

About Her Perfect Revenge...

Are You Ready For A Comedy Like No Other...?

The Prank of a Lifetime... Teenager Christina Matteo is sweet, innocent, shy but nerdy – and the *perfect* target for a cruel joke played by class superhunk, Bill Havenwood. It leaves her devastated and changes the rest of her high school years for the worst.

The Revenge of a Lifetime... Years later, she bumps into the creep again and begins plotting her *perfect* revenge. She's going to get him back. *Bad*. And when she's through with him, he'll wish he had *never* messed with her in the first place!

The Mistake of a Lifetime... But her plan goes horribly wrong and she finds herself owing the slimeball \$50,000. What's a poor working girl to do?

The Problem of a Lifetime... Bill is out of the family will – or so says his billionaire father, William – unless he can change his lazy, good-for-nothing, partying ways. But how?

The Scam of a Lifetime... William wants grandchildren...or even the *possibility* of grandchildren; and if Bill wants to stay in the will, he needs to get engaged—*like now!* But where is he going to find a willing—*or unwilling*—accomplice on such short notice?

The Blackmail of a Lifetime... Bill turns to Christina. If she simply *pretends* to be his fiancée for one month's time until he can change his stubborn father's mind, he'll forgive her \$50,000 debt. She has no choice but to agree—even though she still hates his guts!

The Double-Cross of a Lifetime... But William knows all about their phony deal. He's not dumb! Wait until he begins to pressure the scheming couple to marry for real. That'll teach his dirty, rotten son a lesson...

The Comedy of a Lifetime... The laugh-out-loud craziness that ensues produces one of the most hilarious romantic comedies of all time. With realistic characters and an expertly woven plot, *Her Perfect Revenge* is an excellent choice for any and all romantic comedy lovers.

HER PERFECT REVENGE

By

ANNA MARA

“I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.”
-Abraham Lincoln

Chapter 1

16 Years Earlier...

Was it her imagination or was everyone staring at her? No, everyone was staring at her—and they were laughing too!

Putting her head down, fourteen-year-old Christina Matteo walked quickly down the school hall, trying to avoid catching anyone's eye. Clutching her books to her chest, she increased her speed but as she went by a gaggle of girls lurking at their lockers, the girls suddenly burst out laughing.

Ignoring them, Christina continued her brisk pace down the hall towards her locker. It was probably just her imagination. This was only her third week of her freshman year at Cloverdale Public High School. She didn't know anybody here—and they didn't know her.

Super shy and self-conscious, Christina had kept to herself since school had started. Except for her girlfriend Jenny, she hadn't socialized with anyone. Not that anyone would want to anyway. After all, short, dumpy girls who wore glasses and railroad tracks on their teeth weren't exactly on everyone's party list.

"Hey, baby."

Christina swiveled her head to her right. Tall, skinny Gary Porter, a senior at the school, was in a corner with his friend, Barry Mahoney.

"Why don't we party tonight and you can do me?" Gary puckered his lips and made a slurping, sucking sound at Christina. Barry burst out laughing.

Mortified, Christina swung away and kept walking. What the hell was happening? Reaching her locker, Christina fumbled with the combination lock. She just wanted to get her stuff and get the hell out of the hallway.

"Chrissy?"

Nervous and tense, Christina jumped. She turned to find a very out-of-breath Jenny beside her.

Jenny rambled on. "I ran all the way here. I thought I was late again and..." Suddenly, she stopped her speech as she noticed Christina's pale face. "Chrissy, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." Embarrassed, Christina kept fumbling with her lock.

Jenny studied her friend. Her street smarts were telling her something was wrong. Even though they were the same age, Jenny was taller and more developed than Christina. She was also more confident and tougher, but still not a member of the A clique, or the B, or C—not even the D, but she didn't care. Jenny was lower class and knew how to fight dirty.

The two girls had been best friends since grade school. Christina had begged her parents to send her to Cloverdale High when she'd found out Jenny was going. Although her parents had wanted her to go to St. Joseph's, an all-girl, private boarding school outside Philadelphia, they'd relented after an entire summer of pleading from their daughter.

Not rich by any means, Nunzio and Gabriella Matteo had scrimped and saved, and had wanted the very best for their little girl. That meant a private, convent school.

But their resolve had melted with Christina's tears and they allowed her to stay at home in Bensonhurst, New York, and attend public school.

Jenny continued to study Christina's bent head. "Chrissy, what's happened?"

"Nothing," Christina mumbled, as her lock finally released.

As she swung open her locker door, an envelope fluttered out. Jenny bent down to pick it up. It was an envelope addressed to 'Chrissy Matteo'. She handed it to her friend. Perplexed, Christina quickly tore it open. Whomever it was from had wedged it between the door and upper frame of her locker.

It was a letter from the Anderson Family Planning Clinic—and—shocked, Christina looked up at her friend.

Jenny snatched it from her shaking hands and began reading it out loud.

"Dear Miss Matteo... We regret to inform you that a sexual partner of yours, who has requested to remain anonymous, has contracted gonorrhea and is currently being treated at our clinic. We are writing to urge you to seek medical attention as soon as possible to determine whether you have also been infected... holy crap! Is this...?" Jenny looked up at Christina with new eyes.

"No, it's not true! Jenny, how can I get that... that disease when I've never even kissed a guy?" Christina hissed.

"Well, you don't get it from kissing."

"Jenny!"

"Okay, okay. But why is this addressed to you? And in your locker?"

"I don't know." Panic coursed through Christina's system and she felt weak.

Jenny was studying the letter again. "You know what this is? It's a joke."

"What?"

"Chrissy, official letters from medical clinics don't get stuffed into student lockers. And look." She held up the envelope. "There's no stamp on it. These kinds of letters get mailed to you or they try to contact you on the phone."

"But who would do that? We don't know anybody here."

"I don't know but we're going to find out." Jenny's face set with determination.

"Jenny, no!" Christina shouted, as the first bell rang warning everyone to get to class. "If my parents find out, they'll ship me off to convent school and you know how much I had to beg to stay here." Christina snatched the letter from Jenny's hands and stuffed it into her sweater pocket. "Promise me you won't say anything to anybody." Jenny stubbornly remained silent. "Jenny?"

"Okay, I won't."

Inside their English 101 classroom, Christina and Jenny took their seats along with the other freshmen. The final bell hadn't rung yet and their teacher, Mrs. Lauder still hadn't arrived.

Jenny leaned over to Christina and whispered, "Maybe it's Ashford over there." She nodded toward Stevie Ashford, a big, bulky kid who excelled in sports but not in school. "I think he likes you."

Christina gave Stevie a sideways look before turning back to Jenny. She kept her voice low. "If he likes me, why would he do that? It doesn't make sense."

"Maybe you're right. I'll bet he can't even spell gonorrhea."

"Jenny, shut up. Somebody's gonna hear you."

"Maybe it's..."

“Hey, you’re Chrissy, right?”

Christina looked up to see Billy Havenwood, class leader and super hunk, sidle up to her desk and place his elbows on it. He leaned forward into her face and the room went deathly quiet.

“Y...Yes,” she replied.

Christina was wary. Billy Havenwood had never spoken to her. The school term had only begun three weeks ago and everyone had already been pigeonholed into his or her clichéd roles—class clown, nerd, jock, wannabe. Billy was none of those. He and his best friend, Jake Monroe, were the superstars. Popular, brash, arrogant and gorgeous, they knew what they had and what they could command.

Rumor had it that Billy came from a wealthy family. His mom, a liberal, hippy-type, had insisted her son attend public school in order to learn how ‘normal’ people lived. His businessman father had sternly objected but then finally relented.

And Billy? Well, he didn’t care where he went as long as he could party. His drinking exploits in his first few weeks of school had already made him a semi-legend. Even the seniors were impressed.

