

For everyone who has publicly embarrassed themselves for a good cause.

And lived to laugh about it...

The Taming
Of
The Drew

By Jan Gurley

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Want to know how Drew got into such trouble? Check out the prequel the Taming of the Drew on the **live Twitter feeds**: @tamingdrew and @sixredwoods and @legacylemurs. Got a bicep shot of your own? A gender-defying outfit to share? Submit your pics to tamingdrew.tumblr.com. Everyone deserves an obsessively high-quality education - so donate to Legacy Lemurs' favorite charity at <http://oneworldchildrensfund.org/projects/global-chalkboard-project-victor-hugo-school/>

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Chapter 1

“No way. I don’t do naked.”

Into a shocking split-second of entirely coincidental silence, just after the last dismissal bell rang, my voice blared like a vice-principal’s megaphone in the Legacy high school hallway. It didn’t help that I had my fist on my hip and Celia had five twenty-dollar bills in an out-stretched hand.

A lightning bolt of embarrassment illuminated my face. The masses of students around me froze in space like a burned after-image on my retina: someone bent halfway, tying a shoe, a wheel on a skateboard gritted to a halt, a locker door stopped mid squeak, everyone breath-holding in shock.

“How about \$200,” Celia said, reaching for another wad of twenties in her purse, and my pulse shivered up my neck and into my ears. Then the massive wave of silence broke and shattered into pounding laughter all around me.

I grabbed her elbow and dragged her away as I hissed, “Are you *insane*? Do you know how this looks?”

She stared at my hand on her elbow and said “Ew,” but I didn’t let go.

We formed a V shape, me leaning forward to drag her along through the crowds, her tilted back as she lurched after me, stiff-legged on stiletto heels. As we left the central, three-story, echoing atrium, boys from her pod yelled “Way to go, Celia! Girl on girl!”

Entering my pod, voices hissed all around me, “Are you crazy? You

can't bring her in *here!*”

See, our high school is so mega-huge (3,872 kids) that they subdivided it into four schools-within-a-school, each called a “pod.” And that’s exactly how the upper-class New Crew members describe it when you arrive for freshman orientation (“pods” with wiggle-fingers air-quotes).

All New Crew leaders are from the University pod.

In fact, all the beautiful people are from University (motto — and I’m not joking here — *Center of the Universe*).

My pod, Academy, is the art school pod. We're everything University isn't. Taking Celia into our part of the school would be like inviting a shark into the guppy tank, so I turned around and started hauling her outside instead, into the open parking lot which all four pods shared.

We were only fifteen feet away from No Man’s Land when Tio materialized in front of me, hands flapping in panic.

“No. No. NO,” he said. “Not there. We’ve got a flash-mob candy sale going on outside that door. She’ll spook the customers.”

I paused. “She’s waving twenties in the central atrium and talking about

hiring me to take naked iCandy pictures of the Dog. In front of everyone.”

“What?” Instead of being embarrassed by the shocked look that Tio gave her, Celia smiled to herself and traced an invisible symbol on the floor with the toe of her left Jimmy Choo.

Tio leaned forward, arms crossed, so he could peer into Celia’s fake-blushing face. “Do you have a death wish?” He shifted imaginary bifocals and spoke in a clipped singsong voice, mimicking the last health assembly speaker. “Suicidal threats will not be treated as a joke. All incidents must be reported to the office.” He glanced down the hallway to our right. “If I hurry, I think I can still catch Dean Verona.” Celia gave a deep, bored sigh. “Four hundred. And that’s my final offer.” She opened her purse to fish out another pile of twenties.

I stared at the collected paper in her hand like it was a serpent. In a way, it was. Coiled and evil as greed, those lifeless bills glared back at me with mesmerizing snake eyes, whispering temptation. Four hundred dollars. This one iCandy pic would earn as much as four hundred used

books in our book sales, as much as 1600 Flash Mob Snack sales. We'd be \$400 closer to saving the trees. Saving my beloved, towering redwoods.

My hand started to reach for the bills even as I heard Tio squeak, "Kate! Snap out of it!"

He thumped me on the shoulder and I staggered to right myself, my head a little clearer. It's always a shock when Tio thumps you one. He's barely five feet tall. When the puberty circus came to town, he overslept the free hormonal roller-coaster ride. He's got the voice, the body and the unshaven cheeks of a fifth-grader. Which would be fine, if this wasn't eleventh grade. You never expect his thumps to make much of a dent, but they do. Even if you're almost six feet tall, like me.

We're the kind of pair that makes adults smile. You know, that sickening, *aren't they cute* kind of smile that makes you want to aim Tio and his right hook at them with the safety off. And then pull the trigger.

Celia, however, was everything high school thinks is perfect. The

perfect height (5'6"), the perfect bust (C-cup), the perfect waist (insectoid). And the perfect pod (University).

I took a shaky breath. "Listen, like I said, I don't do naked. I don't shoot naked photos of anyone." That's when the negotiations commenced in earnest.

Celia: "Towel only. Damp."

Me: "Bare upper chest. No showers. No steam."

Tio: "I repeat. Are you *insane*?"

Celia: "Three-fifty, then."

Me: "Four hundred. Close up. Bicep included. Take it or leave it."

After that, it was all business.

Celia gestured at herself. "My mother and father — *both* lawyers. So I'm going to need something in writing."

Tio made a sound like someone poked him with a metal kebab skewer.

I sighed and pulled a page out of my blue checked journal from the dollar store, "Fine."

"Quality, too — I want *you* taking it," said Celia

See, my mom says everyone's got a secret talent. Hers is parking karma. Mine is a gift for taking pictures with my arm outstretched. I'm the Annie Leibowitz of crap cameras. I don't know how it works, but if I can think about the person enough — I need to study them for just a minute until I can imagine something I like about them — well, then it's like the feeling runs down my arm and when I snap the picture there they are — sharp and fine, their real self, only better, even if the rest of the picture, the whole world around them, looks like it's a tilting, blurred carousel.

