

Carrots and Celery Chapter One
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Date: Tue, 17 Dec 2002 22:29:41 -0600

"I love you Carrots."

In his sleep?! The first time I get to hear him say he loves me and I can't even say it back? How much does that suck.

I lie in the dark for a minute feeling pissed off until my idiot brain processes the fact that it doesn't matter WHEN he said it, just that he has. Knowing me, what happens next is no big surprise. He loves me, but how? Obviously he loves me - we've been best friends since the first grade. What I need is for him to be IN love with me.

Hmmm. You're probably a tad confused right now. Since I'm just lying here awake doing nothing anyway, let me explain some stuff. First of all, who picked up that I was just referred to as Carrots a minute ago? I'm assuming the usual guesses have been made. Crazy parents, orange hair, a talking vegetable. Okay. Yes, my parents are crazy (I say that with love!) but they didn't name me Carrots. My hair is NOT orange. It's some much debated shade existing between black and brown. Some people say it's dark brown, others swear it's black. Who cares really. Finally, I am not in actuality a carrot. This is not that kind of a story.

Technically, my name isn't Carrots, (who got the hint about it not being what my parents named me?) but it might as well be. I swear, I've forgotten my own 'real' name. There have been moments. No one who knows me calls me anything but Carrots. Not even my GRANDPARENTS. Teachers call me Carrots. A few of them are pricks and call me Mr. Vasskez - no other option really. They won't call me Carrots and I won't respond to my other name. Not cause I'm difficult or anything, like I said, I honestly forget sometimes. That other name is simply not me. In my head I think of myself as Carrots Vasskez.

Basically, I've been Carrots as long as I remember, or at least, becoming Carrots is one of the first things that I remember in any detail. Here's how it started. I was six, and I thought I was the shit, cause I had this super cool Ninja Turtles lunchbox. Plus, big boy that I was, I got to walk to my elementary school half a block away all by myself. I bet you're impressed. You should be. The morning was a bust. Nobody really talked to me, even though I was an adorable and charming child (or so my aunts and grandmothers were always telling me, while they pinched my cheeks). I was getting pretty pouty and was seriously considering a little temper-tantrum action by the time lunch rolled around. Even at six, I knew sitting alone at lunch was seriously uncool. This was not going to happen to me, so I plunked myself down by a cute (I swear, I remember thinking that he was

cute) kid who was sitting alone at one of the little round kiddie tables. Clearly, he had not been informed about the dangers of a solo first lunch hour. Turns out, that was just about the best decision of my life to date. Giving in to peer pressure is so misunderstood. This kid and me, well, we got to talking in that easy way you do when you're young and aren't all prejudiced yet. Not that kids aren't mean. Like kids are brutal. Take it from someone who still vividly remembers elementary school. But still, we hit it off right away.

While we were talking, we were eating our lunches (you know, it being LUNCH HOUR an all) and like the self-respecting knee biters that we were, we ate our desserts first. I had pudding, and he had cookies. I realise that the fact that I remember that is kind of freakish, but what we ate that lunch is very important. Everything about that lunch gave me memory burn. Eventually we got around to the 'healthy' component of our mom packed meals. I know what you're thinking. I had carrots right? Nope. Sorry. Please try again. My mom is a sweet and terrific women, but she's crap at remembering the foods her children like. Poor dear, there are 5 of us. Who has five kids anymore anyway these days? My crazy parents, that's who. Anyway, she packed me celery. Which I hate, with a passion. To me, it just tastes like water and leaves a gross film in your mouth when you're done. I was frowning at my little bag of celery pretty hard, and my cute lunch-mate was doing the same at his Tupperware full of baby carrots. Our eyes met, it was one of those defining moments. I picked up my bag; he picked up his Tupperware.

"Carrots?" He said, holding them out to me.

"Celery?" I offered, doing the same. We grinned, and traded. I ate his carrots and he ate my celery. Our mothers would be so proud, we'd eaten our vegetables. We grinned at each other again. That was it. We were best friends.

When lunch was over, we threw out our trash (Take Pride Manitoba!) and headed back to our classroom. We'd never bothered to introduce ourselves during lunch, (there had been food to be eaten, Ninja Turtles to be discussed! Matters of FAR greater importance...) so at one point when I needed to get his attention I said, "Hey Celery," right back he'd said, 'yeah Carrots', and the rest, as they say, is history.

Oh and just so you know, I DO know Celery's given name. But the same way mine's not me, and Carrots is, Celery is who he is. To new people, it sounds weird. It's hard for them to get used to. People do though, and you will too. They have to, cause when they try to call us our other names, half the time we look around with everyone else, thinking: who are they talking to? So get over it. I'm Carrots. He's Celery. That's who we are. Simple as that. No big deal.

Our lunch swaps ran smoothly until one night at supper when my mom tried to get me to eat celery and I flatly refused. She was confused. Didn't I always eat my celery at lunch? She thought I loved celery. No, I explained. Celery always ate my celery. Celery? For the next 15 minutes my whole family was convinced I had concocted an imaginary friend named Celery and had probably been throwing out my green sticks. It was especially difficult to explain, cause back then, I didn't know Celery's real name. We'd never told each other, and when you're really young, that kind of thing catches on fast, and everybody in our class was already calling us Carrots and Celery, our teacher Mrs. Pailey included. She was a really nice woman. Plus I think she was trying to be nurturing to Celery. I didn't know it then, but he has kind of a shitty family situation. Not like you really talk about that kind of thing when you're six. Took me awhile, but I did finally manage to convince the fam' that there really was a kid named Celery, and that I fed him my celery in exchange for his carrots. By the time they believed me, everyone thought it was pretty funny. My siblings (Kyle 18, Kara 11, David and Jon 14) laughed, well, Kara didn't, she was like a baby then, and my parents had little amused parental smiles on their faces. Kyle was the one who started it in my house. Of all of that lot, I'm closest to Kyle. It's an age thing, but we also plain like each other. He's solid. And we share a sense of humour. More points in his favour, he's always been excellent to Celery. If anyone messes with him, I blacklist them for life. I'm not a fighter (I hope to be more of a lover one of these days, ha, ha) but I'm pretty alright at the verbal assaults game. Basically, I'm a smart-ass. That's probably a shock for you, but hey. Life's fucking full of surprises.

Sharing lunches tends to bring people together, at least in my experience. By third grade, Celery was spending every Friday night at my place, all Saturday and usually Saturday night too if our busy social lives didn't have us otherwise engaged. When you're little, you may not understand the 'big picture' and everything, but that doesn't mean I was stupid. I knew Celery didn't much like being at home. He has crazy parents, too, but not in the cool way my parents are crazy. Sure the olds embarrass me on a semi-regular basis, but they're the most loving, supportive parents you could hope for. My mom's a bit over-protective (by a bit I of course mean insanely so) but that's okay. It pisses me off at times, but I know her craziness just makes her think discipline and setting limits means she loves me and wants me safe. What're ya gonna do about a mom like that anyway.

Celery's mom's another story. Crazy in a bad way. Unstable. The oldest story in the book, young mom, left by her equally young husband right after the baby pops out, struggles on her own for awhile before she marries jerk-wad. They don't beat him (and I swear if his step-father Doug ever once tried to touch Celery, non-fighter or not, the guy'd be dead right now), they're just really mean to him. When they're not ignoring him. It sounds pretty harsh, but they don't want him. I don't know quite if it's a

bad or good thing, but Celery's pretty much always known it. At least it's helped him deal early on you know? He's not like in denial thinking they love him and that people who love you are supposed to treat you like crap. Doug and Celery's mom Debbie have had a couple more kids, and it's like they're a family, and Celery's just this kid who lives in their house. Usually, he doesn't even eat with them. I know lots of families don't eat together, but Doug, Debbie and the two little steps all do. Celery either eats alone later or comes over to my house. What's one more kid, my moms always saying. He's pretty close with my mom and my dad, so luckily at least Celery knows he's loved. That he has people he can count on, a little stability. He's got some issues, but frankly, everyone does. I think he could have gotten screwed up really bad if it wasn't for my parents. Now you know why I think they're so cool.

You're probably thinking that the fact that we're best friends means we have tons in common. Wrong again my friend. If we hadn't hooked up so young, chances are we wouldn't know each others names very good for totally different reasons. See, Celery is a jock. Okay, he's the sweetest, shyest, kindest jock you'll ever meet, but he's still a jock. Like, he had muscles when he was 8. EIGHT! He's not really into the big 'jock' sports though. Celery's more of a basketball, volleyball, track kind of a guy. Volleyball's his passion though, the other stuff he sort of does to keep in shape. Keep in shape. Seriously. He says stuff like. And he talks about muscle tone, and he does 'lifting'. I'm his spotter, but I'm a skinny runt, so I probably won't end up being of much use if he ever happens to require my assistance. My thing is school. I actually like it. The work part of it comes easily to me (I'm one of those annoying people who never has to study that everyone hates) and I guess you could say I'm like 'class clown'. That's a way lame title though. I merely enjoy brightening my classmates day with a little humour. I guess I'm not really a runt either, not exactly. In fact, I'm pretty tall. I'm gangly though. Long arms and legs that made me look really ridiculous before the rest of my body caught up a year or two ago. My looks are pretty dark, that brown or black hair, same problem with the eyes, and I tan super easily. Celery's the day to my night. He has beautiful straw coloured hair that's really thick and soft. Since we were about 11 he's been wearing this orange cap constantly (one of the only times his excuse for a mother paid him any attention was harassing him to take it off for the first few months before she started ignoring that too) and his hair poofs out the sides, flipping up kind of. It sounds ridiculous, but take it from me, it's totally cute and gorgeous. He's got sensational eyes. They're hard to explain. I like to think of them as the ocean. When he's happy, they turn a light blue and positively sparkle, when he's upset or nervous, they get more grey and stormy. Relaxed, they hover at some beautiful shade in between.

In school, I'm pretty much good at everything (I'm not bragging, look at my test scores fool) except maybe math, but what I like is history and Biology and people stuff. World Issues, that kind of thing. I'm also on the

debate team. I'm junior yearbook editor. I kick-ass at public speaking. All you gotta do to not be nervous is be confident you're better than everyone in the audience. Sounds terrible, but it works. Believe me. Celery likes nothing but math. I don't mean he's good at it, though he is, I mean he **LIKES** it. I swear, I've seen him doing math for fun. **FUN**. Our current math teacher, Mr. Mac, sometimes gives him extra work, over **VACATION**. Just 'for fun'. And he does it. I don't understand it. I'm not mentally capable of understanding it, but hey, to each his own eh?

Because of our different interests and strengths, other than being each others best friend, we don't really share any common friends. I've got nothing against his friends, and vice versa, but I'm not exactly going call up his friend Brian and be like, 'hey bro, wanna come over and read with me?' and Celery is no more likely to invite my buddy Alex over to shoot some hoops with him. Don't think that's stops us though. We do have those other friends I mentioned, and more, but they don't really matter. I care about them and everything, but no one counts like Celery does. He comes first always if I'm making plans for the weekend or after school or whatever. It's been like that since day one. We share lots of other things, of the strange and unconventional variety, and what's more, we really compliment each other. We include each other in our different interests and activities. For example, I used to play basketball with him all the time, and he does more intellectual stuff with me. We make the effort because we care about each other, because we have more fun when we're together, and what we're doing tends to take a back seat to that.

Being kind of shy, especially around people he doesn't know, Celery's a pretty quiet guy. I, on the other hand, happen to be a very **LOUD** guy. If I'm nervous, I get crazier than normal. Especially when I'm meeting new people or whatever. It's like, I'm going to put my absolute craziest foot forward, and if you still like me afterwards it's cool and we can be friends. If not, then it won't really work out since I'm bound to get like this eventually anyway at some point, and if you can't handle it now, chances are you won't be the biggest fan next time either. That's another way we compliment each other though. I help being out Celery's inner 'crazy' and he calms me down. Celery's about the only person I can just **BE** around. No talking or moving or anything. We spend a lot of time together in silence. Especially this last year. Probably, I think, cause we've both had a lot to say we haven't been ready to, and so instead of saying a bunch of other crap that isn't what we're feeling, we've just stayed quiet.

If I'd have to pin point it, I'd say I knew I was in love with Celery when we were in grade 7. I think I loved him before that, but I was in grade 7 when I finally clued in. Girls did it. They were all the rage. Everyone wanted one; the cool guys got one. It was the cool new thing to do. All it did was freak me out. I didn't (and don't) understand it. Seeing all my other friends drifting away and chasing after girls only made me want to hold on tighter to Celery. It took me a few months, but eventually I

realised it was because he was all I needed in more ways than one. That he was the perfect package. A complete. I knew I wanted him for everything. Best friend, soulmate, that I'd known for ages, but I was suddenly realising I wanted to kiss him. And hold his hand. And have him love me. Gay didn't bother me. That was sort of like, 'okay, whatever'. I'm lucky, I know. But my parents are very relaxed about that kind of thing. I came out to them when I was 13 and they were all 'Gay Pride!'. Started going to PFLAG and shit. Still, it was pretty cool of them. Having their support is awesome. So gay was no problem. Being in love with my best friend was a problem. Admittedly, it's not an especially unique problem, but I didn't know that at the time. I freaked out for awhile. I didn't flip out on Celery or anything - I internalised my confusion and fear. After that while passed though, I started to understand that in love with him or not, he was still the greatest. We still had as much fun together as always. The other thing I wasn't going to let get in the way of that. My feelings didn't change, I just shelved them.

I have to admit, the girls at my school are pretty cool. They don't all go for jocks. A lot of them actually do like that 'smart, funny' guy you're always reading about in magazines. Cool for my friends, kind of dangerous for me. Since I'm also deviously handsome and all. My only defence was playing up the immaturity, and playing the friends card a million times. I can't really believe I haven't gotten busted. I haven't had a single date or girlfriend my entire highschool or junior highschool career - or, ever, for that matter - and I'm in 11th grade. But no one's figured it out. Or if they have, no one's shared it with me or anyone else. Lucky again I guess. Celery's had his shot with a fair number of ladies too. Girls in my school also go for the 'sensitive jock' type. And he really IS handsome and all that. I'm not alone in thinking this. They guy's a freaking knock-out. Oh, and plus he skateboards. I think I forgot to mention that. Me too actually. It's one of those things we do together that I was talking about. I'm okay (all right, I suck) but of course, Celery excels at it. Mostly I sit on the curb or whatever, watching him, shouting stuff and snapping pictures or sketching. I like to draw by the way. He scares me sometimes when he skates. He's pretty reckless. It makes for some wicked shit, but he's fucked himself up bad a few times. I can't try to make him stop though. He loves it too much, and he looks too hot when he's doing it. What's even better is afterwards, when he'll flop down beside me in a sweaty mass, wipe his forehead and all cute and proud say something like, 'did you see me land that 360?'

It wasn't until I was about 14 that I actually got wise. Till I finally noticed Celery looked at me with the same dumb, lovesick eyes I did him. Noticed that he stayed far away from girls too, that on the nights of dances and stuff he was always especially eager to do something 'just with you Carrots'. That every time some girl some a serious crush on him, he'd come running to me, complaining about a physco stalker and practically hiding behind me whenever said stalker was in the general vicinity. Being

the denial ridden, worrier, doubter, pessimist that I am, for a month or so after my little realization I was sure I was just projecting my feelings onto him. But the fact was, Celery was even more obvious about it than me. I think because he hadn't realised yet. What I knew at 12, Celery hadn't gotten at 14. He felt okay touching me a lot, putting his arm around my shoulders when we were sitting or even standing close together, being exclusive and loving because he didn't understand what he was doing. It scared and thrilled me at the same time. I'd loved him for two years (probably longer) never thinking he'd feel the same, never expecting or barely hoping for that, and suddenly there it was in front of me. He loved me too. Except he didn't know it, and I was afraid he never would - that he'd never say it, never realise it, never go beyond the closeness caused by his innocent oblivion. I was also afraid that if or when he DID realise, he wouldn't embrace it the way I had. I feared that he'd freak out and run away. Not because I thought he was homophobic, just cause I'm insane, irrational and etceteras. I just hoped that if he did freak out and run, he would only go far enough for me to catch him, bring him back and let me love him.

We were 15 when I started to suspect he knew. The touches became way less common, and he met my eyes less. Our friendship didn't change, and our closeness didn't change much either, but I did feel Celery pull away a bit. As much as I hoped and rationally did assume this meant he knew what he felt for me, but thought I didn't feel the same and didn't want to like violate me, the other part of me was afraid again. My fear existed on two levels. First, I thought maybe he knew, but didn't enjoy this new found tid bit about himself and was trying to get over it. On a completely different track all together, I thought maybe that more physical bond had been like a 'youth' thing, maybe even (gasp!) a phase he was going through. He didn't start dating, which probably saved my few remaining scraps of sanity, and when he did look at me (though less frequently) I saw the same love. There was pleading in his ocean eyes too. I wasn't sure about all of it, but I knew part of it was 'love me too' and probably also, 'I'm scared Care, you have to go first. Please go first.' Problem was I was afraid too. Those levels. So we've both stayed silent.

Until now. We've been building up to this. It's been going on for months. Whenever we were together I could feel it. We've been getting close. I'd started thinking of it as just a matter of time. I wasn't sure what it would be. Would we get drunk and confess to each other? Would one of us finally get really scared and try something with a girl, pissing off the other, until we had a fight about that and blurted it out in the heat of battle? Would we share some romantic moment, stare into each other eyes and simultaneously declare our love? This was how it worked in the stories I read, this was what I assumed was supposed to happen. I did NOT expect him to tell me in his fucking SLEEP. But damn. I'm pretty sure lovers can't be choosers. Not hopeless ones like me. Of course now I have to do something about it. I've heard it, all doubts should be banished. When

morning comes though, I'm not sure what I'll do.

THWACK!

"Bastard, I'll get you for that!" I'm not big on getting up by being smacked with a pillow. Especially not when I've spent half the night revisiting practically my entire freaking life.

Squatting at the end of my bed, grinning and going unharmed, Celery only laughs. "Sure, sure Care. Whatever you say." I shake my head.

"Are you never going to grow up?" Still grinning, he drops down onto his side next to me, and actually has the gall to tweak my nose.

"I'm like a Toy's R Us kid and shit. We don't go for that sort of thing." I roll my eyes, but he's already earned his forgiveness by lying so close beside me, dopey smile on his face. I sigh. It's so obvious we're both loving this. Why can't one of us just say it already. Why can't I, when I'm 99% sure he'll say it back. It's that stupid 1%. I'm so afraid he'll run, and it's paralyzing me. I turn over onto my back, putting a little space between us.

"Okay. So other than physically abusing me, what would you like to do today?" My eyes are open, staring at my ceiling. The glow in the dark stars we put up together we soon as we were tall enough to reach the ceiling standing on my bed are still there. That's the problem. We've had too many good times. I can't stand the idea of losing that even for a second. Celery's gone to his back too, so our sides are pressed together down the length of our bodies. He's rubbing his foot against mine, but that's an unconscious thing he does, so don't get excited.

"Want to just hang out here? We can rent movies or something," he says it like it's not what we do almost every Saturday. He abruptly sits up and peaks out the window holding back my curtains. He faces me again. "I think it's going to rain." I smile. It's sappy, I know, but simply being around him makes me smile. Everything he does pretty much makes me happy, endears him more to me. Every gesture, every look. You've heard the line before. Not perfect - perfect for me.

"Sure. I've got some coin, so movies on me this time. What are we in the mood for?" Time given for contemplation.

"Greatest hits."

When Celery speaks, when he makes up his mind, he's confident and clear. He's not wishy-washy, not once he's made up his mind. It can take him

awhile to get there, but he's solid once he's committed himself to something. I'm like too in a way. Or maybe I mean I'm sort of the reverse of that. I'll explain, and you can decide for yourself. It can take me a long time to adjust to new things, but I tend to make my mind up quicker and then freak out later while I'm trying to deal with the realities of my decision. Another thing you should know about Celery is that he's a really honest guy. Like, he doesn't volunteer much, and he's not one to randomly blurt stuff out, but if you ask him about something, he won't lie. The expression painfully honest definitely comes into play sometimes, but it's usually a good thing. At least it means you can trust him to mean whatever he says and he's not a mean guy either, so that helps.

Ooo, I get to say it don't I? Here it comes... but I digress. I do that a lot. Oh so you didn't notice eh? Think you're funny huh? Well nobody's laughing.

Greatest hits means OUR greatest hits. All of our favourite movies. No, 'this sounds good' or 'so bad it's worth it for the mock value' or 'theme night!' It's also a good blast from our past. To be a greatest hit, we have to both love it, and we have to have loved it for at least two years. Our greatest hits are like comfort food. It's stuff like 'The Breakfast Club', 'Better off Dead' and especially 'The Princess Bride'. Oldies but goodies and all that jazz.

"Okay," I say patting his leg quickly and sitting up. He does too, our shoulders rub together. We turn and smile at each other. There's a second and I think I might kiss him, but I chicken out like always and hop enthusiastically out of bed. "You want first shower or should I go ahead?" He grins.