Christina was not—although she did have a secret crush on him. All the girls did. But why was he talking to her now with that wild, glazed look in his eyes?

“I’ve got some advice for you.” He slurred his words slightly.

Repulsed by the smell of beer on his breath, Christina leaned back. “W...What?”

A slow smirk spread across Billy’s face. “Next time you wanna hump, use one of these.” He threw a wrapped condom at her. As if on cue, the entire class burst out laughing. Then Billy yelled, “Now.” And, suddenly, the other students pelted Christina with condoms.

Christina sat there in shock as a hot fire of humiliation spread from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

Looking around at the sea of laughing faces, her breathing stopped. Billy stumbled back to his seat and gave his friend Jake a high five.

Aghast, Jenny jumped up and started yelling around the room. “Stop it! Stop it!”

No one paid any attention. They just kept laughing.

Suddenly, both Christina and Jenny spotted a photocopy of Christina’s family planning clinic letter tacked onto the bulletin board. Everyone had seen it!

Christina’s bottom lip quivered. She had never been so embarrassed in all her life. What was going on? And why?

Summoning all her courage, she finally spoke up.

“It’s... it’s a lie. It’s not t...true.” She spoke louder. “It’s not true.”

Jenny made a beeline for the letter and tore it off the board. “All of you, shut up,” she ordered.

As if on cue, the other classmates pulled out their own copies and held them high. Everyone had one. Christina finally broke down. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she grabbed her books and turned to her peers.

“W... why are you all being so m...mean to me? I never did anything to any of you!” She sobbed and screamed.

The laughter died down and Christina looked into their faces.

This couldn’t be happening to her—her of all people. She’d always done everything right. She’d been nice to everyone, always blended into the wallpaper, and

never made waves. Why this? Why now? Why her?

With a final cry of anguish, she clutched her books and ran from the room in tears.

Chapter 2

Jenny found Christina sitting inside a stall in the first floor girl's washroom sobbing her heart out. She bent down. Yup—those were Chrissy's shoes, all right. She knocked on the door.

"It's me, Chrissy."

Slowly, Christina opened the door and came out. Her eyes were red and swollen.

"Is everyone still laughing?" Christina tentatively asked.

"No, they all shut up pretty fast when Mrs. Lauder came in."

"How can I ever go back there again after what happened?" Fresh tears started flowing down Christina's cheeks.

"You can and you will." Jenny was angry for her friend. "Now listen, I found out who's responsible."

"Who?" Christina stopped crying.

"Billy Havenwood and Jake Monroe."

"But why? They don't know me."

"I was told they had to pull a prank on the..." Jenny looked at her friend apprehensively.

"On the what?" Christina demanded.

"On—the class nerd."

"And that's me?" Christina began to feel the first stirrings of anger. "Who said?"

"Mindy Mackenzie. She said Billy picked you out as the class nerd."

"Why?"

"Because you're smart and shy and you wear glasses, I guess. I don't know."

"That creep!" Christina was seeing red. This wasn't fair. She didn't deserve this treatment. Not from them. Not from anyone.

Jenny continued. "Mindy said Billy and Jake had to come up with a really clever stunt on you if they wanted to get in good with some of the seniors. Kinda like an initiation. Word would spread around the school and they'd be cool."

"And I would be the laughing stock?" Christina was getting madder. "What about his buddy Jake?"

"You know that story. Jake goes along with whatever Billy says."

"Yeah."

"Jake stole some official stationery from the Anderson Family Planning Clinic and they wrote you that letter. Then they made copies for everybody and Billy bought all the condoms. After you left, he picked them all up saying it was his supply for the week." Disgusted, Jenny rolled her eyes. "Then he and Jake split before Mrs. Lauder came in."

"They skipped?"

"Yeah; Mindy said she overheard them talking about going drinking under the bleachers."

"Oh really..." Christina quickly gathered her books. She was all fired up and like a volcano, about to blow. She needed to release this anger and direct it at the one who had caused it—Billy Havenwood—that big jerk! Determined, she stalked to the door.

"Where are you going?" Jenny asked.

"To tell Mr. 'Popularity, I-Can-Do-Whatever-I-Want' Havenwood off. You comin'?"

“I told old Lauder I was just going to the bathroom, but you go get him girl.”
Jenny smiled and gave her friend a thumbs up sign.
Christina was now on the warpath and operating on pure adrenaline.

Chapter 3

Christina could barely make out the shape of two people crouching low in a back corner underneath the school bleachers outside by the track—but they were there. She knew it.

The schoolyard was empty and no one had seen her. Coming closer, she could hear laughing and snickering—probably at her expense, those jerks. Creeping to the open side of the bleachers, Christina scooted underneath. She could see them now—Billy Havenwood and Jake Monroe. They were half-sitting, half-lying down in the dirt and both were drinking from beer cans.

Christina slowly made her way towards them, clutching her books against her chest for protection. Suddenly, in his inebriated haze, Billy Havenwood finally noticed her.

“Who the hell are you?” he slurred his words.

He squinted his bloodshot eyes trying to focus on her face. Jake just sat there and burped.

“I... I...”

And that’s when it happened. Christina lost her last remaining nerve and froze. What was she doing? She couldn’t go through with this. It was one thing to talk about what you were going to do when you were safe in the girl’s washroom, but it was another when you were actually facing them. She was feeling weak again and her knees started to shake. Any moment now, she would faint—right in front of these bozos and be embarrassed all over again.

Billy suddenly stood up. With beer can in hand and wobbling a little, he came towards Christina.

“I know you. You’re that class nerd.” He burst out laughing, as did Jake. Jake, still on the ground, didn’t know what was going on but if Billy laughed, he laughed.

Mortified, Christina turned to run. This had been a bad idea and she needed to get away as fast as possible. She took a few quick steps, but in her haste her foot landed in a hole in the dirt and she fell onto her hands and knees.

And there she was—on all fours—with her bum stuck in the air—right in front of them. Billy laughed harder.

“Hey, is that an invite?” he asked, as he slugged back more beer. “Because if it is, I don’t do charity.”

At that moment, something in Christina snapped and she could feel anger roiling through her system again. Who the hell did this jerk think he was? Slowly she stood up, brushed the dirt from her clothes and picked up her books. She turned to face Billy Havenwood and defiantly raised her chin up.

“Go fuck yourself.” There. She’d said it. What a relief!

Jake drunkenly laughed in the background. “Whoa...no chick’s ever said that to you before,” he cackled.

Billy’s eyes dangerously narrowed on Christina and his spine straightened. “What? What did you just say to me?” he demanded.

“You heard me. And I may be the class nerd, but it’s better than being the class drunk like you,” Christina accused forcefully.

No one had ever spoken to Billy like that before, except maybe his father. This

was new territory and he didn't like it one bit. Who the hell was this little nobody telling him off anyway? Throwing his empty beer can to the side, he took a few predatory steps towards Christina. She instinctively took a few steps back.

Suddenly, Christina realized that this was not a very good place to be—alone with two drunken guys, hidden under the bleachers with no one else around. What if they...? Nobody would hear her screams or cries for help. Her courage deserted her and she took a couple more frightened steps back.

“Stay a...away from me,” she stammered.

And in that instant, Billy Havenwood read her mind. So this chick thought he might force himself on her, was that it?

He laughed to himself. Why not play along and teach this little bitch a lesson? He wouldn't do anything, of course, but she didn't know that. And this might be fun. She deserved to be taught a lesson after what she'd just said to him.

He smirked at her then. “What do ya think I'm gonna do?” He asked menacingly, taking more steps towards her. “Have a little fun?”

Christina backed away even more. “I... I... said... stay away. Don't come any clo... closer.” Her words came out breathy, as fear coursed through her system.

