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Friday Night in Beast House

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Extract

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Chapter One

Mark sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the telephone.

Do it! Don't be such a wuss! Just pick it up and dial.

He'd been telling himself that very thing for more than half an hour. Still, there he sat, sweating and gazing at the phone.

Come on, man! The worst that can happen is she says no.

No, he thought. That isn't the worst. The worst is if she laughs and says, 'You must be out of your mind. What on earth would ever possess you to think I might consider going out with a complete loser like you?'

She won't say that, he told himself. Why would she? Only a real bitch would say a thing like that, and she's . . .

. . . *wonderful* . . .

To Mark, everything about Alison was wonderful. Her hair that smelled like an autumn wind. Her face, so fresh and sweet and cute that the very thought of it made Mark ache. The mischief and fire in her eyes. Her

wide and friendly smile. The crooked upper tooth in front. Her rich voice and laugh. Her slender body. The jaunty bounce in her step.

He sighed.

She'll never go out with me.

But jeez, he thought, why not *ask*? It won't kill me to ask.

Before today, he never would've seriously considered it. She belonged to another realm. Though they'd been in a few classes together since starting high school, they'd rarely spoken. She'd given him a smile from time to time. A nod. A brief hello. She never had an inkling, he was sure, of how he felt about her. And he'd intended it to remain that way.

But today at the start of lunch period, Bigelow had called out, 'Beep beep!' in his usual fashion. Alison hadn't dodged him fast enough, so he'd crashed into her with his wheelchair. Down she'd gone on the hallway floor at Mark's feet, her books flying.

'Jerk!' she yelled at the fleeing Bigelow.

Mark knelt beside her. 'Creep thinks he owns the hallways,' he said. 'Are you all right?'

'Guess I'll live.'

And the way she smiled.

'Can you give me a hand?'

Taking hold of her arm, he helped her up. It was the

first time he'd ever touched her. He let go quickly so she wouldn't get the idea he liked how her arm felt.

'Thanks, Mark.'

She knows my name!

'You're welcome, Alison.'

When she stood up, she winced. She bent over, lifted the left leg of her big, loose shorts and looked at her knee. It had a reddish hue, but Mark found his eyes drawn upward to the soft tan of her thigh.

She fingered her kneecap, prodded it gently.

'Guess it's okay,' she muttered.

'You'll probably have a nice bruise.'

She made a move to pick up one of her books, but Mark said, 'Wait. I'll get 'em.' Then he gathered her scattered books and binders.

When he was done, he handed them to her and she said, 'Thanks, Mark. You're a real gentleman.'

'Glad I could help.'

He stared at the telephone.

I've *got* to call her today while it's fresh in her mind.

He wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans, reached out and picked up the phone. He heard a dial tone. His other hand trembled as he tapped in her number. Each touch made a musical note in his ear.

Before pushing the last key, he hung up fast.

I can't! I can't! God, I'm such a chickenshit yellow bastard!

This is nuts, he told himself. Calm down and do it. Hell, I'll probably just get a busy signal. Or her mom'll pick up the phone and say she isn't home. Or I'll get the answering machine. Ten to one I won't even get to talk to Alison.

He wiped his hands again, then picked up the phone and dialed . . . dialed *all* the numbers.

His arm ached to slam down the phone.

He kept it to his ear.

It's ringing!

Yeah, but nobody'll pick it up. I'll get the answering machine.

If I get the answering machine, he thought, I'll hang up.

Hang up now!

'Hello?'

Oh my God oh my God!

'Hi,' he said. 'Alison?'

'Hi.'

'It's Mark Matthews.'

'Ah. Hi, Mark.'

'I, uh, just thought I'd call and see if you're okay. How's your knee?'

'Well, I've got a bruise. But I guess I'm fine. That was really nice of you to stop and help me.'

'Oh, well . . .'

'I don't know where Bigelow gets off, going around

crashing into everybody. I mean, jeez, I'm *sorry* he's messed up and everything, but I hardly think that's any excuse for running people *over*, for godsake.'

'Yeah. It's not right.'

'Oh, well.'

There was a silence. A long silence. The sort of silence that soon leads to, 'Well, thanks for calling.'

Before that could happen, Mark said, 'So what're you doing?'

'You mean now?'

'I guess so.'

'Talking on the phone, Einstein.'

He laughed. And he pictured Alison's smile and her crooked tooth and the glint in her eyes.

'What're *you* doing?' she asked.

'The same, I guess.'

'Are you nervous?'

'Yeah.'

'You sound nervous. Your voice is shaking.'

'Oh, sorry.'

'The answer is yes.'

'Uh . . .'

'Yes, I'll go out with you.'

I can't believe this is happening!

'That's why you called, isn't it?'

'Uh, yeah. Mostly. And just to see how you're doing.'

'Doing okay. So . . . I'll go out with you.'

OH MY GOD!!!

'How about tomorrow night?' she suggested.

Tomorrow?

'Sure. Yeah. That'd be . . . really good.'

'On one condition,' she added.

'Sure.'

'Don't you want to hear the condition first?'

'I guess so.'

