



**AN  
OTHERWISE  
PERFECT  
PLAN**

**A NOVEL**

**OF MYSTERY, LOVE, AND  
OF CHOCOLATE THAT  
DEFIES DESCRIPTION**

**KEN SCHAFER**

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# C HAPTER 1

*In which my English teacher completely loses it*

I can't believe he's still obsessed.

I don't know how long ago it was, but way back before it was even a "thing," my best friend—formerly known as Peter—started baking. Well, perhaps that's not exactly the right verb, because what comes out of his oven bears about as much resemblance to bread as it does to, say, reinforced concrete.

Now, why a teenage boy who's built like a refrigerator is baking bread in the first place is a whole other story. The short version is that it's my fault, because I was the one who gave him the book The Hunger Games for his birthday. If you've been living in a cave for the past couple of decades or are reading this in some far distant future where no one knows who Katnis Everdeen is, well, it kind of sucks to be you because it's really great book.

The long version would probably require a panel of psychologists, years of intensive therapy, and a whole lot of dark chocolate to get through, but suffice it to say while the rest of the world was kind of fixated on the whole *kids-killing-kids* part of the book, what does Peter take from it? That boys can bake.

Yeah, go figure.

Oh, and of course, since the character in the book who bakes bread is named Peeta, Peter decided that was his new name. The only problem with this otherwise brilliant little plan is that we live here in Boston, home of the silent "R". You know, *Pahk the cah in Hahvahd Yahd* and all that. So, insisting that he be called Peeta rather than, well, Petah, is kind of insane in its own right.

Now, you're probably asking yourself what a sixteen year-old girl is doing with a boy as her best friend, or you would have, had I gotten around to telling you I was a sixteen year-old girl. Well, surprise! I am, my name's Gwen Pendergrass (and don't get me started on the

baggage that last name comes with!), and he is, so you might as well just start dealing with the concept.

Or you could move on to some other book entirely, one which could perhaps be reasonably called “intelligible.” And I wouldn’t fault you; I mean, my mom’s the writer anyway, as you might’ve guessed from all this incoherent ranting. She can’t spell to save her life, but neither could Shakespeare, so there you go. Me, well, I’m not quite sure what I am, but I’m sixteen, so lay off, I’ll figure it out eventually.

Okay. Start at the beginning, Mom always tells me, so here goes:

I was born. At the usual age and in the usual manner. Or at least so I’ve been told, as it’s not like I actually remember it at all. Which is probably all for the best, what with all the squeezing, screaming and crying that I’ve heard goes on. In any case, It’s always been just my mom and me, and since I’m not much of a believer in virgin birth or parthenogenesis (see Mom, I do pay attention in biology class! Well, at least sometimes...) I’ve always assumed Dad was out there somewhere.

I even have a small strip of pictures of him and Mom in some photo booth at a casino in Vegas. They both look kind of drunk but really happy, which I supposed explains a lot. Me in particular. Or at least my aforementioned birth nine months later.

But as I was saying, Dad’s never been in the picture—or outside of the Vegas ones, if you take my meaning—and while I’m not thrilled with the idea, for the most part I don’t dwell on it. It’s just my life, such as it is.

If you’ve happened to do the math—which I can assure you I would *never* do in your place—you’ll have figured out I’m a high school *soph*, which is just about as much fun as it sounds. In English class, we’ve just finished reading Oedipus Rex—you know, that timeless story of a boy who kills his father and marries his mother, something high school students throughout history have always deeply related to.

“...so, using Oedipus’s failed relationship with his father as an inspiration,” my English teacher, the inimitable Mrs. Beecham, tells us as we’re scrambling to get all our stuff into our backpacks, “you’re going to write about your earliest recollection of you and your father doing something meaningful together. Something other than going to his parole hearing, watching TV or playing video games.”

My fellow students let out the traditional collective groan of dismay, which Mrs. Beecham, just as traditionally, ignores. “And make it good,

people,” she tells us. “Because if I get one more essay on *my dad made me toast while momma was away*, we’re doing six weeks of James Joyce. Solid.”

James Joyce, in case you’re fortunate enough not to know, is the Mount Everest of writers. You read him because it’s such grueling, hard going that at the end you can plant a flag on the book and say I prevailed; I reached the summit of Mt. Joyce without the aid of Sherpas or oxygen tanks and I lived to tell the tale.