“Satisfaction guaranteed,” I muttered, scribbling on the paper, using my thigh as my desktop.

“You've got to spell out that it's a true iCandy *exclusive*. Take it, print it, then erase the file. I can scan the one print if I want a digital copy.

But no one else gets a copy. No one.” Celia gave me what I think was supposed to be a threatening stare through the bushes of her mascara.

“Or I'll sue.”

Tio snatched my notebook, “Do as adversaries do in law — strive

mightily, but eat and drink as friends!”

We both stared at him. “Tio, honey, you’re doing it again,” I leaned close to whisper, “Stop with the verbal ‘Spears.’”

He frowned but let me peel his fist off the crumpled notebook spine. I smoothed it out on my thigh and kept writing as I muttered “Besides, there are worse things than being sued.”

The real threat hung, unsaid, in the air between us. Forget about being expelled. Or even sued. The real threat was a criminal arrest. Not a week passed without some CNN or Fox story hitting the news about the FBI charging a high-schooler with felony sexting, or raiding a kid's home for child porn because of provocative pictures of girlfriends, friends, or classmates.

And here I was promising, in writing, to take a semi-naked photo of our high school's football star without his knowledge or permission.

All for money. Big money.

Erasing this photo? That one, for sure, was so *not* going to be a problem. I tore the lined paper free with suddenly shaking hands and

held it out to Celia.

I don't know how Celia got the folded piece of blue-lined paper shoved down into the one-molecule thick space available in the front pocket of her bikini-low Diesel Gallery jeans (jeans which, BTW, cost *way* over \$400 a pair). As she poked the paper down with her talons, her eyes slid up from my unlaced second-hand Doc Martins over my vintage peasant skirt and crinoline underskirt, all the way up to my distressed Doors tee shirt. Her face looked like I was emitting some fashion smell. Finished, Celia twirled her shoulder bag and clacked out of the linoleum hallway.

Probably, it should have bothered me more, how pleased with herself she seemed. But by that time, Tio had recovered and danced around me like the floor tiles were hot coals. "Hello? This is deranged. Suicidal!"

"She's not going to out me. If I'm busted, she's in as much trouble as I am. Maybe more."

"She's got a pair of parental lawyers. And you've got...?"

"Six redwoods to save."

"Biceps? Topless and *close up*? You took her money to do something

impossible. And if you don't deliver the shot, Celia will destroy you.”

“Then I gotta get the shot.” I wiped my sweaty palms down my skirt three times before I realized what I was doing and made myself stop.

Tio’s voice was muffled, speaking hunched over with his hands on either side of his head. “Oh my God — University. You can’t even go in there. You’ll stick out like a sore thumb. It might as well be the Oscars you're trying to break into.”

“That’s why you’re going to grab me the newspaper camera.”

Tio's head popped back up, “Mr. Chang would have a duck! It's school property — and it’s already too late for me to sign it out overnight, even if I had a good reason. And you don’t even know how to use it.”

“It's the only way,” I said. “With a lens as big as a thermos, I won’t *have* to get close.”

“Listen to me,” Tio insisted, grabbing my shoulder as I turned to walk away. “This is the Dog we're talking about. The Top Dog of University. USA/Today's Top 100? The guy every football team in America is recruiting. He could squish me with his pinkie.”

I licked my thumb and started lining up the corners of the twenties.

“Yep. That’s him,” I said, and pretended I wasn’t shaking inside.

The Greenbacks crew lay propped at the base of my scraggly circle of redwoods. Okay, so the redwoods are not really *mine*. But I can’t help thinking of them that way. I found them the first week of freshman year, after a particularly brutal morning. You know what I mean.

Everyone’s had one of those days. In the movies, that’s when you see someone eating a thin white-bread sandwich at lunch, sitting in a toilet stall.

But I didn’t end up hiding in the toilet — I found the trees. They’re in the fat part of a little Y-shaped bit of land that borders Old Lady Hathaway’s house at the farthest corner of our campus, where the Academy field (which no one uses except for theatrical re-enactment day (we don’t do sports) meets the University field (where grass is

pounded by athletes until nothing is left clinging to the packed earth but tough white dental-flossy strands). Sure, the trees are looking a little sickly-brown, and they seem to be dropping too many needles. But they're still beautiful. They stand in a perfect circle surrounding a flat-topped stump that's so big it looks like King Arthur's table or something. The living trees around that stump are just babies, even though they're so tall you have to flop your head back to see the tiny circle of pale blue sky way above. See, if you cut a mature redwood, sometimes baby trees will grow out of the roots of the original tree in a perfect hands-joined-together, ring-around-the-roses circle. It's called a fairy ring.

No, I'm serious, that's the actual name for it. Is that cool, or what?

When I found my trees, I lay on my back on the broad stump with my feet dangling down and an arm behind my head, watching the clouds try to sneak past me in the circle up above while I chewed my lunch. A breeze stroked my hair and all the high school sounds were far away and tiny, like they couldn't really compete with something as important

and majestic as the trees. I picked up a twig and the rest of the day, if someone slammed my shoulder in the crowded hall, or I dropped my stack of books or I couldn't get my locker open, I'd pause, reach in my pocket and let the tiny finger-like leaves brush against my hand. Even my hair smelled like a forest.

Right now every one of the magical trees had a person lying at its base.

“Guys,” I said, “heads up. I landed a big money-maker.”

From the corner of my eye, I could see Tio behind me, pantomiming a circle-around-the-ear cuckoo symbol and pointing at me.

People started to snicker at that, so I took out the twenties and slapped them on the stump. “Think this is crazy?”

Silence. Helena spoke first. “Tell me you didn't sell any of your body parts.”

“That's like, all my lunch money so far this year...” Gonzo said.