"You DO take up all the hot water, and you'll probably make a big mess," teasingly. "But you go first anyway. I'll put roll up my sleeping bag and the mat and everything."

"Feeling generous?" He shrugs.

"I DID attack you with a pillow earlier. I'm just trying to get back on your good side." I laugh and ruffle his hair. I LOVE doing that. It's so thick and soft. Plus, it like stays messed up for ever or until he fixes it, which he hardly ever bothers to do, and there's nothing cuter than Celery with messy hair. The rub is that he often just puts his hat right over the lovely mess, so I don't usually get to enjoy it for long.

"10 years and you haven't managed to get off it, fool." He grins.

"I know." Gloating.

"That could always change however," failing attempt at a serious tone.

"Shower Care."

"Yeah, yeah yeah."

Back from the shower I find him kneeling on an only half made up bedroll, looking distracted, disturbed.

"Hey, what's up?"

"What?" Jerking away from whatever daydream he was in.

"Ready to take your shower?" He finishes the job quickly and stands up.

"Yep. You were quick." I was in there for over 15 minutes. That's not quick. Something is up. I have no chance of getting it out of him now though, not with shower as the perfect excuse. It'll have to wait. I thumb to the door and he heads out, clothes in a bundle clutched at his stomach.

Saturdays belong to us. The twins have soccer practice in the morning and always hang out with their team-mates in the afternoon, Kara spends Friday and Saturday with her best friend Sue, and Kyle, big college man that he is, usually tends to be out partying on Friday and sleeps over where the party was at. Mom and dad both have to leave at some outrageous hour like 3am, because our family owns an organic bakery (I TOLD you my parents were crazy, is it my fault you didn't believe me?) and on Saturdays they're the only bakers. For like pie day and stuff my dad's brother James also bakes, but Saturday's they're alone. Believe me, when you live in a house with 6 other people, a little privacy is a very big deal.

Celery's clean and cute and sprightly out of the shower.

"Hungry?" I ask.

"Yeah, breakfast or lunch?" We're too cool for brunch.

"Breakfast, less work. Cereal or what?" We've started down the stairs.

"Cereal's good."

Breakfast is a quiet affair. The same heavy silence that's been there for months. He's better at it than me, and I break it first.

"Want to walk to Update or should we drive to Blockbuster?"

"Let's walk," this from the boy who only moments ago suggested we stay inside because it looked like rain.

"Yeah okay." I know it probably seems like I'm this total pushover and that I just go along with whatever he says, but I can be extremely stubborn and bull-headed when I want to be. The thing is, if I don't really care either way, I'm not going to make a fuss about something just for the sake of argument.

We walk, and it doesn't rain. But before we're even in the store Celery gets a really disgusted and frightened look in his eyes and turns to walk away. I grab his elbow.

"Hey, where are you going?" He jerks his head at the window displaying the New Releases section, and I take a closer look. Along with a couple of other girls, I see Meghan Toback. She's his most recent and determined admirer.

"So?" He gets a pained expression on his face, his eyes cloud.

"Please Carrots. I don't want to go in there. They'll want to talk to us and then I bet Meghan will try to invite herself over to hang out with us." His tone and his eyes are begging me. Tell me why then damnit! Why don't you want to talk to girls?!

"Don't worry about it. Come on, we came all this way." We go in, Celery resembling a kicked-puppy. It's enough to break my heart, but he has to learn to fight his fears a little. Girls are a problem for us, like it or not. They live among us. He has to deal.

Once inside I notice that along with Meghan, Cherrie Livingston is here. She's got a crush on me. And we've never been friends, so I'm not doing too great a job at keeping her at bay. Glancing over at him, I realise Celery's glaring at Cherrie and not even looking at Meghan. He's feeling threatened, no doubt about it. Oh wow. I smile.

"We're in, we get the movies, we're out. Nobody gets hurt." He grins back at me, looking relieved.

Along with the other three I mentioned earlier, we get choose '16 Candles' over 'Groundhog's Day' but agree to have a Bill Murphy Fest the next Saturday. The girls don't spot us until we're standing in line. They'd been occupied deciding between 'She's All That' and 'Whatever It Takes'. Tough choice.

"Oh HI..." For some reason, Cherrie's been trying to figure out my real name for weeks. I don't know why, I guess because she doesn't fancy calling her future boyfriend Carrots.

"Hi," I say in a bored tone. I can almost FEEL Celery beaming at me and I

don't have to look to know he's grinning. We can't go getting outed though, so I kind of hope Meghan thinks it's cause she's around, even though I don't much want to encourage her.

"What are you guys doing?" I hold up the movies and raise my eyebrows. They giggle.

"Yeah, but like what are you watching and what are you doing afterwards and stuff," Celery's clamped up at my side. I'm on my own. Yet again.

I show her the titles. "It'll take us awhile with breaks and stuff, but we should be done by the evening," Their eyes light up, but Celery's are a stormy grey. I quickly put him out of his misery, "But I think we'll probably do some skating after that," he relaxes. Mostly he needs to know I don't want to do anything with them, I think.

"We could watch couldn't we?" Damn. Give up already.

"I kind of like skating alone actually," Well, well, well. Give the guy a cigar.

"But you're going together...?"

"Yeah, but Carrots doesn't count. He skates WITH me. I don't really like having an audience." Liar. He's LOVES it when I watch him skate. Though on second thought, he's never wanted anyone else to come with us, and he doesn't much like skating at school on the track with the others skaters at lunch, so maybe it's only me he doesn't mind watching him.

"Okay, well, um, have fun," Disappointed but beaten (for now) the girls say goodbye and leave us alone.

Outside, once we've paid. "Thanks," I smile.

"For?" He shrugs.

"For not ditching me for Cherrie," Whoa. That's a big revelation, that's an almost unprecedented declaration of worry. I flip off his hat, catch it, and hit him with it. It's this thing that I do.

"Never." He grins. "Not in a million years."

We watch the movies snuggled up under the same blanket on my couch. After the Cherrie Incident, Celery's sweet and cuddly. I'm glad to have been able to make him happy so easily, but I still wish more could have come of it. What he said last night is wearing heavily on my mind. I also need to ask him about what was wrong this morning. A ways through 'Better Off Dead' Celery laughs at something, but I'd been too distracted and, not

paying attention, had missed it. He grabs the remote and pauses the movie.

"Are you okay?" Hand on my chest. Just leave it there and I'll be fine, I think to myself.

"Yeah, I'm all right. Preoccupied. That's all," he tenses, looks frightened.

"Are you thinking about Cherrie?" I laugh, he's confused. I put my arm around him, and squeeze firmly. How much more blatant can you be?!

"No. Don't be silly. I told you, she doesn't matter to me at all."

"Okay, then what is it?" It's another one of those moments, faces close together, open pensive eyes. In keeping with my cowardly tradition, I once again fail to make a move. I lean back on the couch, facing away from him at the TV. It's paused where Josh Cusacks's mom's just found him trying to hang himself in the garage.

"What were you thinking about this morning when I came out of my shower?"

"What?"

"You looked really distracted and kind of sad or upset or something,"

"That's what's bothering you?" Surprised.

"Yeah." He laughs, but maybe it sounded a bit nervous.

"That was nothing. I was trying to remember a dream I had last night," dun-dun-da!

"Did you remember it?" Trying to sound causal. He's turned away now too.

"Um, not really. Sort of. But you know how it is, explaining your dreams to people never makes any sense anyway, cause you can never properly describe how everything happened in your head," probably not quite a lie, but about as close as Celery ever gets.

"Yeah I guess,"

"Anyway," brightly. "It's no big deal," looking at me. "Feel better?" I shrug.

"Sure,"

"Let's keep watching then okay, or should I rewind a bit?" I smile and roll my eyes.

"I've seen it like a 100 times, I think I'll be able to catch on," shoving me gently with his shoulder, he presses play.

After the movies are finished, instead of going skating Celery decides head home. This surprises me, but I figure he needs to think about stuff or something. Chances are he's not really going to go home, but that's okay.

"Come back later in the evening if you want, sleep over,"

"No, I can't. I have to watch the steps tonight until late and I wouldn't want to disturb anyone."

Grrr. The steps. I refuse to learn those little monsters names. They're so disgustingly spoiled it makes my skin crawl. I especially hate that one of the only times his mom or Doug ever talks to Celery is when they're ordering him to baby-sit them on some Saturday night. I feel like giving him a hug. Instead I tap the beak of his hat.

"Try not to have too much fun," he laughs.

"I promise."

Family begins filtering in shortly after that and I quickly retreat into my own domain, wanting to be alone to do some thinking of my own. My room's awesome. When Kyle graduated he wanted the freedom of his own place but mom wasn't ready to let go of her 'baby boy' so as a compromise they got contractors to build him an apartment thing above the garage. Great for me because I got his room. It's bigger than my old one, and has it's own bathroom attached (major bonus) but best of all, it has a balcony that's big enough to have two lawn chairs, so me and Celery can chill out there and talk in privacy or listen to music or whatever. Also, the position in relation to a tree we have in our back yard is absolutely perfect for climbing up or down when I want to sneak out. Very cool. I keep the door leading out to the balcony locked most of the time of course, but there's a key for it hidden under the leg of one of the lawn chairs for emergencies (like when I forget to lock it and then come home past curfew and need to get in).

I lie on my bed, deep thoughts abounds, when suddenly I'm interrupted by Kyle's abrupt entrance.

"So did ya tell him yet you coward?" This is pretty much standard practice after every time I hang out with Celery.

Kyle knows I'm in love with Celery. He's the only one. I didn't tell him though. He figured it out on his own after our birthday party this year. See, Kyle and me are almost exactly two years apart. He was born two years

and a day before me and we've always shared family birthday parties. Celery's been coming to those for eight years. Kyle's the only thing Celery and I have that resembles a common friend, but college and stuff's been making him busy this year. Not that he's been ignoring us, we're just hardly ever in the house at the same time. When we are, like at our birthday party, we all hang out and have fun like we did when we were younger. I didn't really see anything different about the way me and Celery were acting at the party, but I guess for Kyle it was an eye opener since he hadn't really been around us for a few months and it gave him perspective or something. Anyway, once Celery and all the guests had left Kyle looked at me and said,

"Celery huh?" I didn't bother trying to deny it, knowing he was cool with my being gay. Almost as crazy with the pride stuff as my parents.

"Yeah," I'd tried not to sound embarrassed. He smiled.

"How long?"

"What'd ya mean how long?"

"How long have you been together?"

"What?! We're not,"

"What do you MEAN you're not? You're all over each other," I shrugged.

"He doesn't know how I feel about him,"

"How could he not KNOW?" I shrugged a second time. "You do realise he loves you back, right, I mean, you're not that thick are you?" Let's make it three. "Carrots! Come on, it's SO obvious! It's kind of gross actually, how obvious it is. You're honestly telling me you don't think he feels the same,"

"I'm pretty sure he does,"

"Pretty sure?" In his disgusted 'older and wiser brother' tone. I explained my levels of anxiety and other reasons for lack of action.

"So basically you're afraid to tell someone who obviously loves you that you love him,"

"That's about right."

"That's pathetic."

"Thanks."

He hasn't really let up since then. He's even threatened to lock us in my room and not let us out until we got some sense. So far he's settled with badgering me. I mean, usually I don't mind, cause I know he's doing it out of love, but right now, I'm not really in the mood.

"Fuck off,"

"Whoa! A highly disproportional response. Wanna tell me what's going on?"

Funny thing is, yeah, I do. So I tell him about hearing Celery talking in his sleep and about the video store stuff.

For once, Kyle decides to be gentle. "Look bro, I know you're scared. It's a big deal telling someone you love them, especially if it's another guy, especially if that guy's your best friend and you're scared as hell about losing him. But you've got to do it, I understand you've been waiting around, hoping he'll go first, but we both know that's not Celery. He won't be able to say it, he's way too shy and he's not self-confident like you are. I know he trusts you completely, and he must know you won't reject him as a friend, but he's different than you. It's so much harder for him to trust his heart with people after the way Debbie and Doug treat him."

"I know all that,"

"So tell him!"

"I don't know if I can,"

"Then you're going to lose him." Kyle shrugs sadly and leaves.

Lose him. Lose him by NOT telling him?

And that's when it hits me. My reasons for not telling Celery I love him are not his reasons. He's not afraid I'll run away or not want to admit that I'm gay, he's afraid I'm NOT gay. He's afraid I'm not in love with him. THAT'S why he's never been able to tell me. He's actually afraid I won't say it back. Look at what happened at Video Update. He was honestly concerned I'd be interested in Cherrie. He really doesn't know. It's all so clear now - but thank-goodness for Kyle, without him I might not have figured it out until it was all too late. I can't believe I'm such a stupid idiot. Why hasn't this ever occurred to me before? Probably cause it's so obvious and simple. I'm great at missing that sort of thing. Of course we're not the same. Celery and me. My problems, fears and worries - which have basically nothing to do with wondering if he loves me - blinded me to what he's been feeling. It never crossed my mind he wasn't even sure how I feel about him, I've always thought it was just his

shyness. But it's not really that at all. He's really not sure. I can't let him go on thinking that way. The very next time I see him I have to tell him, I MUST tell Celery I love him.

12 o'clock and I'm still not asleep. Stupid brain is keeping me up nights. I'm flooded with memories yet again. Grade Seven was a crazy time for us. Not just for me, because of my blossoming obsession, for us as friends. Junior high was when our different interests really started to hit home as something that was supposed to matter. I was a 'cool brain' and he was a volleyball jock/skater. The cool brains and the skaters sometimes hung out together, but we didn't have any of the same interests like classes we liked or similar friends either. Nothing to keep us together. For exactly a week, the second week of school in fact, it almost seemed like we were going to break up. Out of no fault of our own, we simply didn't see each other. We had almost no classes together. After school, he had volleyball practice and I had discovered debating and the school newspaper. Our respective friends were pulling us apart. I liked hanging with kids who worked on the paper and were interested in world issues. I also liked the attention everyone gave me for cracking jokes in class. There was no way Celery was going to do stuff like that, the jokes I mean. Around me, it's pretty much no longer an issue, but the dude IS painfully shy. He takes a long time to warm up to people, but (obviously) once he has, he's extremely loyal. So we were both busy, doing different things. Then Friday afternoon rolled around, and Celery was at my locker, his back-pack stuffed with books and overnight clothes, smiling. I asked him what he wanted to do, which was tradition, even though we always did the same thing. He'd replied "'Idiot Scrabble', idiot.' Also tradition. Idiot Scrabble is Scrabble gone horribly, horribly wrong, Carrots and Celery style. It's the same as normal Scrabble except using words that are misspelled, only three letters long and made up is encouraged. In fact it's pretty much mandatory. Points are given according to a system we set up. You get docked if you use a real word with five letters or more, for instance. But you have to have a definition prepared for any made up word you use. Points are also awarded when someone uses words that were made up in previous games. In this case, you have to remember the definition. On Saturday when we woke up, we made our usual plans for the day. We talked about what movies we would rent, and decided on a Classic Cartoons day. 'Bambi' (Thumper is fucking hilarious!) and 'The Sword in the Stone' and 'Alice In Wonderland'. Hey man, we were only 12. Growing up early is for losers anyway. And I'll have you know I STILL love Alice in Wonderland. That's a fucking trippy movie. If either us had needed a wake-up call or an assurance that our friendship was solid, that weekend was it. I knew when I said good-bye on Sunday afternoon that none of the other stuff I did with my new friends was nearly as cool as doing nothing with Celery. That having someone who laughed with me during every other scene of a kiddie Disney movie was worth any debate club or 'intellectual discussion'. You

know, I hope I'm not making it sound like Celery's dumb. He's totally not. Probably, the only real difference is he's not a show-off like me.

One other thing I guess I should mention is that though Celery is a jock, it's important to note that he's a bad jock. He cares about volleyball, and enjoys it, but great at them though he is, he only goes out for his other sports to keep in shape. Like I already said. He doesn't act like a jock though, not like most of the other jocks in our school anyway. No swaggering around in his team jackets, no dating cheerleaders, no treating the non-athletes like lower beings, that kind of shit. Plus, he's a skater. And skateboarding is the biggest anti-jock sport in the world. Skating's Celery's true nature. In skateboarding you're not depending on anyone but yourself, your screw-ups and triumphs are your own. It's solitary, unique. Celery likes being alone, but only as long as I'm there. Maybe that doesn't make much sense but too damn bad. I don't know how to explain it. We can be alone and together at the same time, depending on our moods. Around each other, but not WITH each other. It can be just as comforting. In the same room or space, doing our own thing, content, separate but together. It doesn't happen much, but sometimes. When we need it. I'm forced by my extremely honest nature (stop that snickering!) to admit that it's mostly me who's the one needing the aloneness of our together times. The quiet, that's important for me. It comes from living in such a bustling, crowded house. Celery's house, the opposite of mine, makes him lean more towards the togetherness part. But we can have it both ways, so everybody's happy.

I roll over onto my side, and sigh. It's one of those good, long, self-pitying, teenage morose sighs. I'm quite an expert at them.

Another memory I keep coming back to is the grade 6 dance. First one, it was almost like a mini prom for the 'graduating' grade sixers. Everyone was in a flutter to find a date. Hair pulling had reached a fever pitch. Celery and I were bewildered.

"Do we have to go?" He'd whispered to me one afternoon very close to the dance. I'd shaken my head. Of course not. I remember giving him a comforting smile and mouthing, 'they can't make us'. Shut-up. I was 12. You talked like that when you were 12 too.

But of course we did end up going, and it was miserable (for the first half-hour). Standing at the Boy Wall, all of our fellow members of the harrier sex nervous about asking girls to dance, while Celery and me were worried girls might ask US to dance. Or that somehow, we'd be forced into dancing. We weren't sure, but I know I was a little worried there might be some kind of rule saying you HAD to dance with at least one girl at a dance. Like I said, miserable, until Celery had enough. He grabbed my elbow, raised his eyebrows, rolling his eyes in the direction of the bleachers, and we made a run for it. My dad wasn't due to pick up us for

another hour and a half, but we amused ourselves for that amount of time with childish games. You know. We pretended the space behind the bleachers was a cave, the other kids in the gym some hostile island locals, the chaperones their tribe chiefs. I might be wrong, but I think the punch (conveniently red) was supposed to be blood. It was fun, and it might have been the beginning of all this. Of me and Celery making a bond that shut out the rest of the world, our mutual decision that we didn't need anyone but each other. The idea that either one of us would have rather been out on the dance floor with some girl was an insult to what we stood for. Partners in crime, conspirators in living, best friends forever.

I'd been counting 80's One Hit Wonders (what's with that sheep crap anyway?), and am starting to finally nod off when I hear a quiet rattling and the shutting of a door. A bit frantically, I bolt into upright position. The moon shining through my window lights up Celery's profile. He's here, and predictably, now I don't know what to say.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper loudly. Yeah, I know. You thought I said I didn't know what to say. Shut-up. "I thought you had to baby-sit,"

He walks a little closer.

"I did. They just got home, but They brought some friends and they were being pretty loud," the living room is right under his bedroom. Done intentionally, so the steps wouldn't be disturbed by such events. I hate Them.

"Oh," I say brilliantly.

"Do you mind?" I snort. "So I'm polite. Give me a break."

It's March, so even though it's late, it's pretty light and I watch as he walks towards the closet that stores his extra bedding. I'm scared and nervous and a million other things, but I have to say something. I can't keep letting us down.

"Cel, don't bother,"

"What?" I turn on the light, feeling we shouldn't do this in the dark. I hold up a corner of the blanket.

"Come sleep with me in the bed," surely he can hear my voice cracking and faltering. I don't even sound calm to myself, he must be noticing. Celery's eyes pierce me, almost charcoal.

"That's probably not a-"

"Please." He sighs.

"Okay." He climbs in with me. I wiggle over making enough room, but only JUST enough. He's so beautiful, I want to kiss him SO badly. But I know I have to say it first, that if I don't he'll get scared and confused and it won't be any good at all. We're both not really lying down yet, resting heads on propped up elbows, facing each other on our sides. Eyes avoiding, but careful to not appear that way. I want to take away that grey. I put my free hand on his shoulder, causing him to look at me. He's nervous, but his eyes are burning with excitement as well.

"Celery, please believe that what I'm about to say is the absolute truth and always will be," we both swallow. I take a breath. So strange, that after all this time, this is IT. Three words, and nothing will ever be the same again. I've been here before, but never so determined, never realizing how important it is that when these moments come I have to stop letting them pass by and finally seize one. That if I don't eventually it will wreck him. I take another breath, and after exhaling deeply whisper, "I love you,"

Carrots and Celery Chapter Two
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Thu, 19 Dec 2002 13:53:26 -0600

I take another breath, and after exhaling deeply whisper, "I love you,"

His eyes turn a brighter blue than I have ever seen. "I'm in love with you." There's a split second of total silence, where he stares at me unbelieving, and then his arms are around me and his face is in my neck and we're both shaking and taking ragged, gasping breaths. Never letting go sounds like a good idea to me, but he pulls his face away, searching my eyes, and I smile faintly.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," he's almost crying.