However, as I bet there aren’t more than two other people in the room who have any idea who the heck he is, the whole threat thing is kind of pointless. But as I said, Mom’s a writer, so I know this stuff enough to shudder at the thought.

The rest of my classmates start filing out, scrambling to get to their next class before the bell rings.

“Three pages, typed,” she calls after them. “And rough drafts by next Wednesday.”

And then it’s just me, standing in front of her desk. I want to ask if I can approach the bench, but I have a feeling it won’t go over all that well.

“Yes, what is it?” Mrs. Beecham asks with a sigh. Actually, she adds a put-upon sigh as punctuation to every one-on-one interaction I’ve ever seen her have. She once even got so exasperated with us kids for “pestering her for clarifications” that she’d slammed a book down on her desk. “I’m here to teach,” she’d told us in the resulting stunned silence. “Not to answer questions.”

When the time comes, I’m going to push for getting that inscribed on her gravestone like a family motto.

“Um, I never knew my father,” I tell her.

“Consider yourself lucky. Most of ’em are pigs anyway.”

Not what I was expecting. But she’s on a roll, now.

“If I hadn’t met my kids’ father I would have been a whole lot better off, let me tell you. For one thing, I can guarantee I’d be doing something worthwhile with my life instead of being stuck here teaching the same junk year after year.”

Well, okay, then. This is going well. I start to ask if I could write about my mom instead, but she’s gone, lost in her own world.

“But they’re classics...” she whines, presumably mimicking some member of the school administration. “Classics my ass,” she tells

me. “If you listened to those spineless worms on the school board you’d think nothing worthwhile had been written since Mark Twain.”

“Uh, that sounds pretty frustrating,” I mumble. “But what should I do about this assignment?”

“Frustrating? You don’t know the meaning of frustrating. You kids all whine and moan about the assignments. *Three whole pages*. Please! I’ve been doing this same curriculum twice a year for fifteen years. Fifteen years! At sixty, three-page papers a year, do you know how much I’ve read?”

I start doing the math in my head, but she’s plowing onwards, saving me the effort.

“Twenty-seven hundred pages. Twenty-seven hundred pages of mostly incoherent drivel from you people! So, don’t you complain, Missy, don’t you dare complain!”

“I wasn’t,” I protest. “I just need to know how to do the assignment without a dad.”

“That’s not really my problem, now is it?”

“Excuse me?”

She looks down at me over her glasses. “This is a creative writing class. Be creative. Write about how the jerk broke your poor mother’s heart, or about all the lies he told her.”

“I really don’t think it was like that, Mrs. Beecham.”

“Yeah, right. Is he dead?” she demands. I suddenly remember there is no Mr. Beecham. Shocking, I know.

“I don’t think so,” I reply.

She smiles like she’s just checkmated me. “Then it was like that. Trust me.”

“Hey, Pita Piper,” I call, as I finally come out of school.

He’s standing next to this massive oak tree in the school’s front yard, and he doesn’t dignify my adornment of his name with even the faintest of eye rolls. The tree doesn’t react either, but given that it’s a tree and he’s Peter, neither of these events are particularly surprising.

By the way, have I mentioned how much I love this tree? It’s just brilliant. It’s supposedly been here since long before there *was* a here, here. And despite its size, it has somehow figured out how to offer no shade at all no matter where the sun is in the sky. I’ve never been able to work out how it manages this trick, but if I had to deal

with people carving their names into me and covering me with TP on an annual basis, I wouldn't give them any shade either.

Peter steps away from the tree and matches strides with me as I pass.

"It's just Peeta," he tells me patiently. He's always patient with me, even when most people would want to throw me in front of a bus. Which may explain why he's my best friend, I suppose, because if your friends are trying to throw you in front of buses, something is seriously wrong with your life.

I'd met him when we moved into our current apartment building filled with double-income families. Unfortunately the two incomes tend to both be earned by a single parent working two jobs that together pay in the low to starvation range. Peter's family is the exception in that he still has both parents, though with all the weed they smoke, you could mash their brains together and the resulting creature still wouldn't be as sharp as my mom. I wouldn't particularly want to meet it in a dark alley either, but I guess that's pretty much a given for anything created from two brains.