“Is that why you came to find me, for a little mid-morning action? Because baby, if you wanna fuck, I'm ready.” He was leering at her now with those glazed drunken eyes of his, as he brazenly looked her up and down. “You know, for a class nerd, I gotta say you've got great tits.” He slurred his last few words as the five beers he'd already had that morning took their toll on his body.

Shocked at his dirty language and frightened to the very pink-polished tips of her toes, Christina suddenly turned and ran out from under the bleachers. She could hear Billy Havenwood laughing and laughing as she kept running at full speed across the track, through the parking lot, and into the school building. She didn't stop until she reached the first floor girl's washroom.

Panting hard, Christina splashed cool water on her face. This had not been a good day but things were about to get worse.

Chapter 4

Christina got home at 4:05 p.m. that day. After secretly slinking out of the washroom, she'd left the school and spent the day at the mall. She had skipped school for the first time in her entire life, but she just couldn't go back today and face all those people who had laughed at her.

Throwing her sweater and books on the kitchen table, she shuffled to her room, threw herself on the bed and reached behind her nightstand to pull out her secret diary and began to write about the day's events. Journaling was something that Christina had discovered the previous year. It was as if by putting her feelings down on paper, she didn't have to carry them around in her heart and mind anymore.

Putting down her pen, she let her mind wander over the day's events. She wondered if the story had already made the rounds. Did her peers know it had all been a joke? In which case, it would make her a dweeb. Or did they believe the letter and think she was a slut? Would she now have a reputation? Would everybody forget about this in a week's time and move on to somebody else?

Suddenly, Billy Havenwood's handsome face floated into her mind. What a disgusting creep! Christina remembered the way he'd been smirking at her with those arrogant, drunken lips of his and a tremor ran down her spine. And his laughter! She could still hear it playing over and over again in her head. He'd been enjoying himself at her expense. She'd never been a joke before.

Christina put her hands over her eyes, trying to blot out the images, but to no avail. She then remembered his eyes—his gorgeous, green eyes—and the way they had leered at her. And what about those dirty things he'd said to her? Was he really going to try something? A shiver of fear ran down her back.

"Christina?"

Great, her mother was calling her. What did she want?

"Christina?" This time her mother yelled her name.

"Coming!"

Christina hid her diary behind her nightstand, got up from the bed, and trudged to the kitchen where she suddenly stopped short. Her mother was clutching 'the letter' in her hand and was staring at her in shock.

"This fell out of your sweater when I was hanging it up." Gabriella whispered.

Petite and attractive but with an aura of strength, Gabriella Matteo was the glue that held her family together. At thirty-eight, the Italian-American housewife was a great mother, but she had a penchant for the dramatic. And she didn't appreciate nonsense of any kind in others, especially from her husband, whom she blamed for everything.

Speechless, Christina could only gawk at her. Her mother always seemed to make any situation worse than it actually was. There were no such things as 'discussions' in this family. Everything that happened happened at high decibel and over-the-top, and this scene was promising to be a showstopper.

"I... I," Christina stammered, not knowing what to say.

"Oh my God! How could you? You're only fourteen." Gabriella's voice started to rise. "Who's the boy?" she yelled.

"It's not true. It's a joke," Christina defensively pleaded. "There is no boy."

But Gabriella wasn't listening as she continued. "And what's your father gonna

say? I knew we should never have allowed you to go to that public school. And this boy... who is he? Tell me! Oh, I'm gonna be sick. I feel faint." She gripped the edge of the table. "Get me some water. Quick!"

Christina ran to the sink and let the water run. She was on the verge of tears herself. "Mommy, it's not true. This guy at school..." She quickly brought her mother the glass of water as Gabriella collapsed into a chair.

"What guy? The guy in the letter?"

"No. There is no guy in the letter. It's a lie!" Christina was now yelling loud enough to match her mother's voice.

"Oh Holy Mother of Jesus, what if you have this disease? I'm making an appointment with Dr. Marchese right away."

"No! It's not true," Christina began to cry. "Some kids at school played a joke on me and..."

"What? You mean other people know about this? Oh, saints in heaven." Gabriella put her fingers in the glass of water and started splashing the droplets onto her face.

At that moment, the back door opened and in walked Nunzio Matteo, dressed in grubby clothes and with lunch pail in hand. He'd just finished his shift at the construction site and was looking forward to a good meal and some TV. But as he had approached the house through the garage entrance, he'd heard the shouting.

"What's goin' on here?" he inquired.

Gabriella got up and shoved the letter at her husband. "Read this. I knew we should have sent her to St. Joseph's. This is all your fault."

Nunzio quickly began to read the letter. Christina stopped crying and held her breath as she waited for her father's explosive reaction.

Nunzio looked up at his daughter. "Is this true?" he asked quietly.

Caught off guard by his softly spoken words, she quickly regained her wits. "No, it isn't. Some kids at school were playing a joke and they thought it was funny and they sent me this letter but it's not true and..."

Nunzio held up his hand and Christina stopped speaking. He looked at her for a few hard seconds. "I believe you."

"You do?" Christina was shocked.

"I know my daughter and I know you'd never get involved in this sort of garbage." Nunzio waved the letter in the air.

For the first time that day, Christina smiled and let out a sigh of relief, but unfortunately her father kept talking.

"But tomorrow..." he dictated, "...you're packing your things and going to that convent school in Philadelphia."

"Noooo... I don't want to," Christina wailed. Tears spurted in her eyes and she stamped her foot in frustration.

But Nunzio was firm and there was no dissuading him. "My daughter is not going back to a school with these types of people who would treat her like this and that's final." He looked at his wife and she nodded her approval.

"It's not fair," Christina sobbed, as she ran from the kitchen and into her room, slamming her door shut.

Throwing herself on the bed, she let out all the anger and trauma of the day. Tears flowed as she punched her pillow. Billy Havenwood and Jake Monroe had done this to

her. It was all their faults—those jerks, those creeps, those bastards!

And within a week, Christina was shipped off to boarding school for the next four years.

Chapter 5

16 Years Later...

Present Day

Click. Click. Click.

Christina kept snapping pictures of the eight protesters outside the Fido Dog Food Company head office building as they chanted and waved huge placards in the air. "Say No To Fido," screamed the rowdy bunch. They called themselves 'The Guardians of Mother Earth' or 'GME' for short.

A scruffy-looking, sixties throwback named Teddy, who was carrying a large sign that read 'Fido Owns Samco Oil, Samco Oil Pollutes Our Planet, Boycott Fido', ran over to Christina who was crouching down trying to get a better shot with her camera.

"Hey man, you from Streetwise Magazine?" he asked.

"That's me." She straightened up and gave him a dazzling smile.

Teddy's eyes widened with admiration. At thirty, Christina was a beauty with long brown hair framing her pretty features. The railroad tracks on her teeth had long come off her pearly whites and her thick glasses had been replaced by contacts.

At fourteen she may have been short and dumpy, but by fifteen she'd shot up to 5'6". By sixteen, she'd taken up competitive swimming and lost over 30 pounds, giving her a sleek frame. And by seventeen, she'd discovered makeup.

Teddy was clearly impressed. "You're one hot chick for a reporter."

Christina laughed. "I'm a photographer, not a reporter."

"Well, you're pretty hot for that too."

"Not as hot as your cause, from what I hear."

"Yeah," Teddy grinned. "We've been getting a lot of publicity and we're really stickin' it to them." He inclined his head towards the Fido building as Christina took pictures of the entrance.

"How long have you been out here?" she asked.

"Two weeks and we're gonna stay here until those corporate vermin clean up their mess, man."

Christina put her camera down. "So tell me about what you're trying to do here. The Magazine didn't say much."

Streetwise Magazine was an under-financed, New York City, free street paper—the kind available at record shops and clubs. Christina had been freelancing for them for about eighteen months. The money was lousy and the hours terrible but she was doing anything she could to become a professional photojournalist. She'd gotten the position through her best friend Jenny, who worked there as a receptionist.