I said, “Gonzo's right. Think about it. Every single one of us has given up our lunch money all year. Each week one of us has to drag food in for the whole gang.”

Gonzo glared at Phoebe, “And some people bring in nothing but a pile of stupid bananas and a big jar of peanut butter.”

“Hey,” said Phoebe, “no one forced you to make grilled artichokes and butternut ravioli. I don’t even like artichokes.”

Gonzo looked like he was a balloon, filling up with air, ready to pop.

“That’s why I made you — only *you* — a pesto panini.”

I tried to get us back on topic before what passed for a food-fight broke out in our group (other people throw bread — we argue about arugula).

I could hear the football game noise drifting from our high school stadium. This afternoon football game was my one, best chance to get a photo of the Dog, but I needed their help. Surely eight weird, quirky brains, working all together, could think of a way for me to do this. But the game was more than half over already. I flapped my hands, trying to get their attention.

“Listen to me! I don’t have much time here. I love you guys, I swear I do, and if any of you needed a kidney, I’d give you one of mine in a heartbeat. But you know what happens when we get together— we just

talk all over each other. I need you to *focus*. We're running out of time."

Viola took a lollipop out of her mouth and said, "You're selling your kidney? On eBay?"

She was serious. That was the problem with Viola. She was the world's bestest, truest friend, without a mean bone in her body, but almost everyone, at some point, had the urge to strangle her. Only a tiny part of the real world ever seemed to get through to her brain, and the part that did was usually mixed up. She even looked otherworldly, with spiky elfish hair and a very long waist.

"Okay," Helena said then, "Spell it out. What *have* you agreed to do?"

So I explained. When I got to the naked-from-the-waist-up-picture-of-the-Dog part, there was a collective gasp.

Robin and Alex were the only ones to weigh in with words: "Cool," and "That's hot." Alex and Robin never went anywhere without the other and the two of them were having a black eyeliner week. Both head-bobbed their approval with half-lidded raccoon eyes. I turned to

the rest of the group.

“Guys, please, please, trust me on this one. See the money there? Don’t you think that kind of money — for only a few minutes work — is worth a little risk?”

“That's not just risky, that's impossible,” said Gonzo. “How do you expect to get that close to some half-naked University guy you don't even know?”

“The only place I’ll get that kind of picture is in the locker room, after a football game.”

Another gasp.

Helena said, “But isn’t football season over?”

I said, “There’s nothing left — except for *today* — you can hear it.

Today there’s a demonstration.”

“Does it have to be a *game*?” Helena asked. “Don’t they do off-season practice stuff?”

Gonzo said, “Kate’s right. At a practice, people would notice her. And she’s got no excuse for being there. But when it’s a game, there’s all

kinds of confusion.”

Tio said, “But that’s not a *real* game — the band isn’t even doing a half-time show.”

Gonzo said, “A demonstration’s a kind of post-season game, for the recruiters. Some huge college B-team plays us. The college freshmen get a chance to play against a tough team. And recruiters like to see our high school guys take on some older players. It’d work for Kate — there’s usually lots of people in the stands — people like seeing a college team play against a tough underdog.”

Silence fell. We all stared at Gonzo. See, we in the Academy pod don’t do sports, not even spectator sports. Gonzo, pink color steaming up his neck from his collar, said, “What? Can’t I like puff pastry *and* football? I mean, it’s not like I understand the game or anything. I hear guys talk, that’s all.”

A distant thunderous cheer rumbled across the field.

“There’s no time!” I wailed.

Phoebe, glowering as usual, said, “You guys are always telling *me* to

stop and think before I lose my temper and do something stupid. You ought to think this through. A game's best, sure, but really, why can't this wait? We could earn the money another way. Why does it have to be now?"

I sat up and looked around at them, not wanting to answer.

The breeze slowed to listen and the only sound was the scritch-scratch of branches twisting and fretting above us. Phoebe said, "There was a city planning committee meeting last night, wasn't there?"

I nodded, my throat pinched tight with misery.

"Tell us," Phoebe said, her hands balling into fists. "I promise I won't go into smackdown mode."

We all cared about the fairy circle. That's how our group formed. I couldn't keep the trees to myself. When I found someone crying in the far toilet stall of the girls' changing room (Viola) I had to tell her about them. When I saw hallway crowds sneering at the couple that was too weird and different (Alex and Robin), I had to drag them both to the circle for lunch. That's how it happened, one person after another. Until

there were eight of us.

How could you keep such a treasure for yourself, when you knew other people desperately needed it too?

We were all in it together — we'd been doing everything we could to fundraise money to save the trees all year — ever since I saw the tiny paper stapled on a sidewalk tree in the neighborhood last fall. It was a mandatory notification sign about proposed construction on the school field.

“We don't even have as much time as we thought. Now that the city's given the okay, there's less than four weeks left. If we don't do something drastic, the trees'll be cut and the school will be pouring concrete here in June. Which means I've got to get this shot. *Now.*”

Alex said, “But we raised a lot of money — right?”

I picked at the edge of my tee shirt. “You guys are great. We raised eighteen thousand dollars in seven months. Just us. That's...that's unheard-of.”

Helena, oblivious to the trembling emotion around the group, scalped

right down to the heart of the problem. “But four hundred dollars for a picture isn’t going to do it, Kate. Not when we’re still eight thousand short of what the school’s offering old lady Hathaway for the fairy circle.”

I looked around the group and I could see the news hit them hard — how far behind we were, how little time we had, how much was at stake. Well I wasn’t going to let it happen. Not to my friends, not to the trees. I gritted my teeth and said, “First, see, I get this one shot of the Dog. And then I’ll do something else. Whatever it takes. That’s what we’re going to do.”

People seemed to steady. Glances went from one person to the other, weaving around the group like safety ropes, keeping everyone from losing it.