Don't get me wrong, they're nice enough and do their best to take care of Peter... it's just that their best isn't particularly good.

So, where was I? Oh yeah, I was telling you how I met Peter. We've moved so many times that I can't remember where we were coming from, but my job is always to sit on the lawn of the new place and guard our stuff as Mom makes trip after trip in our old station wagon, moving our junk... sorry, our prized possessions... one carload at a time.

Of the two or three car loads, only two things are really mine: a huge box of books, and a ratty suitcase filled with hand-me-down clothes which are always somehow mostly smaller than I currently am, but which are insufficiently worn out to be replaced.

Of these, I only really care about my books and my clothes can go up in flames for all I care. Well, as long as I'm not wearing them at the time.

But back to yet another move. Mom was off on her second or third trip and there I was, bored out of my mind, so I decided to break open my book box and see if Frankenstein was anywhere close to the top. It is, without a doubt, one of my favorite books... and yes, I know, that makes me officially weird. Most of my generation don't want to have anything to do with something more than twenty minutes old and my favorite book just had its two-hundredth birthday.

If you've never read it, trust me, it's nothing like what you expect. In some ways, Dr Frankenstein is even more of a monster than his creation, and I can totally relate with the monster's perspective of having the world all around you, but being outside of it, only able to look in. Sure, being the poor kid on the free lunch program isn't exactly the same as being a reanimated creature too hideous to be gazed upon, but still, not being seen for *yourself*, can be pretty exhausting either way.

I had settled down and was in the middle of chapter four when the sun pretty much went away. I looked up, and found myself in the shadow cast by this really big guy looking down at me.

"Hey," he said, then apparently realized he was blocking my sun, because he took a large step to his left and it all came streaming back in.

I blinked in the sudden light and tried to place him, but the only thing I could think of was that he could be the monster itself. Well, in size at least, because this guy was anything but hideous to look at.

"So, I was wondering," he said, "if I could borrow your copy of Frankenstein. When you're done with it, of course."

I had no idea who this kid was and considered the obvious questions that brought up, but then decided to go straight for the even more basic one.

"Why?" I asked, looking up at him, innocently.

At this point in the conversation, most people will just stare at you blankly with a "that does not compute" glaze to their eyes. Like when a waiter bounces up to you and says "If you need any help, my name is Candy" and you reply "What's your name if I don't need any?"

It kind of short-circuits their brain, and you can almost hear the gears whirring as they try to go back and make sense of what you said. And of course, this is exactly what I expected to happen to Peter. For yes, this is Peter, and this is the moment I've been talking about when I first met him.

"Because the rats ate my copy," he responded patiently, without even a hint of grinding gears, smoke, or glazed look at all. Impressive.

"Everyone's a critic," I told him, wondering if he'd follow my logic.

"Actually, they were pretty indiscriminate. They also ate one of my shoes."



I'm beginning to like this kid, not that I'd ever let him know. "Right or left?" I asked, as if it somehow mattered.

"Left definitely. I remember Mitch—that's my dad—saying it was ironic they ate the left shoe because with that one gone, now the right shoe is left."

Ouch. I did mention that his parents' brains are kind of cross-wired right? This sort of stuff comes out of their mouths all the time, and a lot of it is actually pretty funny. All the more so, as they have absolutely no idea that it is.

"You know," I mentioned casually, "lending a book to someone who has rats which eat them is kind of like lending money to someone with a gambling problem."

"They're not so much my rats, as rats who pretty much sublet the entire building."

Great, I'm just loving this new place already.

"If they bother you, though, you can always get coyote urine from predatorpee.com. Works like a charm. The downside, of course, is that your bedroom smells like a bunch of coyotes peed in it... or you could just embrace the rats as another marvel of nature's infinite adaptability, and anyway, what's a little black plague among friends?"

"One of these days," I commented to the universe at large, "I would really like to live in a place which didn't involve choosing among book-eating rats, coyote pee and the Black Death."

"Yeah, that would be nice, wouldn't it. So, can I borrow your book?"