"I love you too. I've always loved you. I always will." He kisses me. So tenderly. So quickly. Best moment of my life. Then again, and again, and again. Each time, so gently, but so incredibly intense. Lips abandoned for cheeks and eyes and noses for awhile. I'm so happy, filled up to bursting with so much joy, I wonder if I might be floating a bit. We'll separate to kiss and then press our bodies together again, craving contact. All the while, over and over, saying I love you.

There's quiet again eventually, the frenzy over, when simply holding each other is enough. I'm slightly scared, good old me. Here in my arms I have everything I've ever wanted, and as long as I don't do anything stupid (that's the problem though isn't it?) I think I always will. Under my arms, I feel him moving a bit.

"Carrots?"

"Yes love," oh to be able to say it!

"Thank-you for saying it first."

"I didn't."

"What?"

"You did. Last night." He tenses.

"I can't believe you heard that!"

"What's the matter?" Laugh in my voice. "I love you, I love hearing you say it. That was really special for me. It's probably what set this all off. That and Kyle," He swallows audibly.

"Kyle?"

"Yeah, um, Kyle knows."

"He does?!"

"Yeah. He's completely okay with it. He's been riding my ass to tell you since he found out."

"So that's what he was talking about," I'm pretty sure he's not really talking to me.

"Huh?"

"Awhile ago, Kyle called me and gave me this totally - then anyway - strange talk about trusting your feelings and believing in yourself and standing up for what's in your heart. I knew he was trying to tell me something, but at the time I didn't understand what."

"So much for swearing to secrecy," I say with mock murder in my voice. Celery hugs me playfully.

"Come on. You've got nothing to be upset about. That really helped me and like I said I had no idea what he was hinting at."

"Oh fine. I won't kill him after all, for you," I kiss his nose. I'll take any excuse of course. We kiss with noses for awhile.

Then, smiling, "Are we idiots?"

"Why?" Even though I'm pretty sure I know.

"For waiting. This is so wonderful, so incredible, do you feel like we've wasted time?"

"Not even a little bit. I treasure every minute of our friendship. Maybe we waited for this aspect of it, but we still loved each other. I don't regret anything. Would you want to change anything?" He hugs me like he'll never let go.

"Not if everything we did brought us here. And even if it hadn't, no. Our friendship saved my life. I hope it won't change,"

"If it does, it'll only get better." He squeezes me again.

"I love you,"

"I love you too," Making that probably the hundredth time I've said it

tonight. It never gets old.

"Do you wanna know a secret?"

"Yeah,"

"I love being able to say it almost as much as I love you," The nearest bit of him is his ear, so I kiss it. "I, I don't regret anything Carrots, like I said, but..."

"Touching, acknowledging we're touching, finally being able to be honest about everything?"

"Yeah," He says dreamily.

"It's better even than I hoped, because it's really happening I guess, but even before, we were still loving to each other. It's just different now. More out in the open."

"I stopped for awhile though didn't I? Being loving I mean," I hope the kiss I give him eases his guilt.

"Yes you did, but that was all part of it. If you hadn't, I might not have noticed you were doing it in the first place. It gave me a lot of think about. In the end it really helped me, your pulling away - because of the reasons I suspected you were doing it. That's when I started to consider the possibility that you knew you loved me too. It was thrilling,"

"It hurt too though, didn't it?"

"Well yeah,"

"Because you thought I loved you but there I was never telling you about it,"

"It changed things anyway. I spent the first two years knowing I loved you thinking you weren't ever going to be able to love me back, thinking you just weren't like that. When I was 14 I began to suspect you loved me but didn't know it. Then at 15, when you started to pull away, almost like you were afraid..."

"Why did you wait so long to say something?"

"Why?" I laugh. "Cause I was terrified you weren't saying anything because you didn't want it. I thought that you hated being gay or something like that and were trying to kill it off."

"How could you think that while I stayed so close to you as a friend? I

didn't pull away THAT much,"

"Yeah I know. But Celery, the thing that you're forgetting is I'm insane,"
He laughs.

"It's just you've been like that so long. Sometimes I forget," I pinch him
and he retaliates by tickling. I'm ridiculously ticklish. He stops sort
of abruptly.

"Cel?" He smiles.

"Keep telling me. There's some stuff we need to get out in the open I
think." We move around a little until he's holding me (hey, he's bigger
than me and he's heavy! What do you want from me anyway?!) and I'm resting
peacefully half on his chest (his broad, muscley chest...) half on the bed.
To think all this time I let him sleep on the floor. There'll be no more
of that I assure you.

"So where was I anyway?"

"Um, 15 and being afraid,"

"Yeah. Hmm, it's about time for you, you know,"

"I know. You finish first though," it's obvious to me he's nervous.

"It'll be fine. We can be totally honest with each other now. It's
finally allowed," His arms around me tighten for a second and then relax.

"Anyway. All that fear and anxiety jazz had me pretty much on the ropes,
despite the fact that everyday, pretty much everything you did convinced me
more and more you loved me back. These past few months though, I knew we
were getting close,"

"So did I."

"Really? I didn't think you thought about that kind of thing. I guess I
don't know everything after all,"

"I knew something was going to happen, something big that would decide
things one way or the other, but leave that until it's my turn. I want to
hear this from your side right now. I want to know what you were thinking
and feeling all these years, months, weeks, days, hours,"

"Compare and contrast, Celery?" He laughs.

"Despite test scores that would indicate the opposite I DO listen in
English,"

"You'll have a hard time finding anyone who thinks you're stupid Cel, especially in this room. Look for pity somewhere else,"

"I notice we've gotten off track again,"

"That's because there's so much new stuff we're trying to talk about all at once, but also our normal stuff,"

"Okay. But I really want to hear it,"

"I'm telling it. Right now. Be calm."

"I've never been calmer,"

"That's a nice thing to say,"

"What's nicer is that I mean it,"

"We're going to be hopeless aren't we?"

"Oh probably. We always have been of course,"

"Wasn't it Mrs. Chandler who was always telling us we were impossible?"

"And Mr. Roteo called us the 'bloody limit' about everyday," We laugh together.

"Carrots," while he's jabbing me.

"Hey! That was your fault, don't go abusing me for your own mistakes,"

"Don't make me tickle you again," What a threat.

"As I was planning on saying,"

"Before you were so rudely interrupted,"

"That's right."

Now look, I know I've basically explained all this to you already but it's new to Celery so shut up and listen, or if you don't want to do that skim down a bit.

"Since 15 there have been moments where I really thought I was going to say it, you know, take the plunge. But time after time I chickened out. Since about, like, January, those moments started happening way more often. I still kept wimping out though. But it all started happening for real last

night when I heard you saying 'I love you Carrots' in your sleep, and then the way you acted at the Video store,"

"How did I act?" I figured he didn't realize how he was acting.

"All jealous and threatened. It was pretty cute but I didn't like to see you hurting,"

"That touches on me stuff,"

"I know it does, and we'll get to that. There's a bit more I've got to say first though. I need to explain about Kyle I think,"

"Yeah Kyle. I definitely want to hear about that,"

Okay. I'll have mercy. I'll skip the part about how he found out. You get to hear the rest again though. "...after he left I finally figured out it wasn't being gay you were afraid of but that you were afraid I didn't even love you. When I realised that was what was holding you back I HAD to tell you. I couldn't let you go on not knowing a thing like that."

"My turn now?"

"I think so. We can always splice in a little me along the way if I suddenly remember something,"

"Not that there's any rush,"

"If you think you've got any way out of this short of dying you're crazy,"

"Good," he says shakily.

"I mean it. I swear it. You've trusted me about everything else, you can trust me about this too can't you?"

"Yes," sigh. "Yeah Care I can. I do."

"Your turn's not going much better than mine is it?"

"Your fault again of course."

"I thought we agreed it was your fault last time."

"You agreed,"

"So who else matters?" Off track or not we need to be doing this so we know we're still us. That post THIS we're still the same and we can act the same and that the same stuff will still be funny and natural and

comfortable.

"My turn take two?" So much for silent Celery.

"Yeah, sure," He lets go of me and sits up. I roll over and pout at him from my back.

"Whad ya do that for?"

"I think this'll be easier if we're not touching. Less distractions, you know?" I smile evilly.

"I'll agree - only if you promise to let me distract you a lot later," He laughs. Have I mentioned I'm one of the only people Celery laughs around? It's cause I'm so damn hilarious. Yep.

"Sure, whatever,"

"Whatever?" I say pitifully.

"You wouldn't feel sorry for me before,"

"Yeah but you didn't deserve it."

"Neither do you. Now shut up and let me talk."

"Okay."

"Let's start it all off with a confession how bout? What with it being good for the soul and all that,"

"I don't want you to be nervous. You can tell me anything," He smiles almost guiltily.

"I plan to,"

"Can't I hold your hand at least?" I'm a bit worried about him to be honest. Looking at him you'd think he was about to tell me he'd like killed my dog and stolen my favourite record or something. You know, something BAD.

"Okay," I reach over, palm to palm joining our fingers.

"So what's the big confession?" I ask, trying to lighten him up. Damnit. His eyes have gone all grey again.

"Will you..."

"What?" this time I try to sound gentle.

"Promise not to get mad?"

"Mad?" What the heck would I have to be mad about? Is he joking?

"No. I'm not going to ask you that."

"Cel, I love you. You don't have to be scared." Distracting or not I have to hug him. I kiss the side of his nose, smiling. "Okay?" He tries to smile for my benefit.

"Here goes," He faces me, bites his lip for a second and then says, "I knew. I've loved you since the day we met and I knew the whole time." WHAT?!

"The whole time?" I screech, shocked. He's looking away again.

"From the very first day. From the moment I saw you."

"Before lunch? Before we even talked?" I don't even really remember seeing him before lunch hour, but Celery's nodding.

"As soon as your mom brought you in, from the first second. It was... I mean, I know now it was love. All I understood then was that I wanted to know you, be around you all the time. Six year olds don't really think sensibly about age 40 or the rest of their life but I remember planning it out in my little dream thinking, 'we'll always be best friends and we'll live in the same house', and Carrots, I swear I even imagined us lying beside each other in the same bed. Sex never crossed my mind but just about everything else did. When you sat with me at lunch, I felt like I'd been given the best thing in the entire world. Like I'd just been given everything I'd ever want. Maybe I didn't use the word but I knew what I felt for you. I've ALWAYS known." I sit there, shocked, holding his hand. Literally, words have failed me. There doesn't seem to be any that would be enough so I stay quiet. "Are you mad?" His voice unlocks mine.

"No. Amazed,"

"Really? But not mad?" It's my turn to look into his eyes.

"Not mad. Confused, floored, shocked and amazed - but not mad. How could I be? Anyway, don't stop. That's only the first day. Tell me more,"

"I read about it. You know, being gay. Some books said it was a phase most male adolescents go through, but I knew YOU weren't a phase. I knew I wanted you to be the rest of my life."

"You READ about it? When you were SIX?" I don't really know why I'm surprised though, Celery was an insanely serious child. Over the years it's grown less and less but at the beginning he was a quiet, serious, intense little boy. If there's ever a need for a poster child for kids with poor parental figures growing up WAY too fast, Celery'd be your man. Like, I hate to use physco-babble but it's gotta have something to do with his mom and everything. I mean, he's been raising himself pretty much since he was freaking four years old. Like no kidding.

"Yeah. Like, it was actually when I was about eight, but pretty much yeah. It was all sort of a waste of time though,"

"How?"

"I'm not gay Carrots. Not exactly. I've never had a crush on anyone. Not girls or boys. Only you. Always and only you," quadruple wow.

"I..."

"Shocked you again have I?"

"Oh, just a little," damn losers who say sarcasm is for the weak. What do they know.

"But you're amazed again, not mad?" He's smiling, teasing. That makes it all worth it. Like sure it's not anything like I thought it was but that doesn't mean this is worse. What he's saying doesn't matter. What matters is that he trusts me enough to tell me.

"Amazed Celery. And holy cricket," I'm trying to work that into my vocabulary. I love Harry Potter. "Flattered."

"Yeah?"

"No. You've only been in love with me since the day we met and have never even crushed on anyone else. I'm not flattered at all. That was sarcasm."

"I love you. Carrots, do you understand what it's like for me to finally be able to say that to you out loud? Not just in my dreams, after all these years?" Eyes sparkling. I smile.

"Hey, you've got six conscious years on me but don't like go getting too full of yourself. You're not the only one whose been dreaming about it." We kiss briefly. It's such an amazing thing to be able to do. To just, whenever it strikes my fancy, lean over and kiss him. No more wanting to, but being too scared. Damn will I ever NOT miss those days.

"There's a lot more," he says, like he needs to explain himself for

breaking the kiss. I merely nod, settling down on the pillows, knees bent, toes tucked under his thigh.

"If you always knew, why'd you suddenly pull away, after all that time I mean?"

"Two reasons basically. One was that I felt guilty about it, like I was taking advantage of you,"

"So I WAS right about that at least. I'm not a completely hopeless case,"

"No," smiling at me warmly.

"The other reason?" He shrugs.

"I was afraid you were starting to catch on. You started looking at me really closely all the time - like you were trying to figure me out. I was worried you were on to me," I smile smugly.

"And I totally was!" He shakes his head but gives me a humouring smile.

"Yes. You're very smart,"

"Now shut-up?" If you want to understand what we're talking about, I suggest you rent 'A Princess Bride'. In fact, even if you don't, I still suggest you rent it. I mean, what's wrong with you? It's only one of the most hilarious movies ever made. Honestly.

"Pretty much all through Elementary school it didn't really matter to me that I was in love with you, the closer I felt to you the better it was: the more fun I had with you, the more safe you made me feel, everything. Then in grade 7, everyone was discovering girls and I started getting SO afraid you would to. When we were young it never really mattered to me whether or not you were in love with me, so long as we stayed best friends. I had still had my vision of us living together, and having only one really big bed. It all made perfect sense as long as I didn't let myself think about it logically. But suddenly there were girls and other kids and for the first time I was worried about losing my slot as your number one,"

"I worried about that too,"

"Did you?"

"Yeah, a little. About sports and everything. It felt like we were getting pulled in different directions,"

"That's exactly how it felt! But I couldn't let that happen, it was not an option for me to lose you, though I was scared that I would. I was almost

shaking I was so nervous when I picked you up at your locker that Friday after we'd barely seen each other all week, do you remember that?"

"Yeah, of course."

"I was completely ready to quit the team and try to join the paper staff - anything to stay with you. If you hadn't acted normal I would have. I would have given it up in a second if I thought not would have meant losing you."

"I hope, I mean, did you seriously think I wasn't going to want to still hang out with you?"

"I was worried about it, but you've always been my rock. I wasn't ready to let one week of junior high screw up my entire faith in you, it took me way too long build."

"Eh, Theodore, do I make you feel inadequate?" I mutter to myself.

"What?"

"Nothing,"

"No, that's from 'The Blue Lawn', isn't it?" Holy cricket! You see, my plan is working perfectly.

"You've read that?" He grins.

"I loved it!" We stare at each other like it's for the first time. We kiss in a giddy rush.

"Come here alright? Please?" I say holding out my arms. He smiles.

"Yeah, most of the hard part's done anyway," We cuddle together again. I'm back where I belong, back in his arms, back where I'll always need to be.

"The rest Cel?"

"Girls. That's what scared me the most. I was afraid you'd pick one you liked and then it wouldn't just be me and you any more. I didn't think you'd ditch me, not really, I was just extremely jealous of anyone who might take up any of your time for me. Plus, later, as the years passed, I even started to think about what would happen if you got married. How was my little same bed plan going to work then? Like, was your wife going to have her own room? So, even though I was trying to give you some space, you know, cut out all the touching stuff, I couldn't. I was too afraid if I did someone else would take you away from me. It sounds so ridiculous to be saying this out loud, but it didn't SEEM insane. Not in my head

anyway."

"At least you're in good company," He laughs.

"It wouldn't really do for only one of us to be crazy would it?"

"No, not at all. That way if we ever get locked up, at least we'll be together."

"At least now I know it'll never happen," flipping back to serious. I nuzzle his neck.

"Never, not in a million years - remember?"

"Yeah, Carrots," kissing the top of my head. "I remember."

"So what did you mean about knowing something was coming?"

"Well like you said I felt those moments too, and after awhile I started to notice you seemed to be reacting to them the same way I was but you never did anything about it. I know it was unfair of me but I expected you to be the one to make the first move - that is, whenever I allowed myself to dream that something was actually going to happen between us. You never did though so I started to go back to thinking it was just my imagination,"

"I'm sorry,"

"No. It wasn't your responsibility. It had just as much to do with me. Anyway, it's okay now," I don't really think my agreement needs to be auditory so I kiss him gently.

It's one of the rare occasions he breaks the silence first. "Care?"

"Mmm,"

"Best Friends Forever?" He's holding his hand up. I disentangle mine and grasp his firmly.

"Forever."

Carrots and Celery Interlude (Chapter Two Point Five)

by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)

Date: Sun, 22 Dec 2002 17:01:43 -0600

It's weird you know. I mean, hearing us talk, you'd think we didn't know each other at all. But we do. We're just both really good at hiding stuff from ourselves and not seeing what's right smack in front of our faces. It's one of the strange things we have in common. Among others are a passion (bordering on an obsession) for 80's movies, teen Sci Fi (Buffy The Vampire Slayer, Roswell, Weird Science, My Secret Identity, Smallville, Dead Last) and loving each other.

It's true we don't have many conventional things in common, but that's part of the reason we've stayed close all these years. There are other people Celery can play Volleyball and do Calculus with, but I'm the only one who will stay up all night watching a 'The Blob' Marathon with him on Space. I have other friends who will talk about world Politics with me or help me cause a little havoc and mayhem in the classroom to brighten everyone's day, but none of those friends traded me for their carrots when they were six years old and already in love with me. Anyway, to a lesser extent we do get involved in those aspects of each others separate lives. I go to his games, we'll shoot hoops together sometimes, we skate together, and Celery cares about the world, he has opinions and ideas. There's just less passion, except when we draw each other into our different worlds. It doesn't matter that we generally prefer to stay in the private one we share only with each other.

Waking up, my first thought is how nice and warm I am, then I realise it's cause Celery's warm body is lying next to mine. The movements we made in our sleep have separated us, but he's still only inches away. He's still in bed with me, and I'm still allowed to touch him without pretence or under the guise of an extremely physical friendship. I laugh out loud, needing some sort of release for the joy building up inside me. I guess I was a little on the loud side because Celery rolls onto his side, smiling slightly, eyes open. I kiss his cheek. He lets out a massive sigh of relief.

"Thank-god. It wasn't another dream." I kiss him again.

"Nope." I'm quiet, enjoying just being able to look at him openly, but quickly realise I need to speak, seeing uncertainty flicker grey briefly in his eyes.

"Didn't I promise I'd still respect you in the morning?" Out of relief as much as anything else, Celery laughs, snuggling close.

"It wasn't just a one night stand after all?" We're being us again, letting ourselves be reassured by it.

"I didn't say that -- I just said I'd still respect you,"

"I should get up and climb right back out from whence I came,"

"Is that why you never got undressed? Keeping yourself ready for a quick get away?" His eyes are merry enough, but I'm not sure Celery's heart's entirely into this. I push too far with the joking stuff sometimes. Being serious can be a problem for me and I'll often joke or be sarcastic instead of expressing how I really feel. I've been accused of being insensitive and not knowing when to draw the line. I don't really care, except when it comes to Celery.

"I also thought it would prevent you from ravishing me in the night," He says in high jest.

"Celery?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you,"

"I know." He assures me softly.

"Okay, cause I don't want you to be worried or anything. I was just kidding its not--"

"Carrots, I know," with a smile.

"Okay."

"Lets make a pact eh?" Best friends always have pacts. We already have a couple.

"What is it?"

"We both swear to try to stop worrying so much." I grin.

"That might be the first pact we both fail miserably at," He grins too.

"I know, but let's at least try okay?" I kiss his nose.

"Okay. Does this have to be a blood pact?" He laughs.

"No Carrots, it does not have to be a blood pact," In his

you-were-joking-but-I'm-going-to-pretend-to-take-you-seriously-voice.

"I, Carrots Vasskez, do solemnly swear before all the best friend,"

"And boyfriend,"

"That's right, before all the best friend and boyfriend gods to try to stop worrying so much and relax, so I don't give myself an ulcer," He smiles, but you're not supposed to laugh during pact making. It's supposed to be solemn after all.

"And I Celery Schnider, do solemnly swear before all the best friends and boyfriends gods that I will try to stop worrying so much so I don't act like a possessive loser or turn my best slash boyfriend into a dull dog,"
The new tradition of sealing pacts with kiss is formed.

If Saturday's belong to Celery and myself alone, if it's the day where we are the most only each others, Sunday is the day Celery belongs to me the least. It's family time with a capital F. There's a Sunday brunch (I know, you seem to remember me saying something about being too cool for brunch, well you can just shut-up about it) and everyone in the family has to attend. Celery, as a long past accepted member of the inner family, is naturally welcome to chill with us and have a danish or two.