After Christina had been sent away to boarding school, the girls had written to each other for a while. But six months into the school year, Jenny's father had been transferred to a new job in Chicago, her family had moved and they'd lost touch with each other. Three years ago, a newly divorced Jenny with her little girl Taylor, moved back to New York and had looked Christina up. Their friendship resumed and it was as if the years apart had never happened.

But they had, and they had changed both girls. Christina had become stronger and

more self-assured as she'd learned to be independent at boarding school, and then later at Georgetown University where she'd majored in political science. Confident, tougher and a little bit more cynical, she'd had to grow up very fast on her own.

Jenny, on the other hand, had lost her brash, adolescent confidence and wasn't as tough as she used to be. She'd never made it to college and had married young. She'd had a baby and lived for years in an unhappy marriage until she'd mustered what courage she could to move on.

"Hey man, you listening?"

"Sorry." Christina focused on Teddy again.

"I was saying how Samco Oil, which is owned by Fido Dog Food, is pumping crude oil through old, leaking pipelines in the Russian Arctic. They're destroying the environment, man, and they don't give a shit."

"So why hasn't somebody done something about it?"

"Because it's happening in the Russian Arctic, man. Who cares about that? We just got word that the pipeline is leaking in at least twenty places... twenty damn places... and the oil is beginning to seep up through the ground. It's spreading and forming its own lakes. Can you picture that? Lakes of black crude oil." Teddy shook his head in disgust. "Mother Earth is weeping. We're killing her!"

"How long has GME been at this?" Christina asked, as she took a few more pictures of the protesters.

"Two months. We tried letters, we wrote to the papers, everything. You know, this is ten times worse than the Exxon Valdez and it's been virtually ignored by the media. This is our last resort."

"But doesn't Samco or Fido or whoever lose money if their oil is leaking out?" Christina was confused.

Teddy shook his head. "No way. They get paid for the oil they put into that pipeline, not what comes out the other end."

"But don't they care?"

"Look. The only thing these pricks care about is their precious bottom line. Gotta keep Wall Street and the shareholders happy. So what if all the fish in the Kulva River have been wiped out, it doesn't affect them."

One of the protesters called out to Teddy. "Hey, Teddy? You with us or what?"

"Yeah, I'm coming." He turned back to Christina. "Take as many pictures as you can. We appreciate anything you can do for us." He turned to walk back to the others.

Christina readjusted her lens and resumed taking her pictures. When the little guy took on big business, it always made for a riveting photo spread.

Crossing the street, she angled her camera into position to get the protestors and the dog food company in the same frame.

Click. Click. Click.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she saw something red flash by. It was a bright red Ferrari pulling into the parking lot. Who was that, she wondered? Maybe one of the bigwigs showing up for work? Who else could afford a \$300,000 car?

Christina took several pictures of the car and its occupant. Mr. Bigshot, she reasoned, would have to cross the picketers and a confrontation would probably ensue—with tension, heated words—maybe even a fistfight if she was lucky. Wouldn't that be fantastic!

Click. Click. Click.

Through her zoom lens, she could see Mr. Bigshot finally getting out of the Ferrari. Tall, dark brown hair, good build, slick suit... he turned then and Christina got a great shot of his face.

About thirty, handsome, strong jawline, gorgeous green eyes, movie star looks— holy crap! Suddenly, Christina gasped and drew in a deep breath as she recognized the face. It couldn't be. It just couldn't be him!

She took a few more pictures as he walked confidently towards the protestors. Oh God, it was him. After all these years, it was him—her nightmare from high school— Billy Havenwood! How many hellish dreams had she had of that face, that horrible, smug, arrogant face? Hundreds, thousands, even.

She may have physically changed since those first few weeks in high school, but he hadn't. Oh sure, he'd gotten bigger, taller and better looking, but it was those green eyes, those hypnotic, gorgeous, green eyes of his—she'd recognize them anywhere. And that smirk, that confident, 'I-can-do-whatever-I-want-and-get-away-with-it' smirk!

Christina's fingers were shaking, but she forced herself to continue taking pictures. She watched through her camera lens as Billy Havenwood strode through the protestors as if he hadn't a care in this world—or a care 'about' this world.

"Globalists! Rapists! You're destroying the planet!" The picketers were shouting at him. His only response was to calmly give them the finger before entering the building. He didn't even look back.

Christina finally lowered her camera and felt sick to her stomach. Here she was, an adult who was confident, strong, making it on her own—and felled by a childhood memory in one second flat. Only, he wasn't a memory, was he? He was flesh and blood real.

"Hey man, did ya get those pictures of Havenwood?" Teddy had come running across the street to where Christina was stationed.

"Y... yes."

"Alright." Teddy was obviously thrilled. He gave his fellow protestors a thumbs up sign and they started cheering.

"Y... you said his name was Haven... Haven..." She couldn't even say his name.

Teddy helped her out. "Havenwood, Bill Havenwood. His daddy owns the company."

"What?" Christina couldn't hide her shock.

"Yeah, William Havenwood Sr. owns the whole show and Billy Jr. is his only kid. Gonna get everything when the old man kicks off."

"So they're the...?"

"Yeah, the pricks who are polluting our planet."

It was all getting to be too much for Christina's brain. She was on overload and needed to get away. What if he came back, saw her and recognized her? She turned back to Teddy and covered her nervousness with a smile.

"Well, thanks for the photos and I'll see about getting you some write-ups in Streetwise." Absentmindedly, Christina gave him a polite smile before turning to walk away.

"Thanks, and the name's Teddy, man," he called after her.

Christina nonchalantly waved back as she raced to her car. She had to get back to

her apartment and download the pictures as soon as possible. She just had to see that face again. She didn't want to but she just had to.

Like picking at a scab—you just can't help yourself.

Chapter 6

Christina entered her one bedroom, fifth floor walkup apartment. As apartments went, it wasn't much—a small kitchenette to the left of a tiny living room and an even tinier bedroom. She raced to her laptop computer sitting on her desk and quickly began to download the photos.

An hour later, Christina was staring at 8" X 10" glossies of *'him'*. *'Him'* getting out of his Ferrari. *'Him'* walking through the protestors. *'Him'* giving them the finger. *'Him'* smirking.

Especially *'him'* smirking.

That bastard.

Look at him, she thought to herself. He had everything—money, position, looks—and a cold heart. He probably didn't even remember her, she'd bet on it. He'd destroyed her life in one day and he'd forgotten about it, except maybe to have a good laugh at her expense. Jenny had told her that after Christina had been sent away to boarding school, her name had never been mentioned again by anyone at Cloverdale High. She'd been discarded like used toilet paper.

But Christina had never forgotten her one-day fiasco. It had been imprinted into that part of the brain that stored childhood traumas and it had stayed with her all these years.

Just seeing Billy again this afternoon had reduced her to a jumble of nerves. She'd actually been shaking, for God's sake—she, who was tough and strong and not that shy, insecure schoolgirl anymore, had been shaking like jelly.

Christina studied the photos and suddenly her legs turned to mush again. Why was she feeling like this? What was wrong with her?

Billy Havenwood—that's what was wrong with her. She stared at his handsome, arrogant face.

"No, Billy Havenwood, you're not doing this to me again. I won't let you!" she intoned aloud.

Forcing herself to take a couple of deep breaths, she began to calm down. Why should she be the one to feel like this? Why shouldn't it be him? It should be him!

Suddenly, Christina smiled, as she made an instantaneous decision. Yup, she was going to 'get' him. She didn't know how, she didn't know when, and she didn't know where, but somehow she was going to make him feel what it was like to have your whole life ripped out from under you and turned upside down. This was going to be payback, and she owed him one—a big one.