Since the whole pee thing grossed me out, and having my precious books turned into rat turds was not something I wanted to risk, after we were all moved in he took me to this vacant lot where everyone dumps their junk and we found an old metal filing cabinet that he lugged up to our apartment for me. Must've been from the twenties or thirties because this sucker was made of real steel, nothing like that tin foil aluminum stuff they sell nowadays.

Weighed a ton, but it's been a life saver. Some people have gun safes. Me, I have a book safe. In return, I let him come and read any time he wants.

But back to me, Peter, and the shadeless oak tree that I started talking about like half a chapter ago.

"Can I borrow a memory?" I ask him as we start walking to the green line T-station to catch our train home. Sure, the orange line is

closer and takes about a billion fewer stops but what can I say, I like green. And it's not like we have anything particularly exciting to do once we get to our luxury living accommodations anyway, so why hurry?

Life is the journey, not the destination. Therefore, the longer we can make the journey last, the longer we'll live. Or something like that.

By the way, for those of you outside of Boston, the "T" is the subway, short for the MTA, which stands for **M**ediocre **T**ransport **A**utocracy, or something like that. Some of the stations are actually pretty cool with art and bronzed clothing and stuff.

Ours isn't one of them.

"I mean it," I tell him. "I need a memory I can borrow for Mrs. Beecham's insipid Oedipus-inspired, father/relationships assignment."

He doesn't respond, just slowly turns and gives me The Look. You know the one: the look that says, "you didn't really just say that, did you?" Which of course I just did, or he wouldn't have given me The Look in the first place.

So of course I hit him.

Remind me not to do that; the guy's made of concrete or something because it's like hitting a brick wall.

"Ow!"

As I shake my hand in the air to get some feeling back into it—or at least some feeling other than pain—I glare at him as it were all somehow his fault, but he shrugs, not buying it.

I rub my poor bruised hand as we descend into the open maw of Boylston station. It's cool and dim in there after the bright afternoon sun, and I fish in my backpack and we flash our Charlie Cards and head out to the platform. A train's already sitting there so we run for it, taking the stairs two at a time then dashing into the car, just as the doors... well, do nothing.

And they keep on doing nothing for about another ten minutes and we get to watch everyone else do exactly the same thing we just did: see the car from the top of the stairs and risk a broken neck running down to catch the train just before it doesn't leave.

"It doesn't have to be a good memory," I say as we continue to wait. "How about the one when Mitch thought he was the prophet David, or when you went camping and the raccoons found his stash...?"

The doors finally slide shut and the car lurches forwards. I plead all the way to our stop in Roxbury, the dissolved municipality we call home. Yep, some people get burgs or boroughs or townships, or even just cool neighborhoods like Angleside, Ravenswood or Pigeon Hill like they have over in Waltham.

Me, I get to live in a *dissolved municipality*. An alka-seltzer of a former town, whose old buildings often look like they've been sitting there dissolving away over the years ever since the proud city of Roxbury was eaten by Boston and dissolved into the melting pot of greater Bostburbia, relegated to a mere backwater of a neighborhood. But we will never forget!

Well, that's true, but mostly because nobody ever learns that stuff any more, because it all happened about a hundred and fifty years ago. And it's kind of hard to forget what you never knew. But the principle is sound. And there's always Wikipedia.

Peter's still shaking his head 'no' as we climb up the four flights to our floor.

"Mitch is a bad enough influence in general," Peter tells me. "And you, in particular, don't need another one. Why don't you write about when your own dad was your imaginary friend?"

"I was about three. And it wasn't real."

"It was real to you."

"Yeah, so was the tooth fairy."

He looks at me, concerned. "What are you saying?"

"Nothing, I'm sure there are millions of cute little pixies out there who have nothing better to do than collect used teeth.

"They aren't pixies, they're fairies. And I'm pretty sure they're not all that cute. Probably more like Rosie the Riveter with wings."

I'm fairly sure he's putting me on, but when you look in the dictionary under deadpan it says: "see Peter." Well, at least it does since I whited out the old definition and penned that one in.

I know, me, the literary literalist, defacing a book. In my defense, I put a picture of Peter next to the entry which means I actually also face'd the book, so between that and the defacing, it should cancel itself out karmically speaking.

Aaaah, I'm turning into Mitch with his right shoe left thing...! Maybe Peter has a point about him being a bad influence after all.