“So we need a plan for today. Ideas? Ideas?” Helena barked like a drum major calling out the formation.

Various suggestions filled the small circle of trees. “Drop Kate with a crane! Pretend you’re delivering pizza! Janitor- you could be a janitor!”

Voices dwindled without a usable idea. Oh God, this was never going to work.

Viola said loudly, into the silence, “You could be a band. And play a song.”

Helena said, to Viola, “Kate is already in the marching band. But the band’s not playing today. Kate can’t very well march out on the field by herself. And certainly not into the men's changing room.”

Viola said, “Why not?”

Into the shocked and embarrassed silence, the group turned awkward. Earbuds plugged into ears, and sweatshirt hoods pulled up and down over foreheads. Within moments, the circle of trees housed a group of teen-monks, heads bowed, eyes averted from Viola.

Viola smiled at me, the only person still making eye contact. “I’ve got a flute. And Tio said he can play the triangle. Or was that something else we were talking about in geometry class?”

I took a deep breath of the resin-filled air, the redwood smell sharp and tangy as tears in the back of my throat. It was like a hit of something

soothing. Then, with my eyes closed, the floodgates of inspiration flung open.

“Yes! Yes! Viola! You did it — you’re brilliant!”

I grabbed her hands and we leaped, boinging off the ground, chests back, a half-smile on Viola’s face. “I did? What’d I do?”

I stopped and threw my arms around the nearest tree. The roughness of the bark against my cheek felt the way my dad’s beard used to feel — a comforting scratch with a piney aftershave smell. I couldn’t be near these trees without believing that the world could be better than it was, that everything was possible when I stood in their shelter. Just look at them — I wanted to shout at everyone I knew — they had sprung up a hundred years ago, from hidden roots of a destroyed tree, climbing up to the sky against all odds. They held hands underground and gave each other strength. They were living proof that nothing was truly over, not until there was no hope left.

My voice rose in excitement, “Guys, remember how the band lines up on both sides of the concrete exit ramp and plays the team off the field?”

That ramp is the back entrance to the locker room. I can slip down the ramp behind the players and no one'll notice."

Everyone on the Legacy football team belongs to University pod, and everyone in the marching band belongs to my pod, Academy. We Academy students talk for weeks about who won the half-time band smack-down show, and why, and if we're having an overall winning band season or not. For most of the game, if you're in the marching band, you sit there with your book open on your lap, unable to see anything because of the rows of towering furry band hats in front of you. You're dependent on your band-mates to elbow you if the drum major gets a freakish urge to play something in addition to the predictable pre-game, half-time, and post-game routines.

Tio looked aghast. "That will never work with a packed stadium watching?"

I waved my hand at the objection, brushing it off like a buzzing gnat.

"Everybody mills around at the end of a game. No one ever notices the band. Tio — grab me that zoom camera from the newspaper office.

Viola — get your flute out of your locker and then go to the game.

You're going to meet me and Tio at the ramp. I'll hit the band room for instruments for us, but Tio, just to warn you, I can't carry my case *and* that whopping bass sax of yours."

Tio, shaking his head in horror, said, "You're not getting me a *triangle*. Tell me you're not."

"Don't look so panicked. ANYONE can play the triangle. You hit it with a stick." I took a breath, so my voice wouldn't shake from the fear that rattled inside me like a high wind. "*Attitude*, Tio, that's all we need. Think about it. Who's going to stop us?"

Please God, I thought, let me be right.

Usually I try to slow it down when Tio and I are speed-walking across campus, being as how he's got two steps to my every one. But there wasn't time right now, so he pistoned beside me like a toy wind-up car,

kicking up dust in his wake.

Tio said, “Have you even thought about what happens if you make it inside? You don’t know anything about the Dog. You don’t know what you’re up against.”

It kind of annoyed me how he never got winded. Me? I was hauling a long, heavy instrument case and a metal triangle chiming every step I took and I already had a stitch needling my side.

“So he’s got a big ego. Maybe he’s rude. So what if he finds out? So what if he gets angry? With all this money at stake, he can say what he wants. Words are just words. It’s only so much air.” Maybe if I said it enough, I’d believe it.

“You know you’re insane. Have I mentioned that? You’re obsessed with those trees. It’s like you’ve got a tree addiction. You’re...you’re an arbophile.” He said it like it was a dirty word, then muttered, “I bet there’s medication for that.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

He grabbed my arm, dug in his heels, and I nearly spun around at the

abrupt stop.

“You. Are. Taking. A. Picture. Of. A. Naked. University. Student.” He rapped me on the head with his knuckles.

“Ow. That hurt.” My voice sounded shakier and weenier than I wanted it to and I felt the prickly heat of a blush crawling up my face. I held the long black instrument case tight against my chest, hiding behind it, feeling the metal flip-buckle digging into my breastbone. My eyes even started to sting. Did he think I was a fool? “You *heard* me — I don’t do naked.”

“You’re right. Sorry,” he muttered. “But you’re not taking another step until you hear me out.”

This was way more emotion than we usually had hanging in the air between us. Usually I did stuff and Tio trotted along. He’d never before thumped me, yanked me and rapped me, all in a few minutes. It didn’t really hurt that much, but still. What it actually hurt was my feelings.

Tio had the humungo camera still clutched in his left hand. He shoved his right fist in his new cargo pants. No one in our group ever

mentioned the fact that Tio still bought his clothes in the boys department. Thinking about it made me a little less angry with him.

“Viola’s probably already waiting. Say what you got to say.”

He pulled some folded papers out of his thigh pocket. “Look, I grabbed these from the Legacy Campus News files. Some are confidential tips. Some are stories that got printed in the school paper.” He clearly wasn’t giving me the camera until I read the pages.

I could feel time ticking away as I took them. The distant roar of the school stadium rose and ebbed. The game between the Legacy Lemurs and the Cal B-team was going to end soon, I could feel it down to my bone.