Without further discussion we start getting dressed, we'd shower (hmmm, together?) except we kinda, sorta, slept in, so there really isn't time. Like always, once he's got everything else on Celery grabs his hat from where he dropped in on my desk and, gathering his hair back with his fingers, puts it on. I don't really know why he bothers doing that with the hair, it flips out just the same. It's cute to watch though, so you're not going to catch me saying anything about it.

Celery leaves it until my hand is touching the doorknob before asking, "So do you think we should tell them about us?" I do a 180 and stare at him. I'm about to say, 'who are you, and what have you done with my shy and quiet best friend' when I observe that he's laughing at me.

"That's real nice. I'm loving this special boyfriend treatment, you really know how to make a guy feel special," I grump. Still laughing quietly, he walks over and holds me firmly with those long, muscley arms.

"We could though, couldn't we?" He ponders, trying to goad me further - I hope.

"Give me a minute to catch my breath okay? Anyway, we might not have the option. Kyle might bust us the second he sees. I don't know about that guy. I'm starting to suspect he can read minds." Celery starts laughing again and I take the opportunity to escape his grasp. Nothing to do with

objecting to being held, and having everything to do with the fact that we're late, I'm hungry, and I don't want my three brothers with three stomachs each to inhale all the food before we can get down there.

When we arrive in the kitchen it turns out there was no need to worry. Kyle has yet to arrive and the twins are looking so tired I'm not even sure they're fully aware of where they are. Kara's an eleven-year-old girl. She eats half a bagel and she's full. It works great if you're going for the 'forest nymph' look, but it's not like she's anorexic or anything. She just eats tiny meals way more often. So what if it's strange, who said there was anything wrong with being strange? If you ask me, it's people who've deluded themselves into thinking they're 'normal' (as if there's really is such a thing anyway) who have problems.

"Hello family," I say sitting down. Mom and dad cheerfully reply (this has been discussed, insanity remember? They're morning people) Kara smiles over her half eaten bagel and the twins look blearily at me for a second before returning to their previous activity of staring dully at their plates.

"Can I safely assume asking them what their problem is would be a waste to time?" I ask my mother, waving at the twins.

"Huh?" They say in unison. I nod.

"That answers my question. Mom?"

"I think they were up late having some video game contest or another," I shake my head.

"Why is it that I've never been able to understand the attraction of those things?" Celery pats my shoulder.

"It's because you suck,"

"Oh that's right! I remember now," We all eat quietly for awhile.

"I didn't realise you slept over last night," My mom suddenly says to Celery, even though she's looking at me. It's not like I'm in trouble exactly, she just wants an explanation. I shrug.

"Sleep wasn't working out at his house," I know she won't push for details. We've got our systems of silence and understanding worked out just fine. I've worked for years being a good little boy, and it's earned me the trust and respect of my parents. They know what it's like for Celery and are more than willing to let him sleep over whenever. If sometimes that happens without their knowing it, that's okay too so long as we briefly explain why in the morning.

Breakfast goes fine except for Celery rubbing his knee against mine the entire time, which I found more than a little distracting. Once we've finished we get up, say thanks for the meal (yeah, we're polite, what of it?!) and start back to my room. We almost collide with Kyle halfway up the stairs. Celery and me cause we were too busy staring at each other and not paying attention, Kyle I think cause he didn't even have his eyes open. Getting about 10 hours of sleep in the space of two days will do that to you.

"Hey little bros," He says sleepily.

"Want an escort to the table dude?" Celery teases. Tired or not Kyle's present enough to roll his eyes and laugh sarcastically.

"Thank you but no C2, that won't be necessary," I'm C1, Celery's C2. It's kind of a 'Bananas in Pyjamas' thing. If you're disturbed by the fact that my 18-year-old brother makes jokes about giant produce in bedware chasing bears of the teddy variety, well good, because you should be. Of all my family, I'm pretty sure Kyle's the least likely to know my real name. It's buried under way too many nicknames. He takes a few fake stumbles along the way down the hall, and then Kyle's out of sight.

Celery holds my hand up the rest of the stairs and into my room. It's not just a romance thing, Celery's a really physical person. With no one more so than me, but he's like that with most people he cares about.

I barely get the door shut before he kisses me.

"Dude," I say laughing and taking a shaky step backwards.

"What?" He says, grinning. I shrug.

"I don't know. Nothing I guess. This is just taking me a little while to get used to. You on the other hand. Man, what happened to being shy?" He sits down on my bed, looking serious. I sit down beside him.

"Think about it Care. I've never been shy around you, you have to have noticed that. I mean, I talked to you on the first day of school, right out of the blue when I didn't know you from a hole in the ground. I don't know what it is about you, but you've never made me feel shy. I've always been completely comfortable around you. Like I had something of value to offer, like we were equals. You never talked or looked down on me. All these years I've only held ONE thing back from you, and now that's over. I'm going to try not to rush you, but you're going to have to help me there I think. You know how I am," that I do. So do you if you've been paying attention. Whole hog once he's made up his mind or has the green light. Totally committed to it, he puts his entire heart into whatever he's doing. This is going to be even more incredible than I thought if he's saying our dating relationship

has now garnered his full attention.

"How do you see it?"

"The order?" I nod.

"Yeah," He smiles sweetly.

"I see you first, every part of you. Okay? This is what I was talking about. I'm excited about being able to show you I love you, but I don't want that to get in the way of me showing you that you're my best friend. I'm kind of in making up for lost time here when it comes to the non-platonic stuff I guess. But we can chill,"

"Chilling sounds good, but don't put the freeze on me you know? We don't need to spend the day making out, but when or if the mood strikes you, and you suddenly get the urge to kiss me, or hug me or hold my hand or whatever, PLEASE don't restrain yourself. I'm certainly not going to. I just want us to be spontaneous, and comfortable, okay?" He kisses me.

"Very okay."

Hanging alone in my room, side by side on the bed talking, lasts for only like 25 minutes more before Kyle arrives unannounced. He takes a good look at us, startled by his arrival but still holding hands, declares, "It's about fucking time!" Grins, and then leaves. We look at each other.

"So that was Kyle," I say, deadpan. Celery nods.

"Yeah,"

"Nice of him to stop by," ultra deadpan.

"Oh for sure."

That night we have our first long drawn out, complete with kisses, goodbye. We exchange sappy banter such as 'I don't want to go' kiss 'I don't you to go either' kiss 'but I really have to' kiss 'I know you do, it's late' kiss and 'I love you' kiss 'I love you more' kiss 'dork, I love you more' kiss 'no I do' kiss.

I know. And believe me, if I weren't me, I'd be beating me up right now. But you know, they tell you it happens and damn, it does. Love turns you into a complete and blithering idiot. I don't know what's worse: being around the person you're in love with or being alone. Cause when you're alone you're missing them, and when they're there it's like major blithering idiot love fest. I've gotten so good at keeping my love for Cel contained, it's crazy to be able to show it. That's part of my problem, I

just need a little time for my heart and brain to catch up with reality.
Then we'll see who needs the other one to chill down a smidgen.

Carrots and Celery Chapter Three
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sun, 22 Dec 2002 21:01:51 -0600

Kyle's all over me with questions and snide remarks as I eat breakfast the next day. But underneath the sarcastic tone, the gibes about how maybe we should have waited another 10 years, the eye rolling, I can easily tell Kyle's so happy he's practically laughing out loud. Finally, he surrenders, throwing himself into a chair saying, "I'm really happy for you. I mean REALLY happy. When you see him at school you'll tell him won't you? That I love him, that's he's my little brother?" I nod.

"Of course I will. I'm also going to tell him you repeatedly insulted both of our honours. He'll probably kick your ass," Kyle laughs.

"Delighted to see love hasn't changed you little brother," I smile.

"When you're perfect, there's really no need for improvement is there?"

"You've really gotta love an honest man,"

"I know I do,"

"Shit!" I nearly fall off my chair whipping around to look at Celery, who has quite possibly appeared in my kitchen out of thin air.

"Thanks for the set up Kyle," Celery says nodding at him. I sit there, pouting.

"If feel conspired against," Celery kisses my cheek and Kyle ruffles my hair. "And again," I say in my grumpy lightness tone.

"We're only trying to express our love,"

"Yeah," Kyle says in an equally babyish voice.

"You're not going to continue to treat me in this manner are you?" I ask them. They nod, grinning. Sigh. Their little teasing unit against me has always been loosely established but now it's been solidified by a common cause.

"Well that's just great. And I suppose you're here because you want to be fed?" I say gruffly, making myself feel better by acting upset. A warning look flashes over Kyle's face. Too far little brother. Celery looks hurt.

"I came because I wanted to see you and got sort of tired of waiting," I try to grab his hand, but he evades my reach.

"Cel," I coax. "I'm sorry, I was only joking. You know I was, don't be mad at me for something you know I didn't mean," He takes off his hat, shakes back some hair and puts it back on. Sighs.

"It's cool," He says quietly, offering me his hand. I take it, and squeeze.

"Lets NOT become one of those annoying couples that fight and make up all the time okay?" He grins.

"And let's definitely not become like Donna and Eric," We gag together. That 70's started to suck right after Donna and Eric started going out. Then when they broke up! Donna turned into mega bitch, Eric was a loser. Well, we've stopped watching, but I assume the sucking pattern has continued.

"Or worse, Joey and Dawson,"

Together "ahugh!"

"May I suggest you also don't start kissing all over the place, some of us are trying to eat," Kyle mutters darkly just before we lean in for a lip lock. We then of course proceed to do it anyway. Some of us are trying to eat indeed. I even moan a bit for effect. Kyle shudders. "That's lovely. I really want to hear my little brother moaning from pleasure while he's got his tongue down his best friends throat. Thanks guys, really. You've made my day." Celery rolls his eyes.

"Shut-up Kyle. You know we have," he grins.

"Okay, maybe a little. But that doesn't mean this is going to become a part of all our daily routines. If you two think you're going to do the tonsil tag thing every morning, you've got another thing coming. We're going to have to establish some ground rules-

"Ground rules?"

"That's right,"

"Okay Kyle," I say reasonably. Far too reasonably to be taken seriously. Celery snickers. "What do you suggest?"

"I'm serious,"

"Sure you are," I say nodding.

"No tongue, no moaning, and no lip contact period until I've finished my toast. Have pity,"

"Kyle?"

"Yeah?" He asks hopefully.

"Shove it,"

"I second the motion," Celery says with a grin. It's good to have him back on the team.

Kyle rolls his eyes, "Thanks. I really appreciate it." With one big slurp, I finish my cereal and get up from the table.

"You ready?" I ask Celery. He gets up too.

"Sure, all I came to pick up was you so if you're ready then so am I,"

"Then let's plough,"

Our school is about 10 minutes away, by foot. Taking a car would be outrageous, useless and wasteful. In general I'm not that big a fan of cars. Okay, they're really convenient but they're shit for the earth and if you live in the city you can take the bus pretty much anywhere so what's the point? It's a nice school, spill off of the good, and yeah, slightly snobbish, neighbour hood we live in. People shout hellos, but Celery sticks even closer to me than usual. Which, let me tell you, is no easy feat. Like how much closer than our pervious freakishly close can you get? But Celery's certainly making a go of it, he even hovers around while I get books from my locker.

"When did you evolve past books and writing utensils?" I ask in a cheerfully sarcastic tone of voice. He shrugs.

"I'll get them in a second," He replies in his 'I'm going to pretend to be oblivious to your tone' tone. I smile.

"You don't have to, you know, protect me or something. I promise not to stray - I won't even look!" He smiles back sheepishly.

"Slow down?" I pat his cheek.

"Only a little," The bell rings.

"Whoops, gotta go! See you in third period!" Shaking my head I make my way to class.

Celery was well behaved in our joint period of Applied Math (and helpful in getting me through the work, as usual. Incompetent teachers could stand to

take a lesson or two from him on the finer points of unfogging the many mysteries of mathematics for other young minds such as my own) but at lunch, he slips his arm round the back of my chair as soon as we sit down. Now, this really isn't even anything new, and the fact that we're very physical with each other is a long past accepted quirk of our friendship, but it suddenly feels very strange to have him doing it the way things are with us now. I lean forward in my chair, under the pretence of taking a sip of my drink, but never fully lean back again.

We don't have many common friends, it's true, but we have a group of people we're both friendly with. Some of them are from my group and some are from his, we're sociable in the halls and during classes, and for an hour a day we're all together at the same cafeteria table. That's one small step for man, one giant leap for teenage kind. Really, it is sort of a big deal. Breaking down the social barriers and everything. When we started doing it back in like grade nine, we were pioneers, now it's everyday life. Like I said, I like his buddies, and we get along well enough, there just wouldn't be anything we had in common to do or talk about outside of school, so that's where we keep it. Basically, there's five of us core lunchers who show up pretty much everyday. Celery and me, Brian, Alex and Jonas. He's new (I'm talking Jonas over here), and since he doesn't know where he fits yet in the pecking order, he's chilling with us. I like him, so I hope he'll stick around.

"Enjoying your drink?" Jonas asks. I wrinkle my brow at him.

"Uh, sure," They nod to each other. Celery doesn't seem to be in on whatever's going on. We share a 'people are weird' look and then shrug it off.

Lunch passes. I leave a few minutes early to use the bathroom, but not before I have to glare sharply at Celery so he doesn't come along. As I'm walking down the hall after answering nature's call I come directly into Cherrie's path. She smiles. Just what I need.

"Hi!" I nod and look over her shoulder, hoping to see someone I can yell hello to as a means of escape.

Listen, most girls, I like. They're fine. I have nothing against the gender on the whole. It's just SOME girls are so GIRLY. Maybe true 'girliness' is completely different but what I mean is stuff like they're into fashion and makeup and pop stars. They know about things like what's the new pink and when you're supposed to stop wearing white. Cherrie is one such girl. Even her voice, it's... artificial. Too sugary and fake sounding. Like it's practised or something. It's kinda freaky.

While I'm trying escape her figurative clutches she actually puts her hand on my shoulder. It's like she thinks I already belong to her or

something. I honestly don't understand what a girl like Cherrie sees in me. I'm not built and into sports. I don't drive a sports car (or any car for that matter). I have no trust fund. I mean, she's a CHEERLEADER for heavens sake! Frankly, I don't even know why she knows who I am, let alone is interested in me. She shouldn't even know my name, or, at least not care about finding out what it is. The types of girls who usually go for me are closer to my kind. Sort of geeky with weird senses of humour, the kind of girls I actually like hanging out with and am nice to. Maybe she sees me as a challenge or something. If that's the case, she's got a much harder road ahead of her than she thinks. Speaking of challenges...

"Hey Cherrie," Celery's arrived on the scene. His tone isn't friendly, his smile isn't good-natured. She removes her hand.

"Hi," She says in an equally hostile tone.

I shift my eyes back and forth between them, feeling like I'm being fought over, which I sort of am I guess. You'd think that any second now they were going to start pulling each others hair. Instead Celery puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me close. He might as well have said, 'back-off - get your own boyfriend!' Cherrie shoots me a hopeful look but I just stand there feeling cosmically uncomfortable and she leaves.

"My knight in shining armour," I say, my voice caught between nervousness and sarcasm. Celery lets go.

"I'm sorry - I just can't stand her! If you leave me for a girl, maybe I'd be able to understand. If you leave me for THAT, I might have to kill you."

"I'm not leaving you for anyone ever. Especially not some valley girl cheerleading bitch. That's just plain insulting. Have some respect," He grins.

"You're not mad?" I shrug.

"If you keep doing that kind of thing, people will start to talk,"

"Would that matter? I mean, would it bother you?" I scrunch my face.

"I don't know," He smiles tightly.

"I'm trying not to push, it's just not really working so far. I guess, now that YOU know, and the world hasn't opened up and swallowed me whole, I don't really care about anyone else's reaction." Okay, wow to the power of 15.

"I love you," I whisper. "I love you so much." Any more of that and we'll both tear up.

"Class," he croaks. Nodding, I start to walk with him, and Celery stays a respectful distance away from me. I find myself missing his arm, the closeness.

In class instead of working I think about his question. Should it bother me? No. Does it? I'm not sure. We'd be okay, I'm pretty sure of that. All the people I run with are accepting and open people, and I think Celery's also been careful not to get close to anyone who also doesn't fit that bill. Not that either of us are really all that close to anyone but each other. I've always checked out my potential school friends, trying to make sure if I did come out, even though I'd never been ready to before, they would back me up. When you get right down to it, the only person I've really ever wanted to hide my sexuality from all this time has been Celery. Obviously that's no longer an issue. But am I ready to go for it like he is? The only thing that I'm really worried about in the end is that our touching will go from being seen as a weirdness about our friendship to us flaunting our gay relationship. But what's wrong with that anyway? Now that I think about it, I might go for a little flaunting. In a day or two. Once I've... say it with me: had a little while to get used to the idea.

Once that's settled in my mind I begin staring at Celery, and he's adorably unaware, scribbling dutifully away. We're in French with Mr. Mere, and he's one of the few remaining teachers who still makes an issue about Celery's hat. The battle between them has been going on for years. At the beginning it was loud (Mr. Mere shouting in French and everyone else laughing) but now it's more silent and strategic. Celery always enters class with his hat on his books, keeping it there while he sits down and so on. Attendance is taken, maybe there's a lecture, but then Mr. Mere turns his back on us writing out stuff we have to translate or other assignments and on goes the hat. Every time Mr. Mere starts to turn around Celery plucks off his hat in an instant, brings it down around his back and drops it demurely into his lap. This can happen up to 20 times in one class, and I'm SURE Mr. Mere has to know what's going on, but they both insist on keeping up the charade. I don't know why, it probably has something to do with the fact that they're both insane. But like, ESPECIALLY Mr. Mere. Big time especially.

Deep thoughts and moony staring notwithstanding, I finish my work before the bell. What can I say? I'm naturally brilliant. It's kind of a chore really, being beautiful and hilarious as well...

Celery waits for me outside the door and I smile big, just in case he's still thinking maybe I'm mad or whatever. Chances are one of us would have gotten around to saying something eventually, but before either of us has the chance an old friend is kind enough to shout, "Hey faggots!" Yes everyone, it's hey faggots time again. Let's all get out our signs and ribbons.

"Fuck-off," Celery says in a low growl, standing up full height, shoulders thrown back, all big and tough looking. Me, I stand there uselessly on the side, looking nice. Which okay, I kick ass at. Only problem is, now I don't know about you, but I'M thinking I'm starting to look a tiny bit like the girlfriend here. Who's with me?

"I'd like to see you make me fag," Celery (who by the way, IS a fighter) grabs a fist full of the guys shirt and rams him not so nicely against some lockers.

"Give it up you dumb-ass. I'm getting sick of doing this everyday." After one more slam for good measure, Celery lets him go. The guy mutters a few less than fond farewells under his breath, but disappears into the crowd. I sigh. Celery's not the only one who thinks this whole thing's starting to get a little old.

What's that? Oh. Did I forget to mention that not everything is perfect in this little world of ours? Sorry. I guess I figured you'd like, assume or something. Life - not perfect? Go figure. Anyway, to some people there just is no such thing as a 'cool geek'. Not everyone just accepts our closeness as a 'thing' about our friendship. Not everyone is a nice guy. I know I'm throwing a lot of new concepts at you all at once but try and see if you can't muddle along.

The lovely gentlemen who you've just been introduced to is Brendan Kobus. He's everything a villain should be. Dumb, mean, big. He's your classic, stereotypical, 'there's one in every highschool' bully. You know. Not really popular, but with a bunch of obedient, slightly dumber and smaller minions who can usually be found standing a foot or two behind him shouting insults at whoever he's attacking and repeating whatever he says. They also say 'yeah!' a lot. I'm sure you're familiar with the breed. We've had this special relationship you've just witnessed since grade seven. It started out innocently enough, well, for me and Celery that is. We'd been doing it for about six years, and madly and secretly in love or not, I think we both honestly didn't pay a whole lot of attention to what we were doing. It was during the first assembly of the year. The entire school was crowded into the gym, sitting on the damn floor (both my feet were asleep) and Celery and I (wait for it, here's comes another shocker) were sitting next to each other.

Well okay, it was probably closer to on top of each other. Our sides and arms were touching and our heads were leaning pressed together, our hair mingling. I think maybe one of his hands might have been on my knee. I know that's not exactly normal teenage boy stuff, but it was what was normal for us. What still is. Gay and in love or not, we've always loved touching each other. Craved that closeness. I will also plead the innocence of youth. So anyway, our man Kobus was sitting right behind us and wasn't a huge fan of

the view. He got really nasty and vicious in a quiet way (you remember, kids are mean) but we just went closer. It wasn't even on purpose. We just automatically reacted by wanting to protect each other and to form a tighter bond against the assault. I think at the start he wasn't even all that serious and wanted only to make us aware of what we were doing, having a little fun in the process of course, but when Celery put his arm around me (not for a second realising this was only going to make it worse) Brendan made up his mind about us. He's hated us and called us fags ever since. Most of our altercations end like that last one, but he won't drop it. I know, I know. How could we have not talked about being gay sooner with all this going on? I can only say that because neither one of us has ever seen of ourselves as fags we never felt the need to discuss it.