'I want you to get me into Beast House. Tomorrow night after it closes. That's where we'll have our date.'

Chapter Two

'Have you ever been in there at night?' she asked.

'Huh-uh. Have you?'

'No, but I've always wanted to. I mean, I've lived here in Malcasa my whole darn life and read the books and seen all the movies. I took the tour *before* they started using those tape players, and I know the whole audio tour by heart. I bet I know more about Beast House than most of the guides. But I've never been in there at night. It's the one thing I really want to do. I'd go on the midnight tour, but you have to be eighteen. Anyway, it's a hundred bucks apiece. And besides, I think it'd be a lot more cool going in by ourselves, don't you? Who wants to do it with a dozen other people and a guide?'

'But . . . how can we get in?'

'That's up to you. So what do you think?'

'Sure. Let's do it.'

'Where have I heard *that* before?'

He shrugged. 'I don't know, where?'

'From all the *other* guys who promised to get me in . . . and didn't.'

He felt a strange sinking sensation.

'Oh.'

'But maybe you'll be different.'

'I'll sure try.'

'I'll be at the back door at midnight.'

'Your back door?'

'The back door of Beast House. What you probably need to do is buy a ticket tomorrow afternoon and go in before it closes and find a hiding place. The thing is, they count those cassette players they give out for the tours. They can't be short a player when they go to close up for the day. If they're missing one, they know somebody's trying to stay in the house and so they search the place from top to bottom.'

'You sure know a lot about it.'

'I've studied the situation. I *really* want to spend a night in there. I think it'd be the most exciting thing I've ever done. So how about it? Are you still game?'

'Yeah!'

'All right.'

'But . . . we'll be staying in Beast House all night?'

'Most of the night, anyway. We'd have to get out before dawn.'

'Are you *allowed* to stay out all night?'

'Oh, sure. Every night.'

'Really?'

'I'm *kidding*. I'm sixteen, for cry-sake. Of course I'm not *allowed* to stay out all night. Are you?'

'No.'

'So we'll both just have to use our heads and improvise.'

'Guess so.'

'Just like *you'll* have to improvise on getting in.'

'How am I supposed to do that thing with the cassette players?'

'Where there's a will, there's a way.'

'But . . .'

'Mark, this is a test. A test of your brains, imagination and commitment to a task. I think you're a cool guy, but the world's full of cool guys. The question is, are you *worthy* of me.'

Though she sounded serious, Mark imagined her on the other phone, grinning, a spark of mischief in her eyes.

'See you tomorrow at midnight,' he said.

'I sure hope so.'

'I'll be there. Don't worry.'

'Okay. That'll be really neat if you can do it. Thanks for calling, Mark.'

'Well . . .'

'Bye-bye.'

''Bye.'

After hanging up, Mark sprawled on his bed and stared at the ceiling. Stunned that Alison had agreed to go out with him. Trembling at the prospect of being with her tomorrow night . . . *all* night. Slightly depressed that she seemed less interested in going out with him than in getting into Beast House. And dumbfounded by the task of how to deal with the cassette-player problem.

Where there's a will, there's a way.

Usually true, but certainly not always. He could *will* himself to flap his arms and fly to Singapore, for instance, but that wouldn't make it happen.

He'd taken the Beast House tour often enough to understand the system. They gave you a player as you entered the grounds. You wore it by a strap around your neck and listened to the 'self-guided tour' through head-phones as you walked through the house. Afterwards, you handed back the player and headphones at the front gate. Handed it *to* a staff member.

The crux of the problem, he thought, is the staff member.

Usually they were good-looking gals in those cute uniforms that made them all look like park rangers.

If nobody was watching, you could just walk up to the gate, return the audio equipment (slip it into the numbered cubbyhole in the storage cabinet), then turn around and go back to the house and find a hiding place.

Or have an accomplice drop off *both* players on his way out while you remain in the house.

But there *is* a gal at the gate and you've gotta *hand* her the player. They want to make very sure nobody's in the house when they shut it down for the night.

So how can I do it? Mark wondered. There must be a way.

It's just a matter of *thinking* of it.

Bribe the girl at the gate?

Create a diversion?

He lay there staring at the ceiling of his bedroom, trying to come up with a plan that might work. Might work when you're just a regular sixteen-year-old real kid, not Indiana Jones or James Bond or Batman.

He came up with ideas. His only good ideas, however, involved the use of an accomplice.

I've gotta do this on my own, he thought. If I drag Vick or someone into it, they might screw up the whole deal.

So he kept on thinking. The thoughts filled his head, cluttered it, whirled, bumped into each other. They didn't make his head *hurt*, but they certainly made it feel heavy and useless.

Without realizing it, he fell asleep.

He woke up at the sound of his father's voice calling from downstairs. 'Mark! You better get down here fast!

Supper's on the table. Come on, man. Move it. *Arriba! Arriba! Andalé!*'

On his way down the staircase, breathing deeply of the aroma of fried chicken, he heard a gruff Mexican voice in his head. It said, 'Tape players? We don't need no steeenkin' tape players!'

He grinned.