My trombone, that is. When you play for a marching band, you get a sense for these things. It’s like you can feel the tide shifting in the deafening sound all around you, so you stand, clear your spit valve, and start paying attention — otherwise you miss the downbeat for playing the team off the field.

And then the school’s newspaper’s headlines in my hand caught my

eye. Celebrity Senior Involved in Drunken Brawl. Pac-10 Comes Calling. The Pit- Bull Named To Parade's High School All-America List. Legacy Probation Extended for The Dog — Will He Ever Get Out Of The Pound?

“You see that one?” Tio extended a shaky finger to hand-written sheet sticking out underneath the others, where the words “Dog's homecoming date complains about aggressive behavior” were written.

“There's more. ‘From all such devils, the Good Lord deliver us.’”

“You're doing it again,” I said. Whenever Tio gets really stressed, he involuntarily spouts lines from Shakespeare. Instead of Tourette's syndrome, our group calls what Tio does Bard-ette's syndrome. When no Hostiles are around, we have some code phrases to help Tio rein it in — “stop with the verbal ‘Spears’” was our best, because saying it seemed to help him snap out of it. The whole thing started in Middle School.

Tio was the Target. There were so many reasons for it. First, well, there's the fact that puberty passed him by. Second, his name, Lucentio,

came from Shakespeare, which I personally thought was an unforgivable crime committed against him by his English-major parents. Finally, there was the Shakespeare obsession. Tio used to read and re-read Shakespeare obsessively.

Why Shakespeare — other than the name connection, that is?

Shakespeare probably gave Tio some smart ways to answer his middle school tormenters — the old writer-dude always was handy with an insult guaranteed to impress your adversary. If, that is, your adversaries wore codpieces and neck-ruffs. Tiny Tio had faith, though, so he read and re-read Shakespeare like there was a mystical answer buried in the plays. But then the words burrowed so deep in Tio's mind, he sort of lost control of them. Things popped out. His mom saved up for months and got him a few visits with a therapist, who said that Tio's Bard-ette's syndrome would go away on its own eventually. Tio himself always says, hey, at least I didn't get obsessed with quoting Harry Potter.

“This guy — the Dog — isn't allowed to kill me. I won't *die*,” I said, folding the rest of the school paper pages so I couldn't see any more.

“Besides, you can’t believe rumors.”

“No. You can’t *print* rumors. At least not in the school paper, you can’t.

They call him the Dog for a reason.”

“How do you know?”

“His real nickname is the Pit-Bull. Does that sound touchy-feely to you?”

I took a deep breath. “He’s just another student.”

“You realize you could get suspended. You even could get *expelled*.

Forever. This is the Dog. His mom is worth a fortune. He’s been in the L.A. Times. Three thousand words. He was even mentioned in the Prep section of Yahoo sports. Everyone wants a piece of him. And no one cares that he’s a jerk. There’s got to be other ways to make money.”

“Not in chunks like this. If I pull this off, we might get a few more orders. That’s all it would take. If we don’t do something different, we won’t raise enough money in time. The book sales, the monster rummage sales, the clothes swaps, and even the Flash Mob snack sales aren’t cutting it. You know that. You can do the math as well as I can.”

“You can’t let those trees go, can you?”

“Tio, babe, if I thought they wouldn’t get a cherry-picker and just drag me out like they did those Berkeley and Santa Cruz students, I’d be sitting high up in them right now.” I could hear the announcer’s squawk drifting on the breeze toward us. Every second we stood here, the game — and my chance to save the trees — came closer to ending. “Listen, we’ve got to go. Give me the camera. Now.”

And then Tio did something unbelievable. He clenched his jaw — I could actually see a muscle tightening at the edge of both his pudgy cheeks, “You’ll have to take it from me.”

There was a shocked silence.

“Are you kidding? I’m twice as big as you are. This is ridiculous. Hand it over.”

“No. You’re going to take me with you. Into the locker room. You think you can do this on your own. But you need help.”

I glared at him, hands on hips.

He had the decency to look away for a second. “Okay, maybe you don’t

want me to get in trouble too if things get ugly. But that doesn't change the fact that I can get closer to a boys locker room than you can."

"Not without a University I.D. badge, you can't. And you can't take the picture. It has to be me."

"I'm not letting you mess this up."

Oh no he didn't. Of the two of us, he was the one that *always* crashed and burned under stress, and we both knew it.

The knuckles on Tio's hand holding the camera were white. The one thing that was clear was that he wasn't backing down. If I wanted that camera, I had to include him. But taking Tio with me was a pure disaster in the making — I'd never be able to live with myself if I got him expelled. His life would be absolute hell if he had to start over in another school.

Why was he doing this to me?

Maybe we'd all ruffled his hair too many times, and treated him too often like a little kid. Heck, he was going to be 16 soon. Was I willing to risk this one shot to save the trees, all for his ego? To be honest, all

for our friendship? Because if I shut him out, even for his own good — no scratch that — *especially* for his own good, nothing would ever be the same between us again.

I tilted my trombone case up over my shoulder, elbow up and pointed forward, the handle gripped in my fist. I looped my other elbow around Tio's head and tucked it into my side, so that he oofed and had to walk hunched over sideways, trotting again, to keep up.

“Let's do this thing,” I said, hoping I sounded braver than I felt.

Viola, Tio and I stood together on the concrete ramp, side-by-side, a mass of humans roaring and screaming behind us. I'm not sure, but I think it meant that the game's score was close.

“Here's the deal,” I shouted. I had my hands cupped around my mouth so they could hear, even though we were so close our shoulders bumped, “When the game ends and the guys are running down this

ramp, we're going to play the da-dut, da-DUH lead-in."

Tio's eyes bulged so much I thought his tongue might actually pop out and catch a fly. He shouted back, "You mean the one where the stands shout 'CHARGE!' afterward?"