Reaching for her black journaling book, Christina began to write her thoughts and feelings into it and immediately felt better.

Putting her pen down, she reached for one of the pictures of smug Billy Havenwood getting out of his ultra-expensive sports car.

"Look at you, Mr. Havenwood," she whispered, "You've probably never had a crushing, humiliating, soul-destroying moment in all of your privileged, rich boy life. Well, get ready because you're about to have one." A feeling of calm and strength coursed through Christina's system and her decision was made.

*

Jenny Lewis was sitting across from Christina at Sal's Sandwich Shop next door to the Streetwise Magazine office in Greenwich Village. As Christina attacked her sandwich, Jenny stared at the pictures of Billy Havenwood.

She shook her head in disbelief. "I can't believe it."

"Believe it. It's him, all right."

"You're sure he didn't see you? I mean, this one here." Jenny pointed to one where it appeared that Billy was facing the camera. "He's looking right at you."

"No, I was across the street with the zoom." Christina took a quick sip of water before resuming her lunch.

"Incredible. Billy Havenwood," Jenny mumbled. "And he still looks..." She stopped and quickly looked up at Christina.

"Say it."

Jenny let out her words in a rush. "Really, really, really hot." Christina frowned and Jenny quickly added, "For a low-life, scumbag, of course."

Her friend smiled. "His father owns the Fido Dog Food conglomerate."

"So that's where his money came from—dog food." Jenny paused, "Was Jake Monroe anywhere around?"

"No, I only saw him."

Jenny studied Christina's face. "Why aren't you more upset? Here you are, calmly eating your lunch and discussing Billy Havenwood with as much emotion as you discuss the weather. What gives?" She, of all people, knew how deeply her friend had been hurt all those years ago.

"Jenny, I'm getting even," Christina gleefully announced. "I'm going to make him pay for what he did to me."

"What? How?"

"I'm going to get some dirt on him. I'm gonna find the skeletons rattling in his closet and expose all his little secrets. You know his type always has them."

Jenny was flabbergasted. "And then what?"

"Then I'm going to turn his life upside down like he did to mine. When I'm through with him, his Achilles heel will need a podiatrist."

Jenny didn't like this at all. "And how are you going to dig up all this wonderful information? You're broke. You can't afford a private investigator."

"That's why I'm going to be my own private investigator."

"But Chrissy, you know nothing about that."

"What's there to know? All you need are the three c's—a car, a camera and a computer. By using my computer access at the Magazine, I found out where he lives. Now all I have to do is use my car and my camera and tail him. You know, find out where he goes, what he does and with whom. He'll lead me to what I need to know, I'm sure of it."

Jenny was shocked. "*You're gonna stalk him?*"

"No, I'm not," Christina defensively shouted back. "Stalking is an ugly word. Only weirdoes and psychos do that. I'm going to 'research' him, just like when I'm on assignment for the Magazine."

She chomped down on her sandwich again and smiled at her friend. Ever since she'd come up with this plan and had written all the details in her journal, she'd felt her strength return. It was time someone taught that creep, Billy Havenwood a life lesson and

she was just the girl to do it.

But Jenny was worried. Christina was her friend and she feared she'd be hurt all over again. Guys like Havenwood always had the upper hand. Their money and position ensured that.

"Chrissy, forget this idea. It's crazy."

"No."

"Yes. Listen to me. Revenge isn't the answer. When Derek left me for that other woman I wanted to hurt them both, but I realized that the best thing was to let go of all those negative feelings and move on."

"You had Taylor to think about."

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"Don't you see? The reason you saw him again today is you're being given the chance to forgive him and move on, not to go after him for justice."

"Thanks for the new age sermon, Jenny, but I thought you of all people would understand." Christina was miffed. This was not the reaction she expected to get from her best friend.

"I do understand," Jenny sighed. "I just don't want to see you get hurt again, that's all."

Christina smiled. "Don't worry. I'm smarter than he is."

But Jenny wasn't convinced. She had an awful feeling that disaster was on the way.

Chapter 7

There it was. 14025 Wickingham Drive.

Christina parked her beat-up old car under a canopy of trees down the street from the gates of the impressive thirty-room French chateau house owned by William Havenwood Sr., Bill's father. The mansion, located in Locust Valley, New York on Long Island's North Shore, was an imposing 2-1/2-story brick façade surrounded by shrubbery and tall trees. It sat on a very exclusive and very expensive 5-acre parcel of land. The entire house and grounds reeked of wealth, position and prestige.

By using the computer research facilities at Streetwise Magazine, Christina had learned that her little Billy lived here with his dad, William Sr. who was the owner and founder of the hugely successful Fido Dog Food empire. The company not only manufactured pet food but also owned other corporations, including Samco Oil. William Havenwood, a British immigrant, had started his business with nothing and had built up Fido Dog Food into one of the largest companies in the country today. It had been a true self-made-man, rags-to-riches story.

There were many business articles written about him.

There was very little written about Bill. All Christina found on the son was that he worked at Fido, was the heir apparent and his mom had divorced old William about five years ago.

Well hidden by the foliage, Christina rolled down her window and began taking pictures of the estate. It must be worth what, she thought? Ten, fifteen, twenty million? She'd read in one of the articles that the entire Fido empire had been conservatively estimated at \$1 billion dollars with the Havenwoods owning enough shares to control it. It was probably worth more.

She readjusted her camera and began to take more pictures. Suddenly, a red Ferrari came barreling from around the house. It was him! Christina could see Billy in the driver's seat. She quickly snapped more photos and her heart began to pound. Within seconds, the red car raced up the long drive and stopped at the closed gates. The gates opened magically and Havenwood sped off down the street.

This was it, time to tail the creep. Christina dropped her camera into the passenger seat and turned the key in the ignition. But nothing happened; the car wouldn't start. She tried again. The engine was trying to turn over but—again, nothing. And, oh no, he was getting away! She could see the Ferrari becoming a small, red speck in the distance. She frantically tried the key again but the car was dead.

Damn it! Christina punched the steering wheel with her fist. You know who was to blame for this? Billy Havenwood, that's who. That man was a jinx, just plain bad luck.

Disappointed and angry, Christina reached into her purse and pulled out her cell phone to call for help.

And that's how Christina spent the first day of her 'research project'. Waiting for a tow truck, underneath the blistering, hot sun, stranded on billionaire's row.

Chapter 8

Day Two.

Stakeout at 14025 Wickingham Drive. High noon.

Christina was again inconspicuously parked outside the gates of Bill Havenwood's home, waiting for her prey to emerge. She'd seen William Sr. leave in his limo at 7:30 a.m. that morning, probably on his way to the office. A tall, very distinguished and handsome gentleman of about sixty with gray hair pulled into a small ponytail at the back, Christina had recognized him immediately from a picture in Business Review. Admiring his classic features, she smiled to herself.

She could certainly see where Junior got his good looks.

As for Junior? No sign of him yet. Probably sleeping in—or should she say, sleeping 'it' off? That drunk! But what if he wasn't home? Maybe he'd spent the night elsewhere?

Christina hadn't thought of that before. She checked her watch. It read 12:03 p.m. "Give it time, Christina, give it time," she admonished herself. After all, he'd left the estate around noon yesterday, hadn't he?

Yesterday—what a disaster that had been! She'd spent the rest of the day at the garage having her car fixed and maxing out her credit card on a new alternator and battery.

Thankfully, her car was running again and she'd be able to tail him today with no problems. If only he'd show up and—wait—there he was!

The Ferrari came barreling down the drive and through the gates. Christina felt a surge of adrenaline kick start her nervous system. This was it. She said a small prayer and turned the ignition. The car started. Letting out a huge sigh of relief, Christina put the gearshift into drive and she was on her way.

*

Christina followed the Ferrari into the city. Staying a safe distance behind, she managed to keep the car in sight without being spotted—or so she hoped.