# C HAPTER 2

*In which my brilliant plan works brilliantly... but is still a complete fail.*

I drop my apartment keys in the Tibetan prayer bowl we keep by the door and rub Buddha's belly for luck. He takes a swipe at me but misses, due to my cat-like reflexes. Well, actually better than cat-like, I suppose, because he did miss, after all. And he is, of course, a cat. Probably two if you're counting purely by volume.

"You know, that's not a very Zen thing to do," I admonish him. If cats could shrug then Buddha would, as about all he and his namesake have in common is the big belly.

But back to me. I still have no clue what I'm going to do for the father/relationship assignment. As I see it, I have three options: 1) Make something up entirely, 2) Go weirdly existential about how Dad and I lived on this earth together, breathed the same air, coexisted in nearly the same space in that brief moment when he and my mom were, well, you know "making" me, or 3) Go get a snack.

Since the third option seems like the most achievable goal, I dump my school stuff in the corner and hike the grueling eight steps from the front door to the closet we call a kitchen. It's a truly brilliantly designed space where the non-functioning dishwasher blocks the cabinets, and opening the oven has to be done from the side unless you have very thin legs and don't mind having a drawer handle pressed painfully into the small of your back.

I personally think it was designed by the same guys who make those traffic car puzzles where you can only slide the cars forwards or back and you have to somehow get the one special car out of the gridlock.

Anyway, I rummage through the cabinets—a process which involves nearly getting brained by a can of stewed tomatoes that leaps out at me with absolutely no provocation on my part. Actually, the only food we ever keep in the cabinets are canned goods as the

rats have literally chewed through the wall to get in there and nothing less than cold, hard steel will stop them.

However, while the cans themselves are rat-proof, the resident rodentia gnaw off all the can's labels, which made for some pretty, well, *interesting* meals until I got into the habit of writing each can's contents on their tops with a Sharpie®.

All unarmored food goes into the dishwasher if it doesn't need refrigeration, or the freezer if it does. Nothing goes into the refrigerator itself, for reasons that are best left to the imagination. And anyway, since the freezer hasn't gotten cold enough to produce ice since the mastodons last roamed the city, it all ends up as a fairly functionally dysfunctional system.

However, none of that matters as I still need a snack. Since neither the dishwasher nor the cabinets hold anything particularly enticing, I move on to the freezer. Hmm... three hard boiled eggs left over from Easter—hopefully, the most recent one though you never know for sure—some chicken I know Mom's saving for pot-pies, a pair of carrots that are so rubbery they're fit for nothing but soup, ketchup and relish (but, of course, no hot dogs), tartar sauce, and a couple dozen packets of soy sauce.

I'm considering whether tartar sauce might be good on toast as I close the freezer door, revealing a shadowy apparition suddenly filling the doorway.

I let out a small scream, then jump back without thinking, my brilliant, super cat-like reflexes instinctively throwing me away from this apparition directly into that brilliantly placed drawer handle I mentioned earlier. Which slams into the small of my back, produces yet another scream, and as I spin around to escape, I, of course, manage to smash my hand into the 1970's Formica counter top that juts out over the dishwasher.

You know, even groovy flower-power patterned counters will hurt you given the chance. Trust me, I know.

Okay, adrenaline surge over, pain surge kicking in.

"Ow! Mom, how many times have I told you not to do that!" I glare at her as I rub my hand, and pointedly add another "Ow!"

Mom, of course, has seen me do this kind of thing plenty of times before, so she's not very impressed. If there's no blood and no bones protruding, the best I'm likely to get is "walk it off."

It sounds harsher than it is, but when you have a kid as accident prone as I am, I guess you learn pretty quick not to rush over at every scrape, collision, contusion, fall, slip, tumble, or non-concussive whack. Even seeing me being half-brained by the overly aggressive can of stewed tomatoes probably wouldn't have turned her from mild-mannered mom to Super Protecto-Mom. Still, I know if I really do need her, she'll be there in a flash, like when I took a nose-dive into the wet cement... another story also best left to the imagination.

Mom's wearing her waitress uniform with the blue stripes, and she's got her hair done up in that bun she hates, so I know she's going to (rather than coming from) Katie's Kountry Kitch'n. Yes, with three K's, an apostrophe, and one of the least thought out acronyms I know...