Our after school ritual is always pretty much the same. What's that? All of the things we do are pretty much the same? Well give it a rest. We've been friends for over 10 years. Patterns and routines usually tend to develop in that amount of time. It's not boring either, we do the stuff we do because we enjoy it not because we feel like obligated to under the terms of our friendship agreement. Can I continue on now? Thanks so much. What we usually do is meet at my locker (cause mine's further away from my last period class and so it takes me longer to get my stuff, that's why) say hey or whatever and then go over to my house. We'll do our homework on the kitchen table, eat a snack and then if the weather's warm enough we'll go skate until supper, which is around 6:30 in my house and whenever in his. After supper, if he's stayed over that is, and usually even is he hasn't, we do lots of different things, or if we're busy, like if Cel has practice, or if I have to work on yearbook or the paper, we'll split up from there.

At the end of the day when I get to my locker, Celery isn't there, but Cherrie is. I look around without trying to be obvious about it, and don't see him anywhere. So no, 'spring forth burly protector - and save me!'

"Um, hi Cherrie," She puts on her biggest, and to me most insincere seeming smile.

"Can we talk?" I shrug.

"What about?" How to stay sounding uninterested and not rude at the same time by Carrots Vasskez.

"I think we need to be honest with each other," Yeah. That's what we need. Suuuurrrre.

"Oh?"

"Yes, we've been beating around the bush for a long time now but I think it's time we cleared the air with some open honesty,"

"Uh-"

"Ready to go?" Jeez! I've really got to talk to him about starting to keep some coins in his pocket or something so he can't sneak up on me like that anymore.

"Yeah. Or um," looking back over to Cherrie, "did you still want to talk?" She tosses her hair and smiles in an utterly fake manner.

"That's okay, we'll finish this later..." She runs her finger along my chest as she walks away.

"Hussy," He mutters under his breath.

"Whatever hee-man. Thanks for the rescue,"

"Someone had to, as you seem totally incapable of fighting off the female masses by yourself."

"Your confidence in me is overwhelming," His eyes are bright, loving.

"It's my confidence in you that's the problem. I love you and am fully aware that everybody else feels the same. I'm just trying to maintain my position,"

"There's no one on the bench, there never will be, and chances are you'll stay in form for a good long while yet," He gives me a hard look.

"Care, if you think there's no one on the bench, dreaming of this spot, you're more than a couple waves short of a tide. But I'm not going to be the one who tells you to open your eyes to your many possibilities. I'm insecure enough as it is," I give him a swat upside the head with his hat.

"Lose it, or I'll actually get upset with you. If you're insecure it means you don't trust me, and that'll really take us somewhere uncool, so watch it." He grins. "What?"

"Sorry, can't tell you. It's my secret weapon. The secret is generally thought to be the most important part of any secret weapon and that is certainly the case here,"

"You do know I have ways of making you talk," I say wickedly. He laughs.

"And I'm sure I'll enjoy every minute."

The walk home is quick, pleasant. We spend it and the rest of the afternoon getting to know each other in new ways. Not THOSE kinds of ways, gutter

brain! I mean stuff like what we were talking about the last night. Being gay or Carrot-sexual stuff, talk filled with stories that have suddenly taken on whole new meanings, old memories. And okay, there's a little bit of the other stuff too. So sue me. I'm lying in his lap on the living room floor when mom comes home.

"Hi guys," She says like I'm not lying in his lap on the living room floor.
"Planning to stay for dinner Celery?" He looks down at me, and though I'm sort of on the stunned side, I shrug.

"I think so, probably,"

"Fine, I was planning on ordering some pizza, it's a light day at the bakery but I'm still quite tired. What's the vote from this room?"

"That's great mom," She smiles and starts out of the room, but turns at the last minute and curls her finger at me, I get up and she leads me by the arm out of the room.

"I'm very happy for you, don't be embarrassed, but I've been wondering when you two would finally wake up to your feelings for each other and admit them, and I'm overjoyed that you have." Don't be embarrassed?! I feel like burying my head in the floor tiles. Like damn, how obvious are we? I mean were Celery and I like the only ones who didn't know what was really going on?

"Uh, thanks mom," She hugs me.

"Your dad's going to be so proud! And wait until I tell the other parents at the meeting this Wednesday,"

"Mom! You're not going to announce the details of my relationship with Celery to the entire PFLAG membership!" She laughs.

"Why not?" Cause! That's why! I don't know... bah. Everybody seems to be taking this with a pinch more grace than me. Is it my fault I'm easily frazzled by change? I'm a creature of habit! I thrive on routine and predictability! HELP!

"Whatever mom," I say swallowing my pride (and just a touch of the insanity). "It's just nice to know you support us." She gives me another hug.

"I most certainly do! You go back now and catch him up to speed, I would have talked to you both at the same time but..."

"You thought I might freak out?" You gotta love that 'you're my son and I know you much better than you think' mother smile.

"How are you doing with all this?" I shrug.

"99% of me has never been happier,"

"And that other 1% is terrified?" She's cool my mom. I wasn't kidding before. She's really great.

"It's happening so fast and it's like everyone was expecting it, me too even in a way, but I'm the only one who seems to be finding handling the transfer from possibility to reality to be a bit of a challenge."

"That's how you are sweat-heart," not a word, "it's part of your personality. It takes you longer than some people to get used to new things, but that's okay! You're a careful person, you like to test the waters," that usually happens after I've thrown myself in head first mind you, "There's nothing wrong with being exactly how you are and going as slowly as you need to. Celery knows you and it's very clear that he loves you. I trust him to wait as long as you need. To keep your pace. You see, if a mother can trust a person with her son's heart, you KNOW he has to be an okay guy! And tell him about that 1%, he'll help you work on it," I smile.

"Thanks mom,"

"Any time,"

Celery's sitting up resting his back against the couch with a pensive look on his face when I return. I grin big.

"We've got the official parental blessing," His eyes roll back and his shoulders sag with relief. I crawl the rest of the way back into his arms.

"I don't even know why I was worried like, you're parents are so great!"

"They already knew I was gay, so it wasn't that huge a shock anyway,"

"They KNEW?" I laugh at his voice and expression.

"Yeah. I told them when I was 13 - not that I was in love with you just that I figured I was gay. She knew anyway though, dad too apparently. I guess the only people we were really all that good at fooling was each other,"

"Too bad it didn't go the other way,"

"Hey, no regrets remember?" He smiles.

"Oh yeah, I didn't mean it like that. I just feel sort of dumb, and maybe embarrassed a little. Like your parents knew all this time that I was in love with you? I feel self-conscious,"

"I thought you were big 'I don't care about anyone else's reaction' guy?"

"They're your parents! I have to make sure I do right by you now," I grab his hat and hit him in the face with it.

"Less than a day and the abuse has started already," I say with one of my patented self-pitying sighs.

"Get over yourself,"

"I love you," I say reaching up and pulling his head down to my lips.

"I love you too," He says sweetly after the kiss.

"So, what should we do?"

"I don't know about you but I'm enjoying just looking at you right here," I smile, rolling my eyes.

"I meant like tonight, after supper, do you want to go out or..."

"Where would we go? Besides, it's a school night and stuff. I'm down for a Buffy repeat on Space and then maybe that homework we managed to forget to do," that might sound boring to you, but it's routine, which is exactly what I need to help myself settle down and begin to adjust. I'm sure Celery knows that.

"Yeah, oh--" cut off by the bell. We wait a second and mom pops her head into the room,

"Phone's for you Carrots," I get up and take the cordless from her.

"Hey,"

"Hi, it's me," ME?! The only 'me' I have is Celery.

"Uh..."

"Cherrie," next thing I know she's going to be throwing rocks at my window. Can you say stalker?!

"Hi," The look of discomfort and disgust on my face immediately lets Celery know who I'm talking to. He gets up looking pissed, and starts to walk over like he's going to take the phone out of my hand or something. "It's okay,"

I hiss at him.

"So Cherrie, what can I do for you?"

"I still think we need to talk and I was hoping you'd come over after you ate supper so we could do that..."

"I can't Cherrie. I have plans," I look at him, seeing that despite himself there's fear in Celery's eyes, and make up my mind. "But even if I didn't, I'm not interested. I think I have a pretty good idea what you want to talk about Cherrie, and the answer is no. I'm with someone, I'm not looking for a relationship with you or anyone else,"

"You're WITH someone?" Hey kids, we have our first candidate for the 'What?! I didn't know that!' Carrots and Celery really AREN'T that obvious award.

"Yeah," I'm not looking at him, I can't right now.

"WHO?" It's moment of truth time eh?

"Uh..."

Carrots and Celery Chapter Four
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Thu, 02 Jan 2003 22:09:56 -0600

"Uh..."

So I'm a wimp. Like you didn't already know that from the 10 plus years it took me to get around to telling Celery my feelings. He sits back down, looking like he's trying NOT to look defeated.

"Cherrie, it's Celery. Celery is my boyfriend. And he's just about the most incredible person in the entire world. I love him very much. Feel free to tell as many of your gossip connections as you like about this," and then, for the sake of being dramatic, I hang up.

I can look at him then. His face is expressionless in shock. I walk over and kneel down fitting myself in between his knees.

"The adjustment process is starting to kick in," I kiss him hard. "I'm not there completely, but I'll do anything for you, so this wasn't very much. But now can you please banish Cherrie from your realm of worry forever? She's not a threat and never has been. I'd really like it if we could both put her behind us,"

"Consider it done."

Well of course I panic that night once he's gone. I mean, come on! Panicking is what I do best! But Kyle, who apparently and quite mysteriously seems to know everything, comes into my room and gives me a pep talk which surprisingly enough (surprising considering it was sarcastic, not at all gentle and filled with stuff like 'stop being such an idiot'; so basically classic Kyle) makes me feel a lot better. My money's on it comforting me cause that's the way Kyle always treats me. By now, you should be familiar with my love of routine. Besides, it's not like I don't know he doesn't mean it the way it sounds, that's like 'his way'. He does it partly for my benefit anyway, just cause he knows about my routine fetish. He understands that about me, plus we share an unease about expressing feelings in the normal way. I pretty much get my sarcasm and jokes instead of real feelings from Kyle. Who knows where he got it from. Both my parents are freakish about sharing feelings. Maybe it skips a generation like well, all those diseases that skip a generation. What do you think I am? A doctor? But getting back to my original point. It's also a kind of older brother thing. Sigh. What's an older brother thing? Man, read like TWO sentences back, and figure it out for yourself. Give me a break. And he did give me what could have been interpreted as a loving pat on the back as he left, so it's cool.

Celery shows up half way through my breakfast once again, surprising me less and I'm able to greet him properly.

"Good morning," I say once we've unglued our lips. Kyle groans a little, but smiles faintly at the same time.

"I protest," He says cheerfully.

"It's the principal of the thing right?" He nods.

"Exactly."

Where's everyone else you say? This is something I've explained already isn't it? Haven't you been listening? Crazy parents that like the morning and have to go to work at insane hours, keener twins who go to school early and a little sister who has rocketed into teen-hood early and refuses to rise from her bed any earlier than 10 minutes before she needs to leave. Damn. You were right. I hadn't explained that. Well, not all of it anyway. Sorry. Really. I'm sorry. I mean that sincerely.

"Are you hungry today?" I ask him, hoping to see the grin that will tell me the thing yesterday at breakfast is ancient someday-we'll-look-back-on-this-and-laugh history. I do.

"No, I'm here for the same reason I was yesterday."

"That's okay too," We kiss again.

"Ga!" Kyle says covering his eyes and shuddering.

"Do you realize what I'm going to do to you if you ever bring a girlfriend home now because of this?" I ask, shaking my head. He nods.

"Absolutely," I stroke my chin thoughtfully a few times.

"Of course, that'll probably never HAPPEN, so really, why worry?" Celery laughs, but mostly to show his support not cause it was all that funny. Isn't he cute to do something like that? And aren't I lucky? The correct answer here is DAMN RIGHT.

"I love you," I tell him. He grins.

"You better, I'm the best thing that ever happened to you,"

"You really are you know," I say seriously.

"Right back at ya slick," He says sweetly. Kyle buries his head under his arms face down to the table, uttering 'why me?' over and over. No doubt

about it, I love the guy.

"Let's rock dude, before Kyle makes himself hoarse,"

We're rounding the corner of the last block before we reach school when I ask him, "So you know people are going to be talking right?" He shrugs.

"If they aren't, I may just fall down from the shock. It's cool with me Care, like, screw them if they don't like it. We've been putting up with flack for years anyway, the only difference now is that we're admitting the rumours are true. Our true friends will stick by us regardless," He puts his arm around me, "Anyway, I already have what I need. I said I don't really care about anyone else, and I don't. If anyone chooses to drop me cause I love you, then they weren't even worth knowing. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. And I mean, I feel the same. It's just..."

"Saying it isn't as hard as living it?" I smile and roll my eyes.

"You know me too well man,"

"I love you, I've been paying attention,"

"Smooth operator,"

"I haven't said a thing I haven't meant," I grin up at him.

"I know, that's what makes it so special," Before I know what's happening, he's kissing me. On the street! Like 25 meters away from school, and there are people EVERYWHERE!!! It's no gentle closed lipped kiss either. There's some serious tongue action going on here. I'm surprised people aren't hooting. I jerk my head away and take a few wobbly steps back.

"Hey! Whoa, what do you think you were doing there?" I stammer boggling my head at him.

"Kissing my boyfriend," Like this makes perfect sense and doesn't require further explanation or discussion. He's not self confident like me, EH Kyle? Oh yeah. That's true. Uh-huh. Sure.

"Here?"

"Here, wherever," he grins for a moment longer but then sighs, and is beginning to look less sure of himself. "But not if you don't want me too. I shouldn't have done that. I should have like asked or something, I, um, I'm," Oh terrific. He's starting to babble. Pretty soon he won't even be making real words anymore, just sad pathetic little sounds. And it's all my stupid ass fault.

"No, hey, it's okay," I say trying to stem the flow. "Really. I shouldn't have reacted like that. There was absolutely no reason you shouldn't have done that. I said you should never feel like you couldn't kiss me when you wanted to and I meant it. I don't want us to do that anymore, we've had enough years of it. It's time for something new. And we're out at school now pretty much anyway, so... don't worry about it. Sorry for reacting so badly?"

"Since we're both sorry and we've forgiven each other, can I kiss you again?" I laugh. You would too if you saw the cute little look on his face. You should see how big he can get those beautiful eyes, how much those sexy lips can fill out into a pout.

"Yeah, you better," His second kiss is no more reserved than the first, but I throw my tongue more into the ring this time.

"We have to go to school," I murmur into his mouth.

"Yeah," He says, giving me a final kiss.

"We should try and find the guys before they hear it from someone else don't you think?"

"Which guys?"

"Well, you can talk to whoever you think you need to, and there are some others I want to see, but I was thinking we could tell Alex, Brian and Jonas together?" He ruffles my hair.

"From now on Care, we do everything together,"

Once I get over the sweetness of what he's said I reply haughtily, "And that's different from before... HOW?" He rolls his eyes.

"Yeah, you're funny,"

"Wow! Sarcasm, I'm impressed," He shoves me gently, but I propel myself in slow motion until I careen into the wall of the school, rebounding and hitting it again, settling with a 'oomph!' against it. Celery drags me away by my back collar assuring me that I'm still not funny.

To my great surprise and delight, when we go looking for them, we find Jonas, Alex and Brian all sitting together in the cafeteria having coffee. The school provides a breakfast program and like everyone has at least coffee or tea or something. It's kind of dumb, since we don't really have too many poor kids at our school and the funding should probably be used for some inner city school or something, but that's politics for

you. And don't let the self righteous act fool you, I have stuff there myself sometimes. I'm just not usually much of an early bird.

"Hey guys," I say. Alex says 'hi', Brian says 'yo' and Jonas just grins. We sit down.

"We have something to tell you guys," Leave it to Celery to cut right to the chase. They turn their full attention to us, looking interested. "If you have a problem with it, then that sucks and stay the hell away from us, but we're gay," Their expressions don't change much.

"When?" Jonas asks seeming interested in a weird way. Like, it's not so much he seems surprised as... I don't know, like he's fact checking. It's hard to explain. One of those 'you had to there' things I guess.

"Uh, we've kind of always been gay," Jonas shrugs, almost impatiently.

"Well yeah, I mean when did you two get together, like, you ARE together right?" Celery nods. I'm pretty much giving him this one.

"So, since when?" Brian asks.

"Saturday night," Jonas grins and rubs his hands together.

"Yes! Never go in against a Sicilian when death is on the line," One of my favourite things about Jonas is that he loves 'The Princess Bride' almost as much and Celery and I do. I don't really understand his use of that quote here though.

"Huh?" I ask. Alex smiles shyly.

"Well don't be mad but we made a bet about when you guys would figure it out,"

"You KNEW?" Eventually, you'd think this would stop surprising me. Hasn't happened yet. His smile gets even more embarrassed.

"No offence or anything, but you guys are pretty obvious about it. Like, anyone who pays attention and has a mind open enough to accept that kind of thing can see you're totally in love,"

"We are of course one hundred and ten percent behind y'all," Brian says quickly.

"Yeah!" Alex adds almost right on top of Brian. "It doesn't matter at all. We're happy you've got it out in the open with each other though," The other two nod.

"Oh and we will be teasing you," Jonas is quick to put in.

"That's fine," I say with a chuckle. "We figured it wouldn't be a big deal, but you can never be completely sure about this kind of thing," I finish, speaking for only the second time.

"You coming out at school?" Alex asks.

"We already have sort of," I say and explain about Cherrie. They all wrinkle their noses.

"Ew, super bitch. That's not cool," Jonas says with a grimace.

"Yeah, but now that I've set her straight hopefully she'll stop stalking me," They all stare at me for a second, Celery not included, and then start laughing hysterically.

"What?"

Jonas is half choking on the coffee he was drinking a second before the laugh fest began, but in a few seconds he's able to put together a coherent sentence, "Dude, if you think that a little thing like that fact that you 'THINK' you're gay is going to change ANYTHING for a girl like Cherrie, you're seriously deluded."

"What do you mean? She knows I'm gay, that means I like GUYS, how could she think she'd still have a chance?" I am at this point still assuming he's shitting me.

"Man, girls like that don't care about such minor details. She thinks she can have whoever she wants, and you better believe that includes gay guys. She's under the impression that no man alive can resist her feminine charms. If anything, the fact that you're gay is just going to encourage her. Like, why was she even after you in the first place? My guess is because you so obviously don't dig her so that made you a challenge." I have to ignore Jonas for a second to tend to Celery, who's looking a little unwell.

"Don't worry about her Cel, I think you know she means nothing to me but we're not going to let her make trouble either. I don't care what she does, what kind of shit she pulls, it doesn't matter. Only you do, okay?" For that moment, when he smiles, it's like none of the guys, or anyone else in the entire cafeteria for that matter, are even there. It's just us.

"I'd love to whistle, but I'm afraid Celery would beat my ass," Jonas quips. He broke the moment but that's okay. "Anyway," he continues, "Cherrie might not be your only problem, like sorry to rain on your parade and shit, but Cel, isn't that chick Meghan hot for your totally

unattainable bod?" Celery's sad pathetic look returns.

"Yeah,"

"Damn, she's even worse!" I look at Jonas with a 'you're not helping' glare. He smiles sheepishly and shrugs, palms up, to me.

"She doesn't matter either," I say running my finger along his jaw so he'll turn and look at me. He smiles again, a little less confidently this time, but it's something.

"Shit, I've gotta go, detention," Alex blurts out of no where, grabbing his books, the remainder of his coffee and speedily getting up. "I'll talk to you guys later," Alex is nice. I don't really know much about him, but he's cool. I didn't figure him for the before school detention type though. Who was the smart person who said you learn something new everyday? I want to shake their hand.

Brian's getting up too. "I've gotta go too, Mrs. Lynch said she was going to go over my last Chemistry test with me and if I can figure some of it out she'll give me a 50R," Do I have to explain what a 50R is? You've got to be kidding me. Okay, I did bite your head off by mistake about the breakfast thing, so I'll give you this one. It means 50 RAISE. As in you fail but the teacher bumps your mark up to a 50 so you pass. Now don't we all feel better?

"What about you Jonas, you have somewhere to run off to too?" He shrugs.

"I can take a hint if you want to be alone,"

"Oh no! Like stay, that was just one of my not-so-funny jokes," I explain with a 'alright so I'm a lame dope' smile.

"I have news Carrots," Celery says sadly, "all of your jokes are of the not-so-funny variety," this time I just flip off his hat and let it land on the ground.

He twists around behind his chair, picks the hat up, and then gets up himself and thrusts his hat in my direction like it's a sword, "Hallo, my name is Celery Schnider, you knocked my hat off, prepare to die!" Oh man, SERIOUSLY. Rent 'The Princess Bride' already. It'll makes things a lot easier on all of us.

"Sit down you lunatic," I say disapprovingly with a grin. He doesn't.