"Yep."

Viola said, "But I don't know all the words."

Tio shouted, "You're telling me...that you think we're going to be able to...*inspire*...this whole stadium to yell '*charge*' with only a trombone, a flute and a *triangle*?!?"

Luckily for me, I was saved from answering. Everyone in the stands came to their feet, stomping and throwing things. I thought the aluminum bleachers might crack and disintegrate. The three of us retreated to the bottom of the ramp-wall, dodging thrown popcorn and crumpled paper hotdog wrappers. There was a long, bone-rattling

"Boooooooooo."

I told myself all these people were probably unhappy about a referee's call, and not my lame idea to impersonate a band.

I could feel a hard concrete chill seeping into me. Viola hummed over her flute and when the deafening sound lessened for a second, I heard her making weird harmonics with her voice and instrument. She couldn't have been more relaxed if she'd been sitting in a bubble bath. Tio and I twitched and watched the game clock inch its way down. Who knew one "minute" of game time could last fifteen? It was weird actually *seeing* the end of a game. There seemed to be a lot of grunting, ker-powing, and even some earth shaking involved.

"That's pretty loud, when they hit, isn't it?" I hated the fact that my voice shook. I had no idea anyone could slam another person that hard. I cleared my throat. "Like a slap of thunder."

Tio muttered under his breath, like he was chanting a rosary, "Heaven's artillery thunders in the sky..."

Sheesh. More 'Spears. I needed to change the subject, fast, or we were both going to freak out here.

"So what do *you* think the Dog is — a depp or a pitt?" I asked to cut the tension. It's a game our group plays, ever since I explained my theory

of guy attractiveness based on the timeless 1990's dichotomy. See, underneath it all, there are only two kinds of hot guys: young Johnny Depp (witty repartee, rebellious, omnisexual) and Brad Pitt in his Thelma and Louise phase (square-jawed, clean-cut, push-your-cowboy-hat-up-with-a-thumb uncomplicated). You can go through history and peg every attractive guy as one or the other from a combination of looks and personality. Try it for yourself. Take Errol Flynn. A depp. Kirk Douglas? A pitt. Oscar Wilde? A depp. Zac Efron? A pitt. Robert Pattinson? Current group consensus: trying too hard to be a depp.

Tio answered me between gritted teeth. "I don't know."

This was a shocker. Could the Dog be both? Or neither? That would be a first. "How do you reckon that?"

"I've never seen him."

As the buzzer sounded and the stadium roared, we stared at each other in horror. "I thought YOU knew what he looked like."

"I don't!"

"I don't either!"

“Wasn’t there a picture in the newspaper?”

“He’s always wearing a helmet!”

“A number for his jersey? A last name? *Something?*”

“I don’t do sports. Besides,” Tio shouted at me like I was hard of thinking, “I was just supposed to grab the camera, remember?”

Oh Jesus.

The announcer came on overhead, the volume deafening, so loud that the words smeared and buzzed over the crowd's screaming. We won — a high school team defeated a college team. Apparently people cared. Tio bounced up and down, hands flapping and I could see his mouth moving as he shouted something at me. Oh crap. My trombone. That’s what he was saying. I was supposed to already have it out.

Four seconds later, my trombone was out, the case tossed aside. I perched one hip on the side concrete wall of the exit ramp down to the changing rooms.

For just one second, I had a mental panic attack. This truly was insane.

How could we possibly carry this off? Thousands of people were

screaming above us. People that we knew, people who knew our parents. Classmates and teachers. Tio was shaking so hard, the triangle bobbed and jerked on its string. Viola licked the mouth of her flute, frowning as she twisted the end to get a more precise alignment, all business.

They both looked at me. Waiting. Expectant.

In my head, silence swelled in my ears, the world contracting down to the sound of my own heartbeat. Buh-bum. Buh-bum.

I lifted my instrument and blatted the reveille lead-in notes to “Charge!” with clammy hands that left damp rings on my slide brace and bell. I could see Tio banging his eensy dangling triangle, and Viola inhaling and blowing her flute. But I couldn’t hear them at all.

Did anyone in the stands hear anything?

As if in answer, silence rolled down from the crowd above, like cold frost from a freezer. My heart felt like it followed the bumper on my slide — down, down *down*. Oh God, what if they all started to laugh, instead of shout?

I licked suddenly dry lips, then I played again, this time loud enough, even with a cold mouthpiece, to get the first three rows above us to shout a faint, raggedly *Charge!* in unison. I blew until my head felt light, and my lips felt bee-stung.

I hyperventilated my vision down to a narrow tunnel. All I could see was my spit valve, bobbing in front of me.

And then the raggedy cheer picked up, I gulped air like I'd just surfaced from deep under water and, by the sixth *Charge!*, the entire stadium joined in. I was a one-girl marching band.

Everyone in the audience seemed giddy because we'd won. No one questioned why we were shouting *Charge!* *after* the game was over.

There was a clatter and an endless stream of players started bumping past. I kept playing and forced myself to look like I belonged. My right leg, heavy with the weight of my Doc Marten, dangled down over the waist-high wall as I blew notes, my lips buzzing. Unfortunately I realized too late I forgot to make sure my crinoline was behaving. I gave it a shove down and it popped up again as I went back to playing

while discreetly staring at the players.

These guys were massive, grim-faced as bulls running down a shoot, jostling, shoving, a foggy smell of guy-sweat and mildew crowded around them. They were covered with pads. Some had helmets pushed back far enough that I could see a raw chin, or a little patch of pimply forehead, but that was it.

My mother could be in this crowd and I wouldn't be able to spot her.

Not if she wore a helmet and pads.

At least I knew the very last guy wasn't the Dog. He straggled behind, rail thin, his uniform blinding white (it looked like it had been recently ironed), and he could barely carry a plastic barrel with a screw-on lid, bigger than his torso.