Havenwood had finally stopped outside Carbiri's, a chic, Italian restaurant on the Upper West Side. Dressed impeccably in a dark navy designer suit, he got out and handed his car keys to the valet. Confidently, he strutted into the eatery with a casual, 'I-own-the-world' type of walk that the rich instinctively did so well.

Arrogant jerk, Christina thought, as she double-parked nearby. So, he liked to have lunch at the very exclusive Carbiri's, did he? The place was such an 'in' spot that you had to book your table months in advance—if you were an ordinary person. 'Special' people like Havenwood could probably get in with one phone call and a huge tip.

Christina adjusted her camera lens and began taking pictures of the front of the building. Might as well get comfortable, she thought. These rich folk usually had three hour lunches and she'd probably be here for sometime.

Suddenly, before the valet had even had a chance to park the Ferrari, an angry Bill Havenwood came stalking back out with a tall, gorgeous redhead in tow. The mystery woman, wearing lemon-colored silk pants and matching silk shirt with her cropped short

red hair, was the epitome of high fashion and money.

“Hello, this looks interesting,” Christina mumbled, as she began clicking away with her camera. Who was this woman?

A girlfriend? Certainly not a wife. Through her research, Christina knew Havenwood was single and had never been married. Maybe she was a relative? A cousin? No, this was girlfriend behavior, Christina sensed, as she continued taking the pictures.

Suddenly, the woman said something to Havenwood that made him even angrier. She then frantically wrapped her arms around Billy’s neck and tried to kiss him. Abruptly, he pushed Miss Redhead away and said something to her that forced her to shout something back at him. Dismissing her, Havenwood walked to where the valet was holding the driver’s door open for him and got in. The Ferrari’s engine roared to life and he squealed away.

Wow! What had that been all about? Christina had managed to capture the entire scene on film and she’d analyze it later. But right now, she needed to keep her focus on that Ferrari and its rich boy driver.

Christina quickly started her car. She couldn’t lose him—no matter what. Stepping on the gas, she sped down the street and ended up three cars behind him. Being bright red, the Ferrari was easy to keep in sight.

Suddenly, he braked at the intersection ahead and turned left. It took Christina three seconds to reach the same stop sign. Looking to her left, she spotted the Ferrari making a right turn onto another street. She could still catch him, it wasn’t too late—if only the traffic wasn’t starting to get so heavy. Quickly making a left-hand turn, Christina barreled down the same street but a large van suddenly pulled out in front of her, blocking her view.

“Oh no.” She couldn’t lose him now, she just couldn’t.

Agitated, Christina rolled down her window and strained her neck, trying to look around the van. She could barely make out the red speck of a car up ahead turning left onto yet another street. At least she hadn’t lost sight of him. If only this damn van would move out of her way.

Frustrated, Christina beeped her horn but the van remained in front. Owing to the heavy traffic, she couldn’t pass it. All she could do was follow as closely as she could and pray for an opportunity to get around it. Suddenly, as the traffic lessened, the van picked up speed. Relieved, Christina did likewise. Now all she had to do was to somehow pass it.

Suddenly, the van flashed its turning signal.

“Yes.” Christina was euphoric. Triumphant, she stepped on the gas and her car surged forward. The van quickly pulled into the left lane but Christina’s jubilation was short-lived because there—directly in front of her—was the Ferrari—stopped behind a long line of cars. Shocked, Christina slammed on her brakes. Her tires squealed with effort as her car slid forward trying to stop. But she didn’t stop—and she smashed into the back of the Ferrari.

The sound of metal crashing against metal was deafening.

Christina was violently catapulted forward, saved only by her seatbelt as her car’s front end completely smashed into the backend of the Ferrari, crumpling it like an empty beer can.

The accident lasted a microsecond but to Christina it felt like an eternity—with

steel smashing against steel, glass and plastic popping and breaking.

Then silence.

Dazed, Christina let out a deep breath. Was she all right? Was she hurt? Taking a split second to feel her body, she confirmed to herself that she was fine.

“Thank God,” she whispered in relief.

Refocusing on the situation, she slowly looked up—through her cracked windshield—past her own mangled car—to see Bill Havenwood climbing out of his own twisted wreck.

And he was coming towards her.

“Oh God,” she whispered in panic. He was going to recognize her and then—Christina suddenly gasped in shock as she remembered something else.

She didn't have any car insurance.

Chapter 9

It had been such a stupid, stupid, stupid thing to do. Last month, Christina had used the money allotted for her car insurance to pay for her rent. She'd never done that before, but the funds she'd earned on a photography assignment hadn't arrived in time. Her insurance had been due but so had her rent. And she didn't have enough to pay for both. So—she chose.

She chose wrong.

Her insurance had expired and she shouldn't have been driving. But she'd been expecting that assignment check any day now and she really didn't think anything was going to happen.

Christina stared straight ahead at the damage on both cars. This accident was clearly her fault. How was she ever going to pay for all of this? Her savings were nil and her cash flow was poor—very poor. But all thoughts of money quickly evaporated when her eyes flew back to ' *him*' approaching her car.

And he was getting closer—

And closer—

And closer—

And all at once, Christina was fourteen again—that shy, scared fourteen again with everybody laughing at her—including ' *him*'. Especially ' *him*'!

Bill Havenwood stuck his head into Christina's half-lowered driver's window.

"Are you all right?" he inquired. Deeply concerned, his eyes ran over Christina's face and then down her body, looking for signs of injury. He was clearly shaken too.

Christina, with her hands still clenched on the steering wheel, slowly turned to look at him. His face was inches away and her eyes glued onto his. Did he recognize her? Did he? No—there were no sparks of recognition. Suddenly, he was speaking again.

"Are you hurt?" Worried, Bill looked her over again. "Do you feel any pain? Can you move?" he anxiously asked.

Wide-eyed and in shock, Christina just kept staring at him. His eyes were greener than she remembered, but that arrogance was still stamped on his handsome, movie star face. Or was that the confidence that came with maturity?

"Do you... know... your... name?" Bill was speaking very slowly now.

"I... I..." Christina stammered, too mesmerized to say anything else.

"You... what?" Bill tried to encourage her.

Christina just gave him another blank stare. Her brain felt like it was in a fog and she couldn't put a complete thought together. What was the matter with her? Why couldn't she snap out of it?

"That's it." Bill stepped back from the car and pulled out his cell phone. "I'm calling an ambulance." He started dialing.

As soon as Christina heard the word 'ambulance', she snapped out of her trance. She was fine and she knew she didn't need any medical attention.

"No," she blurted out.

Unbuckling her seatbelt, she reached for the handle and tried to push her door open. But the frame had been bent and the door wouldn't budge. She gave it a hard push with her hand but it was stuck.

"I don't need an ambulance," she shouted at Bill who was calling 911. "I'm fine."

She kept pushing at the door. “I’m okay.”

Bill lowered his phone and approached Christina’s car again. “What did you say?”

“I said I’m fine.” And with that, Christina gave the door one good shove with her foot. Violently, it swung open and hit Bill full on in the chest and groin area.

“Ahhhh.” Screaming, Bill dropped the phone and hunched over in extreme pain. Within seconds, he collapsed onto the pavement and curled up into a fetal position, all the while hugging his private parts.

Bewildered, Christina jumped out of her car and stood over him, looking down at his writhing, Armani-clad body.

What should she do? Help him up? Comfort him? Loosen his tie maybe? But thoughts of concern lasted only a nanosecond before she remembered who this guy was. He was her avowed enemy—the target of her revenge plan.

Suddenly, she smiled to herself. Served him right. In fact, here at her feet, was the great Billy Havenwood and she loved it. She wasn’t that gawky, insecure fourteen year-old anymore. She was a thirty year-old woman who was older, wiser—and stronger. And she was going to be the one in control of this situation from now on, not him.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, but she wasn’t one bit sorry. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, I’m... fine.” Bill whispered breathlessly, as he used her smashed car hood for leverage and slowly stood up. “I—just need a moment to catch my breath. That’s all.”