Anyway, she's looking at me kind of oddly, and she's holding an envelope in front of her, clearly presenting it as Exhibit A.

"Perhaps you'd like to tell me what this is?"

Her hand is over the return address so I can't see who it's from.

"Uh, at first guess, I'd say an envelope," I offer helpfully.

She rolls her eyes. Pretty well for an old person, actually. Most of them look like they're possessed or something when they try it, but my mom's cool that way even though she's over thirty. What she doesn't seem to realize, though, is that getting an eye roll from her is like eating a potato chip; you always want more.

"Oooh," I add enthusiastically. "Give me another, this is fun."

"The strange thing," she says, ignoring my scintillating wit, "is that it's addressed to me."

"That *is* odd. I mean, who writes letters any more?"

"Also, it's from Yale," she says, eyeing me as if to see what kind of reaction she'll get. "From the admissions department."

She gets a big one. I'm sure my eyes widen to Disney-princess-like proportions and I'm fairly certain my mouth falls open. It's been so long, I'd completely forgotten about this.

"Did you open it? Did you get in?"

"What's really strange about it," she continues, ignoring my questions, "is that I don't remember actually applying to Yale. Or anywhere else for that matter."

"But you got in, right?"

“All of which makes me wonder,” she goes on, ignoring both my new question and the fact that I’m nearly bouncing off the walls, “where they could have possibly gotten the idea that I wanted to go back to school...”

“Mom...!” I plead. “What did they say?”

I must have one of those veins pulsing madly in my forehead or am developing some kind of ominous nervous twitch because she gives in and silently hands me the letter. I snatch the folded paper out of the envelope and start skimming it.

Dear Applicant... blah, blah, blah, we’re very pleased, blah blah, contingent upon proof of eligibility... we grant you the full Bloom-Wood scholarship for the humanities!

All I can think is “Oh, my god, Oh my god” over and over. I can feel myself grinning ear to ear. “Mom! You did it!”

I go for the big, congratulatory high-five, but for some reason Mom’s not playing. She’s still just looking at me with those oddly serious eyes.

“I didn’t do anything,” she says quietly.

“Sure you did. C’mon, Mom, this is great news! Fist bump.”

No fist from Mom either, just that “you’ve got a lot of explaining to do” look that every mother seems to have. I’ve always imagined doctors handing newborns to their mothers along with a little laminated flyer with cute diagrams showing how to give this look. “Here you go, Mrs. Pendergrass. It’s a girl. And by the way, you’ll need this.”

But laminated flyers notwithstanding, Mom’s a grandmaster at this look and I crumble under her gaze in mere seconds. Good thing I don’t know any nuclear launch codes, or Beyoncé’s private cell phone number or anything, because they’d just have to look disapprovingly at me and I’d sing like a canary.

“Okay, okay... but can we at least not do this in the kitchen?”

She steps out of my way and waves me into the living/dining/entry hall/my bedroom room. We sit down on the rust colored futon sofa that doubles as my rust colored mattress from hell. Even unfolded, it’s got a permanent crease down the middle and I either have to sleep in this crease, or squeeze all the way to one side and try to fight its black-hole like attraction all night. As I have yet to fully master the art of sleeping uphill, I inevitably wake up nose-down in the trench, which just does wonders for my dust mite allergies.

Have I mentioned that I have a tendency to get side-tracked? I think I probably have A.D.D., and I keep meaning to look up its symptoms on the Internet, but then I get distracted by some sidebar item and have never gotten far enough to even find out what the acronym stands for.

Right. Mom's still staring at me expectantly.

"A couple of months ago," I explain, "I was going through my old baby things, trying to find some good stuff to pass on as hand-me-downs to the Sloans up in 4B, and I found the first couple of chapters you wrote entitled The Care and Feeding of the Common New York Night Owl."

"You didn't."

Why do people say that? I mean, obviously I did, or we wouldn't be having this discussion.

Sigh. "I did."

Mom shakes her head, though I'm still not sure exactly what she's feeling. Normally I can read her like a book, but this is something new.