"Stupid me I sort of forgot there's somewhere I need to be right now too,"

"Where," He smiles.

"The weight room," I groan. I forgot he has a spare first period today. That always means he works out.

"That's me too then isn't it?" He nods.

"I can't work out without my spotter," I snort.

"Of course not. Some giant weight might fall on you and if I wasn't there to scream like a little girl until someone finally heard me and called for help, you could be seriously hurt," Jonas laughs.

"I'm incredibly buff, I think I'll come along and wait in the wings in case someone needs to save the day," If anything he's smaller than me really, way smaller actually, never mind that 'if anything' business, but Celery and I welcome his company just the same. He's a funny guy.

Jonas does come with us to the weight room but after about 5 minutes me and Celery start acting like the 'pump you up!' guys from the early 90's SNL (which is way better than the current stuff by the way) and I guess he found us kind of annoying or something cause Jonas leaves not long after that. I feel kind of bad about it but I can't exactly say I miss him. I do like Jonas, but Celery and I just get caught up in our own thing you know? In each other. It's just something that happens with us. It's like I already said, we have our different worlds, and then there's the 'real' world with everyone in it too I guess where we all co-exist, but most of the time we chill in the world we create together that's only for the two of us.

Cherrie corners me for the second time this week as I'm walking out of my second period class. She hasn't lost the determined gleam in her eye. Shit.

"Cherrie," I say evenly.

"I didn't tell anyone about what you said on the phone yesterday," so that's why no one was paying any extra attention. So much for the 'everyone's just tolerant these days' dream. "Because I'm sure you didn't mean it. It was a joke right?" I take a step back in case she has any ideas about touching me again.

"No, Cherrie, it was NOT a joke! I'm dating Celery, he's my boyfriend." I say emphatically. She laughs.

"You have such a great sense of humour, that's one of the things I've always liked about you,"

"You're not listening to me, pay close attention to my words and the sound of my voice: I AM GAY." I said it loud enough that a few people turn and

look. Cherrie's mask disappears for a second and her face turns panicky and mean. She grabs me by the arms and starts marching me down the hall. Apparently she's not big on being embarrassed in a hallway filled with her classmates. Finally. Something in common. I feel so close to her right now.

"You shouldn't say stuff like that! Not everyone will know you're joking,"

"I'm not!" I yell ripping my arm away. She quickly concocts a tender look of concern, as fake as any smile.

"You poor dear. Whatever made you think you had to be gay? You're very attractive, lots of girls would go for you," Celery damnit, where are you when I need you? I'm dealing with Crazy girl here! I need reinforcements!

"That doesn't matter, I wouldn't go for them. I didn't choose to be gay or decide to settle for being gay since I couldn't get girls, I don't WANT girls. I want boys, well, one boy in particular actually. CELERY, you know, he's the guy I'm in love with," She shakes her head.

"That's just crazy talk. For one thing, boys can't fall in love. For another, you're not gay. You just think you are,"

"GRAAA!" I shout clenching my fists, startling Cherrie in the process. Finally. Some results. "Leave me alone," I growl, and take advantage of her temporary paralysis to flee the scene.

I run into Celery mid flee and I practically hurl myself into his arms. Taken aback, he laughs asking, "what's with you?"

"Cherrie," I pant. "She's like totally insane."

"Yeah I know," he says removing one arm but leaving the other around my shoulders. This is one of our classic poses, his arm draped over my shoulders and mine around his waist. It's pretty much a semi-constant when we're talking or standing. Maybe you've noticed that by now. You have? Good job. You get a gold star.

"How's the Meghan front looking?"

"All clear so far, I think she's sick or something. I haven't seen her all day."

"Lucky,"

"For both of us. When she comes back, they'll probably team up," We shudder.

"But they're no match for us, right?" I say boldly, confidence about 80% genuine.

"Right," Celery says sounding about the same.

"Fuck them," I say. He smiles.

"Damn right, fuck the world!" 'Fuck the World,' if you want to know, and even if you don't, too bad you get to learn, is a Queers song. It's really awesome too. Who are the Queers? Sigh. I'd love to get mad at you, but like hardly anyone knows who they are. Have you heard of the Ramones at least? No? That's pretty sad. Anyway, the Ramones are one of the parents of the punk movement, and the Queers are another punk band, they started way later, but their sound is totally influenced by the Ramones. There's a little history lesson for you. There will be a pop quiz later today. More gold stars for everyone who gets the answers right.

By lunch, it's clear the rumour mill has finally gotten ahold of the news. We get looks of all kinds, curious, disgusted, surprised, disgusted, pleased, disgusted... Mostly the public is kind to us though. There are comments - well of COURSE there are - but they're pretty tame and no one tries to fight us or anything. Not like I really expected them to, considering what a brick wall Celery can be. He's really ISN'T that huge, he's just super strong. And I guess height wise, the guy's practically a giant. Well, if you consider 6 ft 4 a giant anyway. I'm tall too, (extra special glittery gold stars for everyone who remembered that!) but only like 5 ft 10. Around Celery I feel short.

We sit with Jonas, Alex, and Brian like always, and lunch actually passes normally. As does, to my great surprise, the rest of the day. We continue to get the staring treatment, a few people come up to us and ask if it's true, and predictably there's a hallway confrontation with Brendan, but that's hardly new. Before I know it another wonderful day of mandatory education is complete and I'm rifling through my locker with Celery beside me.

"What do we have today?" I'm referring of course to the homework situation.

"I have history questions you're going to help me with and you weren't really getting that new concept in Pre Calc," I still can't believe I let him talk me into that class, "but other than that nothing, unless you got homework in Bio or World Issues." He takes Physics when I have Bio and when I'm in World Issues he's in Calculus. I told you he was a freak about math. That wasn't one of those times I was being sarcastic.

"No, I'm cool,"

"You'd like to think that wouldn't you,"

"Oh ha ha. Very funny."

"You don't appreciate me anymore," he whines happily.

"There's nothing to appreciate dumkopf,"

"Dumkopf?"

"Yeah," he throws his arm over my shoulders and laughs.

"Whatever you say Carrots,"

Carrots and Celery Chapter Five
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Mon, 06 Jan 2003 17:03:05 -0600

Celery puts us straight to work when we get home but it goes okay because we both have the excellent motivation of a kiss following every right answer. Our new study system goes fine until the twins arrive on the scene in the middle of a kiss I was giving Celery for remembering all the amendments to the Young Offenders Act.

"Whoa," They say in unison.

Most twins are a little freaky, but my brothers are freakily freaky. For example. They dress alike - unintentionally. How is this possible you ask? Well when they turned six and even my mom thought it was no longer cute to dress them alike she started taking them shopping separately. They still came home with the same exact clothes. And you know how there's usually a quieter, less outgoing one and another one who's loud with less inhibition? Not in this family, where weirdness is king. They think alike, they talk alike and they act alike. They like all the same things with an equal fervour and hate all the same things with a matched passion. It's VERY hard to tell them apart. One of the only ways they're like normal twins is that they love to trick people, but even that they take to a freaky level cause it often works.

"Nobody told us you were dating," Jon whines.

"It only just happened a couple days ago. We meant to take an ad out in the school paper -- you know, something tasteful--" for Buffy reasons, Celery smirks. "Or maybe rent some space on a billboard, but we kept forgetting. Do you think you can ever forgive us?" They grin. There is no WAY I was that young when I was 14.

"Sure bro. It's cool. We're happy for you guys," Jon's been their spokesperson for this round but don't let that fool you. Dave takes the lead his share of the time. I guess they'd said their piece, because after that they start rooting around for eats. A bag of cookies and giant glasses of milk in hand, Jon and Dave are gone again in no time.

"They're cute," I raise my eye brows.

"Are they?" I'm kind of on a 'who does he think is cute or hot' mission. He frowns.

"Man, they're your brothers. Don't be gross. I meant little kid cute. Jeez."

"Okay. I was only asking. They're not YOUR brothers after all," He shrugs.

"They might as well be," Okay, so that's true, he's right, and I'm a bastard. What else is new?

"You're right, sorry," I say making a wimpy go for his hand. He closes the gap and holds my fingers firmly.

"It's not something I'm going to get upset about Care, it's fine. I know by now that when stuff comes out of your mouth that seems mean chances are pretty good you didn't mean it the way it sounded,"

"I just wanted to make sure I wasn't sticking my foot in my mouth, or that if I was, you knew I..."

"I knew, don't sweat it. I don't get upset about that anymore either,"

"Low blow!" I protest. He laughs.

"I just get you back instead," I shake my head.

"You're an ass," He grins.

"A sexy ass," I'm about to push the books off the table, lift him on to it and jump him (just as a joke you understand) but Kara comes in through the back door with Sue looking for refreshments of their own. Do we all remember what I said about how great a gift privacy is when you live in a house with 6 other people? That was another one of those times I wasn't being sarcastic. Yes kids, it DOES happen. We share a sigh, a pouty look, and that done, we go back to our work. Sue's really shy and she never talks to anyone except Kara and Celery when she's over here. Kara cause they're best friends, Celery well, cause he reeks nice guy sweetness and he's quiet too so maybe she's just recognising her own kind or something. Usually, like today, when I'm around, all she does is smile shyly at him and scurry out of the room as fast as possible. Am I really such a scary guy? I ask you.

I bet I know what you're thinking, why do we bother trying to work in the kitchen if there are so many interruptions? The answer is a two-parter. First of all, before very recently, we didn't exactly feel the need for that kind of privacy, as no kissing or jumping people on tables really went down. The second reason is that my desk is totally covered in crap (not the real kind of crap you understand, just the can't-seem-to-get-around-to-throwing-it-out kind), and neither of us likes doing homework on the floor. Sure I could clean it, but doing homework on the table is easier. Anyway, it's not like we usually have that much. Whiz kids that we are.

"You're staying for dinner right?" I ask as we're clearing our books off the table and shoving them back into our backpacks.

"I was thinking about it. Everyone in your family knows now pretty much, except

Kara, and I thought it might be nice for us to have a sort of all-together announcement about it, put everyone on the same page you know?" Watch as I act calm while I'm curling into a ball of terror in my head.

"Yeah okay, that sounds," swallow, "fine."

"Carrots," He says rolling his eyes playfully and slipping his arms under mine around my hips. "You're freaking again, how come?"

"I don't know," I say detaching myself and shrugging pathetically. "Cause they're my family and this is the kind of irrational reaction I'm so good at,"

"We don't have to, and if it's too much for you honestly, tell me and we won't. But if you think you could stand it I think we should," He's not being harsh or insensitive to my needs or feelings, he's doing what almost 11 years of friendship have taught him I need. The problem with me is I can let completely ludicrous fears take over my physce if they go unchecked. Usually, all that's needed is for me to get a little push in the direction of facing them and I'm able to wake up to the fact that there really wasn't anything to be worried about in the first place. I sigh.

"We should, you're right. Kara's probably going to need mom to explain to her later that you're not my boyfriend the way Sue is her girl friend, but I'll leave that up to her. Who knows, maybe it'll even be fun," Celery grins.

"That's the spirit!"

I hate to say this, but it kind of was fun too. At least in the sense that it wasn't scarring in any way and everything went relatively normally except for the end when mom insisted on taking pictures of us holding hands and then one of Celery kissing my cheek. I acted mad at the time, for the sake of my sullen reputation, but you'd probably win if you bet that when the pictures get developed I'll steal one and like frame it to put on my wall. Nothing like getting basked in your families love I guess.

It's pretty pathetic when you think about it, but really, the most freakish thing about my highly freakish family is how much we love each other. I don't fight with any of my siblings (Kyle and me did a bit when we were younger, but it was never anything serious). There are still squabbles sometimes, but they're always forgiven and forgotten in like 20 minutes. It's just like the sitcoms except when the half an hour is up life still goes on. They only non-domestic bliss factor is maybe that mom and dad are gone so much, and the problems resulting from there being so many people around all the time. But all in all we're a big, sickeningly happy family.

After dinner we all start drifting our separate ways again. Dad goes to do the dishes (right after dinner, I know, he's a physco), mom takes 20 minutes before retiring to their study to work on some books for the bakery, the twins rush up

to their room for another epic video game battle of some kind, Kara goes back over to Sue's and Kyle disappears into the night, maybe to study in the library, maybe to hang out with friends, maybe something else.

As for me and Celery, we settle down for a nice rerun of Buffy on Space like most nights. It's cool for us because we only started watching the show two years ago, and on Space they just recently started playing back episodes starting from the very first one, so we get the best of both worlds. Never doubt the wisdom of the expression, 'If I haven't seen it, it's new to me'. I can't decide which episodes I like better, the old ones or the new ones. Buffy was a total Valley girl at the beginning, but that's just hilarious, and Willow was so cute with her long hair and all the stuff she said. I mean cute in the bunny rabbit sense not the 'irresistibly cute' sense. Plus Xander had better hair in the old ones. Shut up. Really, it's impossible to choose. I love Spike, but I think Oz is totally the man, so yeah, I think the Oz years would have to be my favourite. In the really new ones, Buffy is a total bitch, and I'm not a huge fan of Dawn, but you've gotta love the Willow and Tara love. When considering the newer seasons, it's important not forget the musical demon episode. That was... I don't even want to go into what that was. Let's just agree to try and forget it ever happened and suppress the scars. There's nothing wrong with that. Facing your issues is completely silly. But going back to my original point, I'm a freak about the show either way, old or new. It's got everything. There's the cheesy factor which in my opinion you've gotta love, there's all the crazy otherworldly, demon, supernatural stuff, and then there's absolutely hilarious problems like Willow getting addicted to magic (though that does get less hilarious) or Buffy wanting to be a cheerleader, and she makes the team only when another girl on the squad spontaneously combusts. How can you NOT love a show like that? It even freaks me out sometimes, but in a 'ga!' surprised way, not an 'ohh no I'm so scared way'. It's a good snuggle up show anyway. Mostly though I love it for the hilariousness. And Celery loves it, so there are no draw backs whatsoever. Just gravy. Wonderful, fun, vampire slaying gravy.

"Do you think Xander is hot?" I ask about half way through the show.

"What? I don't know," Celery answers sounding distracted and very unconcerned.

"Well come on, take a second to think about it," he shrugs.

"He's not ugly or anything," I roll my eyes.

"I KNOW that, and that's not what I asked. Do you think he's HOT?"

"Why?" He's slightly irritated now.

"I'm curious, that's all," Celery sighs, shifting around to look at me not the screen.

"I don't really notice stuff like that. Since before puberty you've been the

only person I've looked at in that way. On a like strictly clinical basis I can tell if a person's good looking or not, but I don't look at guys or girls and think, 'damn, they're hot'. There's only you I think about that way."

In case you're wondering, actually, no, I am not the hottest person ever to walk the earth. I'm really only slightly better than average looking. And I'm still skinny and pretty ridiculous looking in the gangly sense of the word. I guess it takes a crazy in love person like Celery to come up with stuff like that. He's not lying though, he really means it. Like I said, Celery's not a lair. You've really gotta love the guy, even if he is crazy.

"You're amazing and I love you, but we're getting your eyes checked." I say before I climb into his lap and start kissing him.

Once the euphoria wears off, in time honoured me fashion, I start to freak out. Don't even give me that sarcastic 'oh I'm shocked' bullshit. How bout a little support for once? I'll tell you why I'm freaking out! What's so special about me? Nothing! That's what. And he's never noticed anyone but me? How can that be possible? If you have any retention capabilities at all you'll remember I said I believe him and I do - that's the problem. It wasn't some romantic line - he meant it literally. Don't make fun of me! This is really bothering me. I mean, what if I like scarred him somehow when we were first friends and like permanently messed with his sex drive?

This has got me freaked out enough to want to talk to Kyle, the giver of the sarcastic lovingly mean spirited advice. Yes. I am really freaked out after all. No kidding. Oh and now you're sorry for making fun of me are you? Well it's a day late and a dollar short if you ask me. And furthermore! No. Never mind. I've got more important things to do. That's right. Things like sitting in my room being freaked out until Kyle comes home.

I must have dozed off, cause suddenly I'm lying on my bed, looking at the clock and it's 11:30. Kyle has to be back by now. I leave my room and make my way to his abode.

"Kyle?" I call, storming into his apartment like he's so fond of doing to my room.

"Bedroom!" He shouts. I go over.

"Kyle do you think I've done something to Celery?" He looks at me, squints a few times, finally pinching the bridge of his nose and making a weary sound.

"What are you talking about? Done WHAT exactly?"

"Well we were talking about this and he's not attracted to anyone but me. He never has been. Do you think I like prayed on him when he was young and vulnerable cause of the stuff with his mom, moulding his impressionable mind,

warping it so he wouldn't care about or feel he needed anyone but me?" Kyle waves his hands around, face skyward, like he's completely at a loss.

"No. No you crazy person. There are so many flaws in your logic -- if you can even call it that -- I don't even know where to start. I mean, use your brain! He was young when you met but hello! So were you! You were a 6-year-old, not some sexual predator. It's not like you put the moves on him or anything. And I'd say you've both done a pretty good job at making sure the other guy stayed exclusive. If anything it's been Celery more than you, not the other way around. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that. It makes you both deliriously happy to be that way so who am I to try and stop you? You didn't MAKE him love you either, like you didn't use mind control or something. The only extent to which you're responsible is that you're you. That's what he loves. Who the hell knows why but you know, that's a whole other kettle of whatever. So chill out alright? Like so what if you're the only person he's ever been interested in, that makes you incredibly lucky and gives you nothing to complain about validly so shut up about it. Go, be happy, do... whatever it is you guys do. Just let go of the insanity. And if that doesn't work out, you're screwed."

"Thanks Kyle. I mean that sincerely and sarcastically," he grins.

"That's what I was going for. So go on, call him at least, I bet he knew you'd freak out. He could probably use the reassurance,"

"You know for such an asshole you're a pretty nice guy,"

"Nicest asshole ever, that's me. Now make like a tree and go." Yes, I know that's not the actual expression. So does Kyle. It's from 'Back to the Future'. You know, it's a movie. Sheesh.

When I go back to my room, Celery's sitting on my bed placidly staring off into space.

"Feeling better?" He asks with a smile.

"You scared the shit out of me," I hiss, still clutching my chest. "What are you doing here?" He shrugs.

"I just wanted to make sure you got everything about the me not liking anyone else thing settled in that crazy head of yours,"

"Yeah, I did. Kyle helped." I say climbing onto the bed, snuggling in beside him. "At first I was really flattered and everything, but then I freaked out a bit,"

"Just as I suspected," That's a line from something, but I can't remember what.

"Then why didn't you try and talk to me about it?" Usually, Celery knows in

advance what's going to cause me to freak, and he'll nip it in the bud before I even get the chance.

"I thought it might be a good idea to give this one to Kyle. I just figured you might have an easier time hearing it from him since he wasn't the one telling you you're the only person they've ever thought was hot."

"That and you didn't want to be the one who had to tell me I was an idiot for not properly appreciating that the coolest guy on the planet only has eyes for me?" He smiles.

"Yeah, and that."

"I am less freaked out, almost entirely not freaked out in fact, but can you explain it to me a little better? Why do you think it is I'm the only person you've ever found attractive?"

"It's just cause I don't love them," I laugh.

"Well I don't love him, but I still think Jonathan Jackson is pretty hot," Despite the laugh, despite my tone, Celery is on to me.

"I don't mind," He says patting my hand and smiling reassuringly.

"That you've never felt anything for anyone else or that I have?"

"Both,"

"Why not?"

"Because you don't love them, and you do love me. So it means nothing. I know who has your heart. Jonathan Jackson can get stuffed."

"I love you so much. You're my own personal miracle,"

"You give as good as you get Care,"

We curl down together, lying there for awhile, and I'm far too comfortable to let him leave.

"Stay the night?"

"I don't know if I should, we didn't ask, and there's no reason--"

"I want you to stay! That's not a reason?" He slides out from under me onto his side, playing with my face as he talks.

"It's not the kind of reason I'm supposed to stay over for,"

"So?"

"So I don't want to abuse the privileges we've been given. I don't want to take advantage of your parents' good will,"

"Take advantage?!" I sputter. "You're like a member of the family here Cel. You're allowed to come over when you want to just cause you want to you know. It doesn't have to be for a bad reason."

"Some other night, when we have permission," I give him the doe eyes, but he's not having it.

"Don't love, let's enjoy the time we have,"

"How long is that?"

"Another half hour,"

"Yeah okay," I say encouraging him back onto his back so I can rest against him once more.

Have you ever been asleep, when you suddenly get the distinct impression you're being watched, but you try to push it away cause you're asleep and assume you're just imagining things anyway so why disturb such a nice sleep? 'Well, something like that', eh? Trying to be clever again are we? Well, nobody's laughing. Nobody who matters anyway, and that's me. Look, there are more important things in this world than you, at this particular moment that's mainly Celery and the fact that he's lying beside me on my bed. I come up with a million snippy things to say such as 'fancy meeting you here' and 'you look an awful lot like my boyfriend, the one who said he didn't feel right about sleeping over because it would take advantage of my parents good will, have you seen him around any lately?' but I end up just saying,

"Hey," mostly cause he's got a sad look on his face and I'm trying to work on the insensitive bastard thing a little.