Christina bit the inside of her lip to keep from smiling. Here was the great Bill Havenwood slumped over her car hood because she had hit him—accidentally, of course—in the billionaire family jewels. Oh, who would have thought her revenge could have begun so quickly?

Suddenly, an ambulance appeared on the scene along with the police. A crowd of onlookers had circled around them by now and the emergency vehicles had a difficult time trying to get through. Christina waved at them.

“Over here. Someone’s been injured.” She pointed to Bill, who was slowly straightening up away from the car.

“No, I’m okay.” Bill limped a few steps as the paramedics came rushing over. One of them put his hand on Bill’s arm.

“Sir, where are you hurt?” he inquired.

“I’m fine, really.”

Christina butted into the conversation using her ‘concerned’ voice. “No, you’re not fine.” She addressed the paramedic. “I think he hurt...” Christina lowered her tone and pointed to Bill’s groin area, “...his package.” A few of the women onlookers snickered. None of the men did.

Bill gave an embarrassed laugh. “Nothing to worry about.” He took a few more tentative steps. “See? I’m walking it off.”

“Sir, if you’d like to go to the hospital?” The paramedic wasn’t convinced.

“No... no hospital needed, really.”

Inside, Christina was laughing to herself. Was Billy’s face actually turning red? Beet red? Yes, it was. Uncomfortable, was he? Well, she’d only just begun. She turned back to Bill.

“Maybe you should go. Have them take a look.”

Bill turned to her. “I think... you’ve done enough, thank you,” he gritted through

his teeth.

Raising her shoulders in a ‘whatever’ gesture, Christina walked to where the two cars were sandwiched together and where a police officer was already inspecting the damage. She looked down at the mangled mess. How was she ever going to pay for this?

Her junk-heap-of-a-car was totaled—a complete write-off. And his expensive red Ferrari? Well, the backend had been flattened like a tortilla—and she didn’t have any insurance to pay for any of it. But did she care? No. In fact, it was even funny. This was the funniest, damn thing she had ever seen in her life.

Suddenly, Christina burst out laughing—and she couldn’t stop. Her attitude was irresponsible, crazy and mad; she knew it. And she also knew that she’d cry about this later on, but right now, the enormity of her predicament and its consequences had been shoved to the back of her mind. She was on such a high for having got the better of Bill Havenwood that nothing else mattered. She was just going to enjoy the moment.

Bill stared at Christina in amazement. She was laughing? She was actually—laughing? He’d met some crazy women in his time, but this one was a true wacko—even if she was beautiful and attractive—and very hot.

He approached her in disbelief, still limping all the way. “What’s so funny?” he piped up.

Christina tried to stem her giggles. “Delayed shock or something.” She looked back at his car. “Sorry about your—car.” She burst out laughing again.

Bill followed her gaze and looked down at the Ferrari. For the first time since the accident, he saw the extent of the damage. Earlier, he’d been too preoccupied with whether this crazy woman had been hurt or not that he hadn’t even taken a good look, but now that he had—

“Oh my God, my car!” Bill was stunned. “Look at what you did to my car.”

Christina stopped laughing but still couldn’t help smirking. “It was an accident.”

“It’s... it’s... unbelievable!” Bill’s voice began to rise with astonishment and anger. “There must be thirty, forty thousand dollars worth of damage here.”

“What?” That wiped the smile off of Christina’s face and it suddenly wasn’t funny anymore. “You can’t be serious.”

“This is a Ferrari. Do you have any idea what repairs and parts cost on something like this?” Bill was now yelling.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Christina started to yell back.

“Oh, it was your fault, all right. I was stopped and you hit me. Where in the hell did you think you were going?”

“I... I didn’t see you. There was a van blocking my view and...”

Bill put his hands up, stemming her words. “Lady, I don’t need this today, of all days.” He looked at his watch. “Great, now I’m late too.” Angrily, he turned back to Christina. “Thanks a lot, sweetheart.” Limping back to where he had dropped his cell phone earlier, he picked it up and dialed. “Hi Charlotte, it’s me. I know I’m late but tell the old goat that I’ve just been in a car accident.” He pulled the phone away from his ear but kept talking into it. “What? I can’t hear you. The phone’s breaking up.” He slammed the phone shut, and then limped back to where Christina was standing.

Flabbergasted, Christina looked up at him. “There’s no way this’ll cost thirty, forty thousand dollars. You’re just trying to s... scare me.”

“Think so? Now why would I do that?” Bill was very irritated. This had not been

a good day for him so far and it wasn't over yet.

"Because... you're mad I ruined your stupid car and... and..." The full impact of what had happened finally hit Christina like a shovel to the face. Thirty to forty thousand dollars? It couldn't be! Where was she going to get that kind of money?

"And what? Look at it. Look at my car. You know, I think it could even go as high as fifty grand." Bill shook his head as he reached into his wallet for his driver's license.

"Fifty...?" Christina's eyes wandered back to the smashed, red metal. She was in trouble. Serious, serious trouble. Trouble like she'd never been in before. What was she going to do?

Bill looked over at Christina and saw how badly shaken she suddenly seemed to be. Maybe she had been hurt in the accident after all? He should really calm down and find out.

He didn't even know why he was yelling. Sure, his car had been smashed, but it had happened. Yelling about it and making a scene wasn't going to change anything.

His tone of voice softened and he put a comforting arm around Christina's shoulders. "Maybe you should sit down and have one of the paramedics look you over."

Christina looked at his hand touching her arm and she flinched. Billy Havenwood was actually touching her; pretending he was concerned about her welfare; pretending to be nice. What a phony!

"Hey, I don't need your sympathy," she spouted. The tough, in-control Christina was back.

Bill let go of her as if he'd just touched a hot stove. Raising his hands up in surrender, he backed off. "Sorry, it won't happen again." Miffed, he walked away to where one of the officers was standing.

Another police officer, Officer Robbins, a twenty-year veteran, approached Christina. "Ma'am, can I please see your driver's license and insurance?"

"S... sure." Christina went back to her own mangled heap and grabbed her purse. She handed her license over and waited anxiously for the next question.

"And your insurance, please?"

A huge lump of fear suddenly lodged in Christina's throat. "Well... I... don't have any." She quickly shut her eyes as if that would save her from any fallout.

Officer Robbins, who'd heard and seen everything, calmly shook his head and silently began to write in his notebook.

"Did I hear right?" Bill's voice boomed through Christina's thoughts. Slowly, she opened her eyes to see him standing in front of her with his arms folded over his chest.

"You don't have any insurance?" he asked again incredulously.

Christina squeaked out a little, "No."

With anger flashing from his green eyes, Bill turned to Officer Robbins, "I'm not paying for this."

"Sir, please calm down."

"This wasn't my fault."

"Sir, please."

Bill shut up and Officer Robbins walked away to his squad car to call into dispatch.

Taking in a calming breath, Bill stared at Christina. "Who doesn't have

insurance? Everybody has insurance. You can't drive without insurance."

"I was going to pay it but I didn't have enough money. Somebody like you..." Christina gave him a disgusted up and down appraisal, "... would never understand that."

"Oh, I understand, all right. I understand you should have been taking the bus." She couldn't argue with him there—but she was going to anyway. "I don't appreciate your tone of voice."

Stupefied, Bill laughed out loud. "Tough." This was one crazy, beautiful loony bird, he thought to himself.

Christina raised her chin in defiance. "In fact, I think you owe me an apology." "I owe you what?"

"An apology for your rude behavior just now." Christina knew she was pushing it too far but she wasn't going to let him get the better of her no matter what she had to say.

