yeah. The males are looking for girlfriends. Well, that's what my mom says."

Cam caught one in his hands. "I got one," he said, feeling it move around between his cupped palms.

"You don't," Ani smiled.

"I do. Here, look," he said, holding his hands up to Ani and making a tiny opening for her to peek into. "Is it there? What's it doin'?" he asked.

"Blinking," Ani informed, chuckling.

Cam looked inside his hands himself and watched the little bug blink. "Cool, it's his butt that lights up," he laughed. "So, he's looking for a girlfriend by lighting his butt up?"

"Yup," Ani confirmed.

Cam opened his hands and let the little beetle fly off to continue his hunt. "If my butt lit up like that, would you be my girlfriend?" he asked.

Ani giggled before answering. "I'd be your girlfriend even if you didn't light up."

"Yeah?"

She nodded.

"So, ya wanna?"

"Wanna what?"

Cam sighed. He knew she knew what he was asking her and couldn't believe she was actually going to make him come right out and say it. "You wanna maybe be my girlfriend?"

She looked at him, nodded a strong yes, and gave him a smile that made his stomach feel peculiar; a feeling that had him needing to look away from her. A few awkward moments passed and countless miniature lights flickered on and off within the garden before Ani reached over and took Cam's hand in her own. He looked down at it, his stomach fluttering madly without knowing that hers was doing the same thing. His eyes did not move from her hand as he went digging around inside of himself for more courage. He found an ounce and decided that now was the time to spend it. "You ever been kissed, Ani?" he asked.

"You mean, by a boy?"

"Yeah."

"No," she answered. "Have you ever been kissed by a girl?"

"No."

Ani leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Well, now you have," she stated very matter-of-factly and feeling supremely proud of herself for taking the initiative.

Cam's eyes lifted off of their hands and over to Ani who was still beaming with adorable pride. It was what he had been planning to do himself all evening but Ani taking the initiative and kissing him took him completely by surprise. He thought about the whole scene for a moment and weighed the pros and cons of what may happen if he kissed her in return. He played the entire scenario out in his mind and saw no reason why he shouldn't other than the fact that he was pissing-himself-nervous. She was, after all, and as of five wonderful minutes ago, his girlfriend, so he leaned over and kissed her softly on the lips. The fireflies were

swarming all around them and the butterflies were flapping wildly within. After a few blissful moments he eased away from her slowly and grinned... “It’s not so bad,” he joked.

“*Not so bad?*” she snapped, laughing and shoving him. Cam smiled, and kissed her again.

*...In the hanging garden, please don't speak
In the hanging garden, no one sleeps
In the hanging garden...*

Robert Smith, The Cure

About the author

Renée Angers was born in Scarborough, Ontario, Canada, a small town outside Toronto. After relocating as many times as there are years in her life, she finds a comfortable permanent home in her writing. Her stories and characters, although fictional, are inspired from the many interesting and provocative personalities she has run into during her second career as a musician.

Books by Renée Angers

Small Dog

Ice and a Curious Man

The Fellowship of Smashing Bastards

Florance Plum

Further information on these titles is available from Renée Anger's website: brainpanpublishing.com/ReneeAngers/

More great titles can be found at mushroom-ebooks.com

Reviews

Ice and a Curious Man:

"A beautifully written book." - eBookAd.com"

"...Angers' works are always so refreshingly crass yet strangely elegant to me, and *Ice and a Curious Man* is no exception. Brilliantly gut-wrenching." — Richard Delgado, *Mind Zero*

Small Dog:

"I really liked this book. Horrific. Ghoulish. Everyone is a monster. Some brutish pack of super fiends. A book cannot be complete in my eyes without plenty of violence and sickness. F***ing hilarious." — John Sobieck, Editor of *The Truth Magazine* and Author of "*Wisconsin Dells; The Horror of the Heartland*" and "*The Solitary Soldier*".

Florance Plum:

"...This hilarious novel will make you laugh, make you squirm, make you cry, and then laugh again ... Twists and turns, intrigue, a fantastic plot and an ending that you will never

forget, this story is a must read. It is the book that we all wish we had written..." — Mike Green, Editor, Expose'd Magazine.

Missouri (no longer available):

"...Angers writes with a knowledgeable pen about the hard working days and drunken, happy nights in the Missouri farmland where there's not much to do but party and fall in love. Having grown up in the Midwest myself, I was impressed with the use of dialect, the depth of passion, and strength of character Angers brings together in this deft weave of love and pain. Angers captures the endlessness of those hot summer nights by the river with beer and skinny dipping with a flair and passion. Highly recommended." — Cindy Penn, Word Weaving/Midwest Book Reviews.

"This book is for anyone who likes a down-to-earth read about real people and events. Keep the tissues handy." — Iris Leach, Sharpwriter