"Tio," I hissed, "it's time!" Tio dropped his triangle and headed down the ramp. Now that the players were off the field, no one in the stands paid us any attention.

If you play in the band long enough, you can pack your instrument in less time than it takes some people to sneeze. I handed Viola my

packed-up horn and the triangle, hopped off the wall and tried to saunter — like I belonged — after all the smelly beasts, into the darkness.

“Pitt.”

“Pitt.”

“Mega-pitt.”

“I think they’re all pitts. Shame.” Tio and I were on our bellies, taking turns looking through the zoom lens.

We lay across the top of a row of tall filing cabinets in a closet-sized room that adjoined the football team’s locker room. There were narrow, dusty windows above the cabinets, as small as sheets of paper laid in a row on their sides, which we peered through at the team. We could barely fit. I tried really hard to ignore the legs-curved-up fly corpses lying like confetti all around us. And the layer of dust — thick as

powdered sugar on a doughnut — coating everything (including, now, me).

Tio said, glancing over at me as if he just realized it, “You don’t like pitts, do you?”

“They’re okay. Just not my type.”

We’d started playing the depp vs. pitt game because our nerves were getting the better of us. The head coach was yelling at the team and the guys all stood around listening, except for a few who sat on the bench in the middle of all the lockers, their sweaty heads in their hands.

“I thought you were supposed to be happy after you won,” I said.

“One of many reasons not to play football,” Tio said, like he was an expert on the subject.

“Got a clue yet which one is the Dog?”

“No. You?”

My stomach heaved and clutched. I had no idea what Celia was going to do to me if I gave her money back — but it wasn’t going to be pleasant, that’s for sure. And it would probably involve lawyers.

But more than that, I needed this money. For my trees.

The coach stopped shouting at them and slammed out of the room into a far doorway. The football guys, moving slow and listless, sat and unlaced shoes, popped helmets off their heads and whammed them against lockers, took the hems of nylon jerseys in one hand and ripped them over heads. It was like a complicated, choreographed dance.

“Hand it over,” I whispered in a rush to Tio. He slapped the giant camera into my palm, understanding what I meant.

We’d come so close. I’d be darned if I left now without even trying.

Heck, I’d take pictures of them all. Surely *one* of them would turn out to be the Dog.

The world narrowed to the camera’s gray thumbnail-sized window and the neon-bright display. Snap after snap. But it just wasn’t working.

The problem was me, not them. These weren’t, in a pitt kind of way, bad-looking guys. But my shots were terrible. One guy had his eyes closed. Another looked confused. The next looked like he’d just been

arrested, backed against a wall, and I'd taken a stunned mug shot.

Another had his face screwed up like he was trying to pass gas without anyone knowing.

This was terrible.

"You're stressed," Tio hissed in my ear.

No duh.

"Think of them as depps," he suggested.

Shot after shot. It wasn't working. And things were getting, um, well, we'll call it PG-13 down there. Let's just say I never realized that a jock strap was, literally, a guy-thong. Until now.

"I think...I think I'm going to have to call it quits," I said to Tio, without looking at him. "Otherwise I'll make a liar of myself. I *will* be doing naked."

But then a sound froze me in place where I perched balanced on top of the filing cabinets.

"Hey Dog, what'd you think of the boner."

The one guy with his uniform still on, the one sitting in the middle of

the bench with his head in his hands, like he'd personally caused the earth to implode, *that* was the guy who looked up to answer the name Dog.

“Boner?” he said in this deep voice as he unsnapped his chinstrap.

There was a leery chuckle that went round the room.

“The chick with the trombone — that’s pretty sweet, a girl who’s got a boner in her mouth all the time.”

All I heard was some guy shout “what a pair of lips *she* must have...” and the rest was a blur of red.

“Shh! Shh! Shh!” finally filtered into my consciousness. I was clanging against the filing cabinets, scrambling to get down and give that cretin a piece of my mind. Only the sound of exploding, pornish guy laughter kept me and Tio from being discovered. Tio had clamped his hand over my mouth and it was hard enough to breathe that way (especially when you’re struggling to get free) that I was snorting like a bull ready to charge before the red haze lifted from my eyes.

Because the “boner” comment was just the beginning. Let me tell you,

unless you've heard an entire guy's locker room describe your anatomy (and its flaws) in detail, including –I might add – insulting your prized vintage crinoline underskirt, you haven't lived. I was merely the first in a long line of critiques – girl boobs, girl mouths, girl butts, girl, well, you get the idea. And the Dog? No wonder they'd asked his opinion first. For the whole discussion (or should that be *dissection?*), no matter what anyone else said, everyone always asked the Dog what he thought. He was definitely the leader of the pack.

Right when it got to the point where Tio said, "Okay, now that's my limit – maybe you *should* go in there and..." the coach's door swung open and he barked, "Dog, your sister's here."

The locker room silenced like someone pushed the mute button.

The Dog had his shoulder pads and shirt off, his chinstrap undone, and the helmet pushed back on his head. He had his back to us, so I *still* couldn't have picked him out of a line-up. Or even tell you what color his hair was. He stood, grabbed a towel, tossed it over his bare shoulder and headed out a door to the right, walking in this rolling slow gait, like

he'd been hurt, or something.

“Go! Go! Go!” I hissed at Tio as fast as he had hissed shh! Shh! Shh! at me only a moment before.

When Tio and I peek around a corner together, we make a totem. My head is the perfect height to perch on top of his head.

They were down a blank hall, just outside the main double doors to the locker room area. The locker room doors had been painted glittery gold — I guess to celebrate a winning season. A thin, blonde girl and the Dog were having an intense conversation. You might even say a fight. Snatches of it drifted down toward our corner.

“Don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talking about,” the Dog was saying.