Bill shook his head as if to get the cotton balls out of his ears. "You want me to apologize to you? To you?"

"Yes." "Honey, it ain't gonna happen." Bill couldn't believe her gall. If he weren't so angry, he'd almost have to admire her. "Let me ask you something? What do you do for a living?"

"What's it to you?" "I'm just curious how you're going to pay for this disaster." Bill pointed to the wreckage.

Christina held her head up proudly. "I'm a photographer."

"Like for babies and puppies?" "No, I'm on assignment right now for Streetwise." "What's that?"

"It's a local magazine." "Streetwise? Isn't that the newspaper you get at clubs—for free?" Bill emphasized the word 'free' as if it disgusted him. He shook his head. "A starving artist with no money. Well, I guess my insurance company will be suing you for damages then."

"Probably." Christina lifted her nose in defiance. "Oh—you can bet your sweet little ass they will." Suddenly, he flashed her a confident smile, giving her the same head-to-toe appraisal she'd given him moments earlier.

"That's something I never bet, Mr...?" Christina pretended not to know his name. "Havenwood. Bill Havenwood."

Admiration and interest kept shining in Bill's eyes as he studied Christina. She may be exasperating but she had spunk and that intrigued him. As a matter of fact, a lot about this woman had instantly intrigued him and he didn't know why.

She was pretty, but he knew lots of pretty girls. She was smart—he could tell. But so what? He knew lots of smart girls too. No—there was something original and unique about her, an almost Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde quality. One second, she seemed to be innocent and naïve—and the next cunning and strong. He couldn't figure her out. But whatever it was, he liked it. He liked it a lot.

He gave her another rakish smile. "And you are?" Bill let the question hang in the air.

“I’m what?” Christina played dumb. What a jerk! He was actually flirting with her.

“Your name? What’s your name?” He asked again.

Suddenly, Christina’s heart started pounding against her ribs. Her name, what if he recognized her name? Then he’d know she was that little nobody from high school. But wait! So what if he recognized her? It could just be a coincidence, right? Two former schoolmates meeting by accident—literally. And he’d never in a million years figure out that she’d actually been following him. Besides, her name would be on the police report anyway—

“You don’t know your name?” Bill teasingly prodded.

“Christina. Christina Matteo.”

There, she’d said it. Did he remember her now? Christina searched his face for any spark of recognition, but there was none. Her name hadn’t rung a bell in that alcohol-damaged brain of his at all. She refocused on what he was saying.

“Well, Christina Matteo, you’ll be hearing from my insurance company.” He smiled then—that smile someone gives you when they know they’ve got you cornered.

Christina shot him a dirty look. “I’m in the book,” she decreed, before turning to leave.

“You’d better get a good one. A lawyer, I mean.”

She turned to glare at him. He was smiling again—that damn, superior smile. Boy, she’d love to smack that off his face.

Coyly, she smiled at him. “Are you going to sue me for personal injury too?”

“What?”

“In case ‘it’s’ not working.” Christina pointed to his private parts.

The smug look was instantly wiped off of Bill’s face. “Don’t worry your pretty little head. Everything’s fine down there,” he announced proudly.

“Well, I did hit you very hard and I’ve read that when that happens to a man, he may not be able to—function properly. But it’s nothing to be embarrassed about. It happens to a lot of men,” Christina gave him her best fake smile of concern. Take that, you lowlife, she thought.

Bill returned her smile and limped closer. He leaned into her face and whispered, “I’m not worried. Know why? Because it’s—functioning—right now, thanks to you, Ms. Matteo. You can take a look, if you don’t believe me.”

Christina glowered into his green eyes as he continued to smile at her with those perfect white teeth of his. The cad! He was enjoying this and getting turned on by the game—her game—and getting turned on by her.

She was repulsed. “Mr. Havenwood, I wouldn’t turn you on if I was on fire and you were the nearest faucet.”

He laughed then—a good, hearty, laugh. He was truly enjoying himself. Christina thought that last crack would have insulted him, but it hadn’t.

Damn it. Well, she wasn’t going to stand here and spar with this creep any longer. Dismissing him, she turned and walked to the police cruiser. But she could hear his laughter following her—just like all those years ago—and it sent chills down her spine.

Christina approached Officer Robbins. “Excuse me, but his car? Can that really be fifty thousand dollars worth of damage?”

The officer looked back to the accident scene. “Probably.”

Christina bit her lip hard. So Havenwood hadn't been lying. Where was she going to get that kind of money?

The colossal jam she was in finally registered in Christina's brain and she suddenly felt faint. Not only was she now without a car herself, but she owed all that money for his car too? She should never have started this revenge thing. Never. It had been a big mistake. But at least he hadn't remembered her. She was pretty sure of that. But Christina didn't know whether to feel relieved or insulted. Had she been that forgettable?

Bill Havenwood had gotten the better of her in the past.

He had done it again today—for the second time in her life.

Chapter 10

In the end, Christina was charged with careless driving and driving without insurance. And as for the damages to Havenwood's Ferrari? She'd been told by Officer Robbins that she would probably be taken to court and have her wages garnished for a very long time. She'd then avoided Havenwood while the tow trucks were removing the mangled cars and had taken pictures of the accident scene with her camera. After all, they might help her in court.

Christina had felt his eyes on her the whole time she was shooting the frames, but she didn't acknowledge him with a look of her own. She just couldn't deal with him anymore that day. She'd had enough.

After finishing her film and without so much as a backward glimmer, she caught a cab to the Streetwise Magazine office. She needed to speak to Jenny. She'd know what to do and what to say to make Christina feel better.

*

"You did what?" Jenny's eyes bulged out as Christina recounted the days' events. The two were sitting in the small lunchroom having a coffee.

"I didn't mean to."

"Chrissy, oh my God!"

"It's not that bad."

"It's bad."

Christina's face fell. "I know. And no I-told-you-so's, okay?"

Jenny studied her friend's dejected face and her tone of voice softened. "If you needed money for insurance, why didn't you come to me?"

"Because it's embarrassing and I'm not borrowing money from you. Besides, you're barely making it yourself and you've got Taylor."

"I knew this was going to lead to disaster. I had a feeling."

"Why don't you think he remembered me?"

"Chrissy, you were only at that school for three weeks before you left. It's probably not even listed on your school records."

"But what he did to me...?"

"Listen, you look different now and Havenwood was drunk twenty-four seven. I doubt he'd remember the name of that school, let alone you."

"I guess you're right."

"You sound disappointed." Jenny was trying to figure out what was going on in Christina's brain.

"Jenny, no way. You know how I feel about him." Christina took a gulp of her coffee without even tasting it. She wasn't disappointed. She hated that man. How could Jenny even think that?

"All I know is that you're not indifferent to him. And one thing my marriage to Derek taught me is that the opposite of love is indifference, not hate. Love and hate are actually this close." Jenny brought her index finger and thumb together in front of her face.

Christina suddenly burst out laughing. "Me? In love with rat bastard, Havenwood? You're crazy." Trust Jenny. She could always be counted on to bring a

smile to your face. Christina sobered a little. “Jenny, what am I going to do? I don’t have that kind of money.”

“First thing, get some legal advice. I’ll give you the number for Stanley Moore, the lawyer we use here at the magazine. Second thing—you are giving up your revenge plan, right Chrissy?”

Christina thought about it for a second. Should she?

“Chrissy!” Jenny was shocked at her friend’s silence.

“Yes, yes, it’s over. I don’t want to even hear Bill Havenwood’s name again. The whole thing was a huge mistake.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it.” Jenny was afraid for her friend. This wasn’t over yet and she feared that when it was, Billy Havenwood would hurt Christina all over again.

For her part, Christina didn’t say anything to Jenny about Havenwood making a pass at her. It was too ridiculous to even think about. He was just being a man.