"I'd completely forgotten that," she says, half to herself, half to me, and half to the world in general. "I started it when I first took that night-shift bar tending job. You were about two, and back then I was still young and delusional and thought I could do everything."

"Mom, you still can."

"What? Be delusional?"

"No, do everything."

"Now you're the one who's being delusional. Honey, what you did was super sweet, but..."

"But nothing. This is your chance, Mom! This is Yale... this was your dream."

"Honey, you're my dream now."

My turn for the eye roll. And while Mom's good, I'm Olympic Team good. "Very Hallmark, Mom. You should write cards."

Mom takes my hand and squeezes it. "Gwen. Even if I wanted to do this—and I'm not saying I do—there's no way we could make the money work."

This isn't happening. It can't be. We're supposed to be jumping up and down, screaming our heads off in excitement and making the neighbors bang on the walls and tell us to shut up. We're supposed to



be picking out her classes and figuring out what new school I'll be going to... oh, crap. New school equals no Peter. I push the thought away. This is important; this is Mom's moment and for some reason she's just not getting it.

I pick up the letter and hold it out to her. "What part of *full scholarship* don't you understand? This Bloom-Wood thing, it's like it was designed for you." I skim the letter. "Uh, here we go. It was established to enable exceptional students who had previously dropped out of college due to health, family or financial reasons to finish their degrees. That's you, Mom."

"I know but..."

"Some previous university education... check. Previously forced to leave school for health or family reasons... check. Currently in workforce... check and double-check. Desire to finish BFA or MFA in Humanities... duh, check. So, what's the problem?"

"The problem is that it says I have to focus exclusively on my studies and can't take a job while I'm on it."

"But they provide housing..."

She smiles at me sadly and shakes her head. "...*shared housing*, which *you* can't live in."

What? Mom points out the paragraph in the paper and I can feel it all unraveling... no, this was supposed to be her chance!

"But, but there's a stipend," I say, grasping at straws.

"Which would be enough if I could live in the housing, but it's nowhere close enough to pay for rent in New Haven."

"I could get a job," I say hopefully. I can usually get my way by being maddeningly reasonable, but she's not having any of it.

"No way."

"But you dropped out of college to raise me, I could just take..."

"Gwen. We are not having this discussion."

"But..."

"You are not dropping out of high school so I can go to college."

"But..."

"No. End of story."

"Fine," I say tightly, thrusting the letter back at her. She just got the Golden Ticket in the Wonka Bar and she's handing it off to some stranger, whoever is number two on their scholarship list. "They won't

hold it for you, you know. This is your shot, Mom. All you have to do is seize the carp, and you can finally get your life back on track.”

“Gwen, honey, it never got off track.”

“Oh yeah. Your big dream was to be working two mindless, minimum-wage jobs. How could I have forgotten that?”

She smiles, conceding the point but not the argument. “No... of course not.”

She tries to brush some hair that’s fallen over my eyes, but I pull away. Why can’t she be selfish just for once in her life?

She lets her hand drop. “I wouldn’t give you up for all the career success in the world,” she tells me.

I don’t bother to reply because I know if I do, I’ll say something I’ll regret later.

Mom glances down at her watch and jumps up off the futon. “Oh crap. I’m going to be late. I really have to go.”

She starts looking around for her purse, which is currently under Buddha.

“Sure. Go,” I tell her as I push the big lug off the bag and hand it to her. The bag not the lug. “Wouldn’t want to keep you from your destiny slinging the blue plate special.”

“Gwen.” She makes as if she’s going to hug me, but I’m already tightly hugging myself, trying to keep from crying and she knows well enough to back off.

“Honey, thank you for trying,” she tells me. “I know you just want to look out for me. But that’s my job, not yours.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I reply, and she sighs, then turns and leaves because she has to. And I stare at the closed door after her in frustration because I have to.

And I know that “yeah, whatever” is not a particularly brilliant come-back, but screw it, Mom’s the writer not me. Or she would be if I’d never been born.

Don’t get me wrong; I like my life. Sure, it could use some improving, but I love my mom and I know she loves me. And I’ve got Peter and my books... but sometimes I think about what Mom’s life would have been like if she hadn’t had me when she did, and it’s all I can do to keep from crying.

This is one of those times, and all I can do isn’t enough.

Not anywhere close.