“Tell me what you expect me to do!” she was trying to steer the conversation, the way I do with my mom when I’m in trouble. The girl

looked willowy and reed-fragile next to the hulking guy, but she clearly wasn't backing down. Two points for her in my book.

The Dog leaned back against the locked double doors, arms crossed, like he had all the time in the world. But the expression on his face was anything but casual. Listening to them argue, I felt, for the first time, like I was eavesdropping. It was an icky feeling.

“Tio,” I whispered, to break the tension, “we ought to see if Mr.

Whitworth'll paint the band room doors gold if we get a superlative at CMEA.”

Tio didn't answer.

I looked down. “Tio?”

He still stared down the hallway. His voice was a low murmur. “I saw her coral lips to move, and with her breath she did perfume the air.”

I grabbed his arm and dragged him back around the corner. “Earth to Tio. What the hell just happened there?”

His eyes had this funny glaze to them. Then he seemed to wake up and, even more scary, he looked at me like he was pleading for me to help

him. “I burn, I pine, I perish...”

O.

M.

G.

“Tio, stop with the ‘Spears. Read my lips: You just saw this girl for the first time. Come on, be real.” I peered around the corner again.

O-kay. I could see where some of this was coming from. She was, well, somewhat of a goddess. But this was Tio we’re talking about here.

Tio, for God’s sake. The man that hormones forgot.

Or had they?

He was back in place, but this time I noticed that the cowlick on top of his head brushed my chin. Had he recently (gasp) *grown*?

To make matters worse, the voices down the hall were getting louder and it became clear that the goddess and the Dog were arguing about...

dating?

“No way, Bianca. No way you’re going out with *anyone*. I don’t care if it *is* just a school dance. Hell will freeze over first. Look at yourself.

You're a freshman. Ever since Dad left, there's no one but me to keep an eye on you."

"Oh, so *you*, the fine upstanding *criminal*, you're going to-

"Hey, I wasn't convicted. And listen, takes one to know one. I know exactly the kind of things those guys will say about you."

Bianca whipped around, long blonde hair sweeping like a curly cape around her shoulders, and stomped off.

Toward us. Eek!

Tio and I stared at each other in horror, then false-started in about three directions at once, only narrowly missing an out-an-out collision. "Act natural," I said.

It was hopeless. Tio went limp and stood there, eyes big and brown as a lab puppy, mouth slightly open. He gave a slow motion blink, just as my voice, too loud, came blaring out of me and said, "So...Tio! That math test! That marching band! What do you think about that, huh?"

I might as well not have bothered. Bianca was weeping too hard to see much of anything when she careened around the corner. She stood

there, stricken, for a split second, then put her hand to her mouth and sped off. (How *can* some girls weep delicately? Me, I sob like a horse hiccups. There's snot. There's even a whinny or two. But not her, oh no, not the Biancas of this world. Sigh.) Tio stood paralyzed in place, then started to tilt, like he would fall, like he was one of the redwoods someone cut at the base. But just before he lost balance, he lurched a step, then another step, following after Bianca like a space ship caught in a tractor beam. By the time he hit the end of the corridor, he was trotting again.

I shook my head. I *definitely* was on my own now.

When I got the courage to peer around the corner, I decided that, despite all the disasters up until now, maybe the fates finally decided to favor me.

The Dog still stood in the hallway, facing the double doors. He had his helmet off, dangling from the fingertips of the hand furthest away from me, and he propped himself with his other hand flat-palmed against the right-side golden paneled door. His head was bowed.

I brought up the camera, and as I did, he let the helmet thud to the ground at his feet. He had one foot forward, the other leg back on his heel, like he was leaning all his weight into his palm and he vibrated with tension, like he could barely resist punching the wall. His tight knee-length pants made every curve of his thigh stand out. Still leaning on the door, he reached up to run his fingers through his hair, a gesture of frustration maybe. Oh, he was definitely a pitt. As his hand shoved up through his hair, I realized this was the pose of all those beefcake guy-in-the-shower shots, right before the overhead water cascaded down in slow-motion onto their bare, muscle-ripped backs. My heart started twirling a happy dance in my chest, faster and faster — I was going to get the shot! The shot! This was it! A joy I hadn't felt for months made my head feel floaty. It was like a giant weight lifted off me, one I didn't realize I'd been carrying ever since I learned the school was going to buy the tiny strip of land at the edge of playing field and cut down my circle of trees to build a concrete snack shack. But now I could do this, it was going to work, we were going to get the

money and buy that land first.

But the Dog's shoulders were too wide, they were blocking too much of his face. "Come on," I barely breathed the words, "look up. Look at me." Through the lens, like he maybe sensed someone watching, his face turned sideways, down the hall toward me. Joy fizzed up inside my chest like a sparkler and I hit the autosnap button of the camera and held it, a tiny explosive electronic cha-ching, zing, zingzingzingzin. Not *one* picture — a bazillion pictures —close-up, stop-motion filming.

Reflected gold light from the double doors underlit him, and he was gorgeous — bare pecs, cheekbones, mussed hair. No wonder Celia paid \$400 for this.

But in that micro-second of time, as I concentrated, channeling everything I had into one photo-shoot, the image changed through the lens. He was not an iCandy snap, not a way to save my trees, not even the Dog.

He became a person. He had a raw scratch across his shoulder-blade and his hair was sweaty and clumped and even if he was a pitt, he was

even more gorgeous because he was real. He focused on me, his gaze no longer distant, one sharp black eyebrow going up even as the tiny *zinzinzin* of the camera's autosnap grabbed pictures faster than my racing pulse. For a flicker of an instant, I could have sworn his eyes narrowed and sparkled with amusement.

My breath stuck in my throat.

Busted.

I don't know. I wasn't thinking. I guess I maybe expected he'd straighten up in surprise or anger and, like a massive Orc in a video game, head down the hall after me.

What I never expected was that a hand would grab my hair from behind and slam me into the ground.