"Hey,"

"Talk?"

"In the morning maybe,"

"Okay," I say kissing him and lying back down.

"Goodnight,"

"Sleep well love,"

Now seems like as good a time as any to continue my summary of the parental situation here in the people's republic of me and surrounding district.

My mom doesn't yell. Ever. She has discussions with people and she has a terrifically awful disapproving glare, but she only uses it for the most serious infractions, like the time Kyle had pot stashed in his sock drawer when he was 15. Still, I'm certain there wasn't yelling even then. Not from mom. Dad yells, but not when he's angry, only at the bakery when he's in the back or you are, and then he's yelling TO you, not at you.

Celery's got it different. They yell. At him when he gets noticed, at each other sometimes, at people over the phone. Debbie has a very yelling oriented relationship with her mother. Father's dead. I don't consider him a loss though. The extended family's just another group of people who've rejected Celery. There's never been word of any kind from him dad's side. The pictures are gone too. I see my dad's ugly mug every day, Celery can't even remember what his looks like. It's not fair. Anyway it's not the yelling that's a problem, it's the silence. Celery's good at silences, but I don't think he's particularly fond of them. His life before school started was just one big hostile silence. It's amazing he turned out so well, so intelligent (not to mention kind and everything) considering how important human interaction is for the development of the human brain when you're little. It's true! They've done studies. Maybe as a baby before his dad left he got attention, I don't know. Celery can't remember. His home life now is still silence. Silence for him anyway, he's the invisible boy over there. Every couple months he gets money for clothes or school supplies if he asks, there's usually enough food for him in the fridge, and they get him to do work sometimes but that's basically it. It's not for no reason he comes over here every chance he gets. I'd beg him daily to move in entirely but I know he'd refuse no matter how often I asked and that it would probably hurt him if I did bring it up. It's not like he wouldn't WANT to, he just wouldn't let himself. Everyone's got lines they won't cross.

He's come over enough anyway, so that he's stayed sane and mostly happy all these years. I'm really no more together than he is and I've got this freakishly loving family to work with. I'm not that bad though (you can just keep your nasty comments to yourself) so I guess the moral of this story is we're both okay, probably because we've gotten each other through. When we're a team nothing can get to us, so we've been doing okay. And even when we've been apart, the amount of time we spend together has always been enough so that all that other crap would still mean nothing cause the protection would still be there. We're each other's shields, you know? Celery's needed a much bigger shield it's true, but it's been knowing him that's made me strong enough to be that shield.

With Celery's it's the stuff he has to deal with from Them. Their all season shitty treatment of him, the lack of love, the silence. Environment stuff. My stuff's more internal, you know? What Celery protects me from. It's mainly just myself. And even then it's ridiculous. Manufactured in my head problems, maybe

even to make up for the lack of real ones. I don't know if that's subconsciously why I do it, but that's pretty damn pathetic if it's the case. The thing about made up problems is, they're sort of tricky to solve. Sometimes maybe worse even than real ones, because if there isn't an actual physical cause it's hard to put a stop to things. Not that I'm saying Celery's problems are strictly external and haven't hurt him emotionally. Far from it. But we get each other through it all no matter what. Because we're us and we always will be.

Sometimes over the years, when I still had my old room especially, Celery wouldn't even wake me up when he came over in the night, which he sometimes did unannounced. He has a key and he'd often camp out in the living room if it was really late and he didn't want to risk even the creaking of the stairs. Other times he'd take out his bedroll and spread it out on my floor, but leave me asleep. More often than not though, we planned several sleepovers during the week in advance. We were usually well behaved and quiet so Celery would always be allowed to stay in my room even on those school nights. You know about our Fridays and Saturdays already so I won't go into those.

So I said it wasn't the yelling right? Isn't and never has been. It's always been the silence. When he was really young, like 7 and 8 I mean, Celery came over out of like fear. That was when They went out late to countless cocktail parties, trying to climb the social ladder. A 7-year-old boy shouldn't be alone in a house at night. The steps weren't alive then. So Celery came over here. They allowed it so long as no one else knew, so long as their reputations as good parents remained intact without the expense of a real nanny. Later he fled the oppressive loneliness of the evenings at home, usually just getting too comfortable here to leave. Not that anyone ever wanted him to. Middle of the night arrivals have become less and less frequent the older we've gotten. But now he's here again, after he made a big speech about not thinking it was a very good idea, so chances are good something really bad's gone down.

Carrots and Celery Chapter Six
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Fri, 10 Jan 2003 17:18:54 -0600

I wait until after we've said good morning and kissed before asking, "To what did I owe the honour of your presence last night?"

"They found out,"

"Found out what?" There's already panic in my voice, cause I have a guess and I'm pretty sure I've guessed right.

"What do you think? About the gay thing, about us, school, everything,"

"So, so what happened? They didn't throw you out did they?" It takes a LOT of effort to keep my voice from sounding excited as I ask that question.

"No. They were thrilled."

"WHAT?" He shrugs.

"As if they care about ME either way. This is just an excuse for them to show how understanding and loving and liberal they are one more time. You don't know how many cocktail parties Debbie will be able to get through just with this story. 'My son is so brave! He's come out at school, he's so confident about who he is. Just how we raised him to be. In some ways it's a hard time for us, but we're really pulling together as a family. When he told Doug and me, the first thing out of both our mouths was, "we love you, and we only want you to be happy.'" Something like that, I swear. It's like the best thing I've ever done for Them."

"Then why'd you come over? Not that I'm not glad you did," He sighs and slumps back onto his back.

"I couldn't stand being around them right then. Do you know what the first thing She REALLY said to me was?" I shake my head. "Lay a hand on your brothers and we'll have you thrown in jail,"

"What the fuck!"

"Yeah. Like I'd touch those trolls with a 10-foot pole anyway. But she can think whatever she wants, and play whatever shit liberal kiss-ass games she wants. I don't care anymore. I just didn't want to be there. It's too much sometimes,"

"I know love," Stay here forever, is on the tip of my tongue, but I say nothing, just lie back down and hug him. We still have 45 minutes until we

have to be at school.

At morning break I remember I need to return a book to the library and before he can insist on coming along I kiss Celery on the cheek and dash off. I feel a bit weird doing it, cause I've never needed Celery to give me 'space' before, but that's not really what this is either. It's just... okay. It's sort of me being stupid. The whole 'am I the girlfriend, do I need his constant protection' thing. It's not his presence I mind, heaven knows, just the idea that he has to be with me cause I can't handle myself. So yeah. Pretty stupid when you get right down to it, considering there's like no chance that's the way Celery's thinking about it in his head. I'm sure he just wants to be with me all the time. I'm an idiot. I'm half way to the library and already I've realized that. Is that like progress or something? Lets hope so. Anyway, I return my book, and I'm on my way back again, passing the bathroom when I'm suddenly faced with Brad Williams. He's smiling what I think is supposed to be a friendly smile. Immediately I'm suspicious. Brad has never been my friend, nor has he ever even been nice to me, in all the years I've known him. He's a jock, but not the non-jock kind who plays sports but doesn't play the part kind like Celery does. He's the kind of jock bad teen movies are made about, the kind of jock and person... Cherrie say, should be interested in. And now the lug's smiling at me. What's up?

"Hey," I say.

"Hey,"

Apparently now that we've gotten formalities out of the way, Brad seems to feel it's time to get down to business. He holds out a twenty and says, "Suck my dick," My mind is in such a state of shocked overload I don't even do anything when he shoves it into my frozen hand. I guess my freaked out blank stare was agreement enough for Brad, who starts to grab my arm and pull me into the washroom. That's enough to start to snap me out of my trance and cause me to yank my arm back, but before I can do more, I hear very familiar and angry sounding footsteps. My white knights back on the scene.

"He's not fucking for sale Williams!" Celery says pushing Brad away savagely and glaring so hard you'd think that the look alone would be enough to incinerate Brad into dust. Not saying a word, Brad scurries off, though he does shoot us an evil look halfway down the hall. I look timidly back at Cel, hoping I'm right in thinking it's not possible he's mad at me too. He hugs me almost crushingly tight.

"You okay?" Concern all over his face.

"I'm fine," I say with a shrug once he's relaxed his grip and we're standing a few inches apart. "Thanks though, like I was so shocked I

didn't even..."

"Yeah, I saw your face and I knew what the dick must have been up to."
There's still concern and rage in his eyes.

"It's not that big a deal," He doesn't look even vaguely convinced. I grin,
"Look, just think of what happened as nothing more than one of the inevitabilities of being out in high school. It was BOUND to happen. If not today some other time, but now it has and you managed to save the day yet again so there's nothing to be upset about any more. It's done. On with the show."

"I just can't believe that creep thought he could do something like that to you!"

"It's okay." I say firmly, rubbing his arm.

"Just one more thing," I smile knowingly.

"If he ever tries it again, Brad won't be?" Celery shivers a bit.

"Damn I love you."

"I love you too Cel,"

"You're not mad I was sort of stalking you?" I smile.

"Not this time anyway. But we're going to have to do something about it just the same," He gets a guilty and fearful look on his face. Quickly, I explain my stupidity, "And the solution as I see it is for us to just go everywhere we can together, when we want to that is, and we'll just have to kick me in the ass a few times until I get over myself," Celery laughs.

"That's one of your more brilliant plans," I smile.

"I thought you'd like it."

"Do you seriously think that though? That you're like the girl in our relationship?"

"I know YOU don't see me like that, which is all that should matter. Like everything, it's just my stupid brain making something out of nothing. Now that you know, watch out for it, and give me a little push when you catch me at it - that's always worked before."

"You can count on me,"

"I do," All say 'awww!'

As it turns out, the being together all the time thing works out pretty well. Having him around to begin with sort of eliminates the 'out from the shadows leaps the manly hero!' aspect and makes me feel like we're more of a team. That of course is simply an added bonus to the most important thing, which is being around him.

The rest of the morning, lunch and the afternoon until the break pass uneventfully. It's not until Cel and I are heading to the drink machines and he suddenly hisses in my ear, "What were some of those other inevitabilities of being out in high school?" I look around, coming up with a very unpleasant result for my search. Megan and Cherrie are slinking towards us in a power walk. In those heels, I can't believe they're not both on the ground in a tangled lump by now.

"Kiss me," I say taking Celery by the shoulders and positioning him in front of me. He reaches over and does as I directed. It's not long before I forget we're only supposed to be kissing to put on a show for the bitch squad and am kissing him for real. Celery's the same. We don't release until the bell startles us. Break's about 8 minutes long, and we made out pretty much the whole time. Cherrie and Megan are long gone, and feeling like champions (the giddy, silly, in love kind), we peck good bye and head off to our 7th period classes.

Okay, so here's the deal. I'm not freaked out anymore, not even a little bit. The talks with Celery and Kyle totally helped me get over my worry, but not my curiosity. I still think there's gotta be other guys (or, dear god, girls) out there that Celery will think are hot. There just HAVE to be. So, in the interest of, em, Science, I raided Kara's room while Celery was in the bathroom and now I've got a stack of 17 magazines and Tiger Beats loaded with hot guys to show him.

"What's all this?" Celery asks, out of the bathroom, staring at me and my stacks of teen mags.

"Just come here and look at a few of them with me,"

"Why?" He asks sceptically.

"Uh, cause it'll be fun?" He rolls his eyes. "Humor me,"

"Fine," He says sighing heavily.

We get through a couple of the magazines, me going "See! HE'S hot! You have to think he's hot!" every so often and Celery shaking his head at me, before I guess my humoring time is up and Celery stands, dragging me up to, and pulls me into the bathroom. He stands me directly in front of the mirror and points.

"HE'S hot." He says firmly. "Okay?" I stare at myself for awhile, pouting.
"Okay?" I smile, who am I to argue with his insanity?

"Okay." He sighs, relieved this time.

"So you're going to drop this now?"

"It's officially dropped."

He kisses my cheek. In a wonderful combination of corny and sweet, we both start humming 'I only have eyes for you' at the same time.

Days start passing in a pleasant rhythm after that. No big major events. Really, it's just like normal life, the old normal life I mean, except for stuff like now when we're watching Buffy or whatever, instead of making fun of the commercials we usually make out during them and instead of those heavy, so-much-left-unsaid silences we talk for huge periods of time. We always talked, but it's different now. We can't seem to get enough of it, the talking thing. The making out thing also holds its own pretty well. Other than that, the only real new thing in our lives is having to spend much of our school days eluding Cherrie and Meghan who have allied themselves with the sole purpose of getting us to go straight and date them. After this happened, one can only assume they'd dump our asses and call it even. Still, when it's not frightening and annoying, it's quite funny.

Our one week anniversary rolls around and Celery wanted to make a big deal about it, which is how I ended up here, at this Italian restaurant we love (cause it's so easy to imagine a bunch of mobsters coming in and eating cannelloni while planning hits). I've got no idea why, but I think he's nervous for some reason. We haven't even ordered yet but he's messing with his cutlery way too much, plus he's not saying anything, and since last Saturday that's ceased being normal.

"You breaking up with me?" I joke, doing what I always do when I'm uncomfortable. I don't even score a pity smile, though he looks up from his glass. He actually shakes his head, like it was a serious question. This is not the kind of tension I handle well, or except to be in the middle of when I'm around Celery. So, lame as can be, I start babbling about the menu and the decor. I'm off on some nonsense track about mafia connections running the place when Celery finally ends what I assume was not only my own but also his misery.

"Carrots," it's not much of a start but it stopped me talking anyway. "I'm um, well," he's dying. Not exactly a banner night for either of us

apparently.

"Are you ready to order?" No word of lie I almost yelled out loud from surprise. I don't know exactly when she showed up, but our waitress is standing by our table, her little pad out, all ready to take our orders. I never even really looked at the menu for real yet, to look for what I wanted, but I always get the same thing anyway. So does Celery. Again, creatures of habit.

"I'll have the tortelleni with the marinara sauce please,"

"And I'm getting the tortelleni also, but alla pana," She nods, smiles, takes our menus and leaves us staring at each other again.

"What's going on?" I finally demand, unable to stand it any longer. Celery's face sinks so deep into misery I could start to cry just looking at him. "Oh love, what's wrong?" I ask reaching over to take his hand despite the fact that we're in a public restaurant. It's sort of dim and not too crowded, but I would have done it anyway.

"Nothing's wrong," He says shaking his head. "Really. I just wanted this to go well and for us to have a good time but instead I'm all uptight and nervous and now so are you and it's all messed up."

"What is?"

"This," he says, spreading his hand over the table. I grin.

"You're nervous cause of dinner?" I laugh. "That's nothing to be nervous about! I swear, I'll force us both start to having fun if it'll make you feel better,"

"It's not just dinner,"

"Okay, what else is it then?" He stops looking around me and starts looking into me.

"I don't want you to freak out," Yep. That's calming me right down.

"I'll probably freak out a lot more if you don't tell me and keep me guessing. Cause if you do that I'll just come up with all this crazy stuff in my head and have a total wiggance, so please just tell me,"

"It's not really a telling, it's more of an asking,"

"So ask," I'm impatient, I'm nervous, but I'm trying not to sound that way. This is obviously hard for him. How hard hits home and I interrupt his beginning attempt at asking whatever's on his mind. "Whatever it is, let's

make sure you know beforehand that I love you and am not getting sick of you or anything insane like that, okay?" He smiles.

"Thanks," that's like the same thing as okay, right?

"You still have to ask you know, I'm not letting you off the hook that easy," As I say it I notice I'm smiling too and I realize I've relaxed. Because we DO love each other and he'd never do something to hurt me intentionally, so what could he possibly have to ask me that could be so bad or freak out inducing?

"Okay. Before I ask, let me just say I know how stupid it probably is to be nervous and maybe even to be asking, but I'm going to anyway," I'd be squeezing his hand except it's lost underneath the table. When it emerges, it's brought a ring box along for the ride.

"Can I keep you?" Oh. My. Goodness.

I stare at the box and he stares at me. I can feel his nervous eyes boring into me. I make a weird noise and he flips open the box. It's a ring alright. One of those plastic ones you get out of machines for 25 cents. It's orange and says 'love' in green. I don't know whether to laugh or to cry. I don't know whether I'm SUPPOSED to laugh or to cry. Then I look at him, and a few different things happen in my brain very fast. The first thing is that I realize this is a way out. I know the nature of the ring is my escape route, if I need it. I can laugh, and I'm sure Celery would laugh with me, and we could act like it was a joke. Not a bad one either. Very convincing set up. But looking in his eyes I can't laugh. There are those beautiful eyes, begging to be taken seriously. I stare back at the ring. A second or two more passes and my brain suddenly and furiously returns from vacation. Can he keep me?! I'm already his!

"That's not a question you had to ask Cel," I say, trying not to sound harsh. "But since you did I'll answer." Our eyes are fixed on each other. "You've always had me. I may not have realized it at the time, but you did. From day one. So yes, of course you can keep me. Please don't ever give me away." His hands actually shaking, Celery takes out that ring and slips it on my finger. I notice he went for the traditional ring finger. But in many ways, he's a traditional boy, my fiancé.

"Sorry it's not a diamond," He says with just shy of a grin.

"This is better," It is, too. It's more from the heart. He didn't get this kind of a ring to take the pressure off himself, he did it to take the pressure off me. I'm positive he was looking out for me, knowing a real ring might freak me out too bad. So serious. He knows me well and Celery's always taken care of me like this. He almost always knows just how to act to put me at as much ease as is possible in a situation. Plus the colors,

there's no telling how many machines he went to looking for something like it, how many quarters he had to put in to get the right colour scheme. I look down at my ring, wiggle my finger a bit. No question, I'd take this over a diamond any day.

"I'm also sorry I made you nervous,"

"That's okay. I understand why. Celery, it might not have gone exactly to plan, but love, I think this went pretty well. All in all? And anyway, the night is still young, who knows what kind of crazy fun we might get into." He smiles, it's an easy, simple smile. There's nothing complicated or troubled behind it, just happiness.

"I love you,"

"Of course you do. I'm great!"

The rest of the night is normal. We talk and laugh, stuff ourselves, play footsie and make bedroom eyes at each other. As we're leaving I categorically refuse to let him go home for the night and Celery's floating so high in the clouds of my answer he doesn't take much convincing. We take a cab home and have a very hard time not holding hands. For a night that started out so weird, it's ending pretty great. I'm having difficulty trying to remember feeling better. I was his before -- no question -- but there's something awesomely wonderful about having it be official.

I tell him so once we're wrapped up together on the couch watching The Dark Corner. What's The Dark Corner? I'm in such a good mood, I'm just going to tell you. No hassling what so ever. The Dark Corner is this block of shows on YTV that are supposed to be scary or horror or something. Buffy, Dead Last, Vampire Highschool, that kind thing, and then a bunch of other stuff so cheesy it's impossible not to love.

"I thought it was right, to make it official like that, and I figured it was my turn to make the conscious first move," I pull him over by the chin and kiss him.

"I'm very glad you did."

We go to bed around 11, unusually early, as we're unusually tired. I mean, it's not everyday you get engaged, is it? It's not a regular thing for me anyway. We try to stay up in bed talking, because there's so much to talk about, but we've barely gotten out a few words each before we're both fast asleep.

We make up for it in the morning. The only hindrance is we're constantly talking over top of one another in our excitement, which leads to laughing, followed by kissing, and then the whole thing starts all over again once we

get settled down and try to talk again. It's weird, in some ways, nothing's changed, but in others, it's like last Sunday morning all over again. The same wonder and excitement, that same feeling of discovery. We're having so much fun talking and cuddling we're late for brunch. Mom has to call up to us, and even then, it takes us awhile, because she shouted, "put some clothes on and get your asses down here," which coming out of your mother's mouth is both hilarious and unbelievably embarrassing.

At the table I'm still slightly red faced, but Celery's calm and beaming. Or is it glowing? Both really. Kyle says a quick grace and then we start eating.

I'm halfway through my croissant when Celery suddenly announces, "We're engaged!"

My eyes bug out. I drop my croissant. Everyone else is about the same. It's one of those times I wish it was possible for me to get mad at Celery. Or even like, annoyed. I actually give it a try for a second, but the look of pure happiness on his face makes it totally futile. His grin's a good enough encouragement for me to wear one, and I enlace our fingers, almost daring someone to give us a problem -- not that I really expect one from this crowd. Sure enough, mom's tearing up, so's dad, Kyle's smiling so hard it seems like his cheeks are gonna split, the twins are looking stoked, and Kara's clapped her hands together, eyes shining. She's a real romantic, that girl.

"Congratulations!" Kyle says, and he earns himself 5 hearty 'here-heres!' I decide to save them the trouble of clinking their spoons against their glasses and lean over to kiss Celery. It makes him so happy I don't even remember to feel embarrassed about kissing him in front of my parents.

"Thanks guys," I say, almost choking up myself. Too much love in the room and all that.

Mom gets up and starts the rounds of hugging, for some reason Kara runs off into the living room and comes back with a bunch of photo albums, and before you know it we're all sitting cross legged on the floor, flipping through them. My dad's a picture freak, and the pictures of just Cel and me take up whole albums, a few of them. It's cause we've always been such hot kids. Yeah right. Well, Cel anyway, but really, I think it's probably because dad knew Celery would always be a huge part of all of our lives, and so he's there in the photos as much as any other sibling. It gives me a happy, thinking about that. I'm way too lucky for words. I really am.

We spend practically half an hour standing in the doorway kissing and whispering before Celery finally makes it out the front door. I watch him down the street and once he's out of sight, turn around to see Kyle laughing silently and shaking his head from the stairs.

"Make something of it punk," I challenge without losing my delirious grin. Kyle walks right over and hugs me. Me and Kyle love each other a lot, but we've never really been huggers when it comes to each other. For that reason, I'm extremely moved, and hug him back hard.

"You've come a long way little brother, I always knew you could do it too."

"Its all thanks to you of course, couldn't have done it without you."
Joking, but serious too partly. Joking's the only way I can stand to be serious most of the time. You figure it out.

Kyle hits me on the back, a love pat type thing.

"Since really, you should be each others, let me just be both your best men, and we'll call it even." I grin.

"Okay Kyle, sounds like a plan."

I go up to my room, and lie on the bed grinning at the ceiling like a fool for ages before I turn off the light and go to sleep.

Carrots and Celery Chapter Seven
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Tue, 14 Jan 2003 21:03:32 -0600

Monday. Just another ordinary day. Hanging out with the boys at lunch, hiding from Cherrie and Meghan in the boys bathroom (same stall of course) during breaks, losing all interest in our mutual classes (there aren't too many of those, so it's really not that bad).

Yep, perfectly ordinary, except it's the end of the day and Celery's not waiting for me at my locker, and he's ALWAYS waiting for me at my locker at the end of the day. I start to panic immediately, but only the beginning, mostly sane stages. In no time at all though, I've reached full throttle panic. It hadn't seemed important at the time, in fact I'd so much as forgotten about it, but now the image of Cherrie talking with Brendan comes rushing back at me. I didn't pay much attention mostly because Brendan is sort of like in love with her or whatever. He wants her for his trophy girlfriend. Personally, I think they're perfect for each other and give the potential union my total blessing. Of course now, my evil memory is playing it back and her giggling, closeness and cajoling tone is all to clear in my mind. What was she talking to him about?

Naturally, being insane, I've already jumped to the possibly fantastical conclusion that she was encouraging him to do some work for the dark side -- not that he'd need much prompting. Brendan's never been much of a threat, because his ego and massive misjudgement of personal strength has always led him to challenge both of us at the same time, without the help of his cronies. But now that we've come out who knows how things have changed. I'd also bet he'd be willing to part with his (cough) 'honour' for the mere chance at a piece of Cherrie. It's a shame dumb people are so easy to manipulate.

Even in my panicked state, I remember that we have rules for situations like this. It's never happened before, but in theory at least, the idea has always been that if either of us failed to show up at an agreed upon location, we'd wait 15 minutes and then go to my house. I spend a miserable 15 minutes trying to look everywhere at once, listening for his walk, trying to spot the orange dot in the crowd, but see and hear nothing. Having gone from panic to misery and rabid worry, I start trudging home staring dispiritedly at the sidewalk all the way, abandoning that only to check behind me every once in awhile.

The house is empty when I get there, adding to my foul mood, as I consider how much fun Celery and I could be having right now with the house all to ourselves if only he were here. I occupy myself by trying to think of things I could do to make the time pass faster, rejecting them one after another until I run out of suggestions for myself and settle on staring dejectedly at the blank screen of the TV. I've already gone bleary eyed and am slumped down on my side when I hear the doorbell ring. Panic again, worse than before. Celery never rings the doorbell. We're way past that. He always just lets himself in. I'm thinking over

and over, 'he's in the hospital', the whole 30 seconds it takes me to reach the door. Yanking it open, Celery stands before me, not in the hospital after all, but looking like he should be.

"Fuck," I say looking him up and down. No need to ask why he didn't just let himself in with his key, his knuckles are cut and bloodied, along with the rest of him. I move out of the way so he can come inside, not sure what to do. I'd hug him, but I don't know where under his clothes he hurts. I'd speak but I don't know what to say. I'd cry, but I don't want to upset him (not more than he already must be anyway).

"Do you want something to drink?" I say, choosing to start with something safe (like the coward I am) as he's easing himself down onto the couch. He nods. I scurry off to the kitchen and come back with a huge glass of water. Celery doesn't like pop or juice or milk or anything. Just water. He doesn't even like flavoured water, normal tap water is all he likes. You'll notice I like to blurt out random facts when I'm nervous.

After I've handed him his glass I leave again, going to the bathroom and getting a basin of water, disinfectant, a bunch of gauze and bandages plus a handful of washcloths. I don't even say anything (and neither does he) as I start dabbing at his wounds with a cool washcloth, careful to press very gently. I'm patching the final cuts up before he says, "Okay," which is my go-ahead to start the questioning.

"I don't suppose you were just trying to kick-flip that 10-stair by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church?" He makes an amused sound out of his nose.

"No,"

"Were you fighting, or defending?"

"Does it matter?"

"I don't know, I mean, who threw the first punch?" His attempt at a chuckle turns quickly into a cough. "Sorry," I say, offering him more water. He takes a sip and then smiles. It's all screwed up cause of the black eye and multiple marks and bruises, but it's still a beautiful smile.

"I wasn't fighting -- I was barely defending. Two of Brendan's goons grabbed me from behind and then him and another two came around in front. First it was a bunch of lame shit talk, but I was putting up a decent enough fight for Brendan to start wanting to get his sucker punches in while he could. Kidney shots are a bitch my friend," He says with a wheeze. "Somehow I slipped out of one of their holds and got free of the other one by kicking him, after that it was a brawl. Almost funny, you know, like they were punching each other too, trying to get to me. I'd love to say I took them all, but they kicked my ass. Can you tell?" I snort. He gives me another wonked out smile. "I did okay, there were five of

them, and I'm not dead, plus mostly I was trying to get away, not take anyone down, so that's okay in my books. They let up, cause they got tired of accidentally hitting each other I guess, and I stumbled over here. That's basically it, all the gory details included," I don't understand his tone, it's all jokey and flippant like this is all no big deal.

"Are you okay, I mean, really okay? Cutting all the macho, protecting Carrots from the brutal realities of life, shit?"

"I feel like I'm on fire or dying or something, but my mind's okay. It's not like I feel like I'm a wimp or some shit. I did the best I could, so what if I got trounced," ever since we saw 'Fight Club', 'trounced' has been a favourite word, "I was outnumbered. As for worrying about this happening again in the future, and being worried about you, I'm bugging, but I am going to so totally narc on all their asses, and they'll probably get suspended."

"They'll still be back in eight days," yes, that means a fighting suspension is eight days. Let me be the first to congratulate you on your brilliance.

"Pissed off more than ever, I know. Which is why we have to take care of it."

"How exactly are we going to do that?" I say with a gulp.

"Relax baby. Nothing violent. I know it would be an affront to your pacifist nature. All we have to do is make sure we don't travel alone much or ever, and also we need to have a little talk with Cherrie."

"I knew it!" He smiles.

"Sometimes in your insane conclusion jumping you come up with the right stuff. I knew you'd have it figured it out five minutes into the fun. That's why you're the brains of this operation,"

"And you're what, the brawn?" I scoff. He smiles weakly.

"Let's hope your brain's a little better than my brawn,"

"Ha! I knew that was an act, all that I don't feel like a wimp stuff. You liar." He tries to laugh, which again results in a coughing fit.

"I don't mind, really. Not much. I would have liked to have my ass kicked by someone with a brain at least,"

"But a bunch of someones without brains isn't anything to be ashamed of either really is it?" He leans forward slightly and catching on I quickly move over, brushing my lips softly over his split one.

"You're medical skills might be trash, but the bedside manner is world class,"

"It's the patient. You inspire excellent care,"

"How freaked out are you?" He asks, going all serious on me again, just when I was starting to loosen up.

"You could have died," I whisper, feeling myself going back into my scared black hole.

"Hey," He says, reaching over with a bandaged hand and touching my cheek. "Death cannot stop true love -- all it can do is delay it for awhile." I start to cry and smile at the same time. Do I even have to tell you to rent A Princess Bride? Why don't you just do it already! Jeez.

"It's just, just... how can you not be, I don't know! In shock, scared, angry, something?!" Gingerly, he takes me in his arms. I resist the urge to plaster myself to him, trying to be content with his loose hold.

"Baby, I am. I'm all those things, and I'm not not showing it cause I'm trying to protect you. I'm just trying to make them not matter. This was a crappy thing that happened but if I get all scared and freaked and uptight because of it, it could hurt us, and they're not worth that. No one is. You said so yourself that day when we were talking about Cherrie and Meghan. All I want is to deal and then get over it, not dwell. I need that from you too, okay?" It's a struggle, but I nod.

"As you wish," He kisses me with as much passion as his damaged lips will allow.

Since you're a complete idiot, and don't listen to anything I ever say, you probably still haven't rented 'A Princess Bride'. I'm going to explain this one to you though, because it's sort of important. In the movie, Wesley (the hero) is always saying 'as you wish' to Buttercup (the heroine) when she's asking him to do shit for her (which she does a lot, cause she's kind of a bitch to him at the beginning). To Wesley, 'as you wish' also means 'I love you'. There. Not that you deserved it.

"It's not just you I'm not going to let them get to baby, it's US. They won't ever touch us."

"Not if we have anything to say about it," He grins (which looks even more pathetic than his attempts at smiles) knowing he's won me over to confidence.

"And that, baby, is something we have everything to say about."

Oh. By the way, when Celery calls me 'baby', it doesn't mean the same thing it means when other people call each other baby. It's an extra special nickname that's always been kept between us and it's short for something. Baby Carrots. The kind he had in his lunch that first time. If you knew that, you will not

believe the gold stars you'll be getting in the mail. He uses it rarely, only when he knows I'm freaking out hard core. When he knows I need an extra boost, reminder, promise. Since he's been doing it since we were like 7, it has sort of a different connotation, but it still comforts me like nobody's business.

I allow myself to bask in his confidence for about half an hour before I voice another one of my lingering concerns. "What are we going to do about Cherrie and Meghan? You said talk to them, okay, but what do we say?"

"Funny, charming things," Huh?

"Not threatening, angry things?" He laughs, and I wince as he coughs all over again.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because we don't want them to be mad at us,"

"Why not?"

"Because we're going to date them,"

"WHAT?!" He turns to me hands and fingers stretched out, his 'calm down, and let me explain' gesture.

"One date. That's all it'll take, I'm sure of it. Care, all we have to do is let them think they've won, that we've seen the error of our ways, all that, and then go on a double date with them."

"This will help us HOW?"

"They'll get sick of us so fast, man, no question. They don't LIKE us, we're not their types, they just wanted a challenge, and as long as the challenge is there they won't leave us alone. Plus they need to like win, so they can brag about how they saved us from gayness. Do you see?"

"I'm beginning to. But still, what if they get all bitchy and stuff when we spurn them?"

"We're not going to spurn them. We're just going to be ourselves."

"Including the making out with each other-ness?"

"Well no," He says looking amused. "Not that part, but only cause they're supposed to think we WANT their help. We romance the pants off them Carrots and Celery style, and Cherrie and Meghan will be out of our lives before you can say

'good riddance to bad rubbish.'" I sigh. "What?"

"Aren't I supposed to be the brains of this operation?" He pulls off a cough free laugh.

"I'm rethinking that. I think you might just be the pretty face,"

"Oh well, that's something at least,"

"And let's face it, the ass isn't bad either," I laugh, shocked.

"I can't believe you just told me you like my ass."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, because it's you, and sometimes you're still my best friend, the one who I played 4-square and watched cartoons with, so it's hard to process."

"Would it make you feel better to know that the 11 year old you played 4-square with also thought you had a very hot ass?"

"No!" I shriek, past embarrassment, covering my face.

"Baby," he says, drawing my hands away, placing his there instead.

"This is good remember, this is what we want." It's all I need.

"I know,"

"Better?"

"Much."

"Good,"

"But one more thing,"

"What?"

"If this plan about Cherrie and Meghan backfires, I'm going to kick your ass,"

"If the plan backfires, I'll help."

"Shit," I blurt about 20 minutes later, causing Celery to tense and half sit-up.

"What?"

"Where are you going to go?" I ask, looking him over and shaking my head helplessly.

"Huh?"

"My parents are going to be home in a couple of hours, and if they see you like this we know they're going to totally freak - mom will probably try to organize a rally or something, dad will want to find Brendan and his buddies dads and beat them up," I know. My parents get more insane by the minute. Welcome to my fucking world people. "But you can't really go home either," I can't bear the idea of him going back to Their house, having Them see him and not even care. They probably wouldn't even ask what happened, They wouldn't care if they did. That's not where I want him any day of the week, but especially not right now.

"Sure I can,"

"No, if you do--" He shakes his head.

"Love, they're just people. They don't matter. They're not my family -- not my real one -- and it's okay. So what if a bunch of strangers don't care that I got the hell kicked out of me? It's not important, because I know the people who I care about caring about me do. You've done a very good job of that, I promise. No sweat?"

"You can be pretty scary sometimes, you know that? Brilliant -- but scary." That one's not from A Princess Bride! I know! It's unbelievable! It's from Harry Potter.

"It's all you Care, you make me feel this way, this happy, this confident. And if you don't like it, tough."

"Maybe with time I'll grow to like it," He grins. Not exactly, but that's sort of from 'A Princess Bride' too. It would be hopeless to tell you go rent the thing already, wouldn't it?

"That would be nice."

"So you're definitely going home then?" He tries to scrunch up his face, but doesn't, cause it hurt too much I guess.

"I don't know. I think so," I spy the problem behind his lack of commitment. Brave as he is, he was just attacked, violated. Who'd want to sleep alone after something like that?

"Stay. Mom and dad will find out eventually anyway, maybe if they find out now it'll save us the 'why didn't you let us know right away' heat."

"Stay?" He still looks a little short of totally convinced.

"Stay. For me,"

"You don't have to pretend that's why," I smile.

"But I'm going to anyway." Cuts and bruises or not, I can see he's grateful.

As soon as I hear mom's key in the lock I rush to the door, heading her off, hoping to be able to prepare her before she sees him so she doesn't get so upset. I know that short of me, the last person in the world Celery could bear causing pain to would be my mom.

"Mom," I say the second she's stepped into the house. "Something's happened to Celery, but he's here and he's okay. I want you to brace yourself though, it'll be kind of a shock when you see him." She tries to push past me, but I hold her off. "No, mom. Please. Take a minute, breathe, calm down. It'll only make things worse if he sees you get all upset. I already blew it, but if you can act okay I really think it would help him. Brave face?" She smiles, the troubled mother sort of smile. You know that smile.

"Of course. Where is he?"

"In the living room, probably wondering why I ran off," I say scrunching my lips.

Walking slowly, mom returns to the living room with me, gripping my hand. When she sees him she squeezes down hard, but I do my best not to let it show on my face. Celery looks up at her meekly, very much like a little boy. He's afraid she's going to be disappointed in him, that's what it is, I'm sure of it. Not disappointed that he didn't win the fight, but that he was fighting. Mom's not big on violence, I get my pacifism from her. I can't believe he'd fear her disapproval about something like this, but it's obviously what's bothering him. Mom gets it, opening up her arms, saying, "Come here son," Celery does and she hugs him. "Don't worry your head about a thing, we all love you here." She's pretty sharp, that mom of mine. She gets it from me.

It's not just mom I have to worry about though. Kyle will be furious, and along with the twins will probably want to hunt the guys who hurt Celery down and beat them to a pulp. Once dad gets over his initial beat-up-their-fathers rage, he'll most likely want to get them expelled and generally ruin their futures. Kara's going to cry. I can't really stop that, it doesn't matter if I prepare her or not, when she gets home there will be tears, but I can maybe do something about dad and the guys. At least try to get them to vent their rage somewhere else, as in, not in Celery's presence. Because I don't want to upset him, and also because I don't want to risk them stirring him up for blood.

In the end, it works out okay. The twins are home first, and I meet them at the door like mom. I give them a few minutes to fume, swear, and punch their palms before letting them check on Celery. When they see him, what happens surprises me. They start to cry. I don't why, but I didn't expect that. Really though, they're just 14, that's not so old, and he's exactly like another older brother to them. You know, they really look up to him. I think it scares them to see him like this, all battered. He gives them hugs, and it helps.

Next is Kyle, and his anger is a physical thing. You can feel it. This angry heat he's giving off. He surprises me too though.

"Bro, I've got to go for a run. If I see C2 when I'm feeling like this I'm liable to go completely postal. So give me about an hour to cool down, okay?" I smile.

"Sure. Thanks Kyle."

"It doesn't happen often, but sometimes I know my limits." I give him a quick pat on the shoulder and he heads back out of the house.

When Sue's mom drops Kara off, ours handles it. She takes Kara gently by the shoulders and they go have a mother-daughter talk in Kara's room. They come out about the same time Kyle's getting back from his run, and the three of them enter the living room together. Celery obviously knows what I've been up to, but as much for me as for himself he's been letting me keep it up without comment. He hugs Kara as she's bravely trying not to cry and keeps her on his lap even though it's probably hurting, while he smiles wonkily at Kyle.

"You should see the other guy bro," He says. Kyle's laugh is almost genuine.

"Did you get checked out by a doctor or something?" He asks, sticking with a less emotional topic. Saves you from getting choked up. It mostly works.

"No, but I think I'm alright." I hold up a hand to mom, who's getting a 'rush to the hospital emergency room' look.

"We'll get him taken care of tomorrow after school,"

"But he may have ruptured something! There could be serious internal bleeding," She protests. I give her a hard, 'drop it' look and she does.

Don't get all self-righteous and alarmed. Do you actually think I'd bandage Celery myself instead of dragging his ass to the hospital - with nothing but my own hands if necessary - if I didn't have a good reason? Making Celery go to the hospital right now would harm him more than help. He had to spend three weeks in one when he was 7 for a wicked case of pneumonia, and it really traumatised him. Hospitals bother him so much I took a first aid course a few years back, just so

I could take care of all his war wounds from skating. And yes, in case you're wondering, that means it's serious. It's too soon after being freaked out over one thing to get him all distraught over something else.

It's late, and getting dark, by the time dad gets home, which works to our advantage. In the dim, Cel looks less scary. Dad chooses to bottle up his anger, and be deceptively calm. He'll probably take it out on the bread dough tomorrow morning. I swear dad's half a baker just for the stress relief that comes from beating a couple pounds of dough into submission. Dad does his part, which is to get the more factual information out of Celery, names and numbers. More than I was willing to ask of him myself earlier.

There's some talk of going to the police, but due to Celery's staunch and somewhat peculiar opposition to the idea, it gets dropped. With the Young Offenders Act, because they were all underage, his like assailants probably wouldn't have anything done to them anyway. Maybe like community service or something, and that's if we were lucky.

That night in bed, Celery holds me especially close, ignoring his injuries. I'm crap at it, but I actually sing to him. It's this really beautiful song, called "Lullabye" by Ben Folds Five. My voice doesn't do it justice, but I'm pretty sure it helps Celery just the same. He falls asleep easily, nose in my neck. I'm not going to give you the lyrics, because that always annoys me, and I know most people probably don't even read them, but if you really want to see them, you can look them up at their website (www.benfoldsfive.com). In fact, I recommend it.

Now, I'm a pretty deep sleeper. With 6 other people and parents who get up at insane hours, I need to be. Sometimes when I'm thinking about things, if there's a lot on my mind, it'll take me a long time to fall asleep, but once I have, it's lights out. It's basically a survival thing. In my house, there's pretty much always noise of some kind. If noise bothered me, I'd never get any sleep. The problem with it is that if Celery wakes up in the night for some reason, I probably won't hear him. I mean, chances are, if he has like a nightmare or whatever, I'm not going to wake up and be able to comfort him. Which is kind of lousy.

When we wake up the next day, some of the swelling and stuff's gone down, and his bruises have started to turn yellow. He looks pretty terrible, but not as bad as last night. Of course, it's possible I'm just getting used to it now.

"How'd you sleep?" I ask, still feeling sort of on the guilty side for personally having slept like a baby.

"Okay,"

"No nightmares?"

"None that I can remember." I check to see if he's telling the truth, and can see that he is. I peck his forehead.

"Good."

On the way to school I say, "I think we may need to rethink the Cherrie and Meghan plan,"

"You do?"

"Yeah. Like, we didn't come out at school so we could pretend to let a pair of bitches convert us to the straight team. We came out so we could be open about our feelings, so we could hug and hold hands and do whatever came naturally,"

"That's true, but we didn't come out at school so we could get beat up either,"

"I know, which is why we need Cherrie and Meghan on our side. Or at least, not on the like other side. I'd be happy to see them as indifferent neutral parties. But anyway, assuming Cherrie's the one pulling Brendan's strings and Meghan and her are in cahoots, if we want Brendan and his thugs to leave us alone, we still need Cherrie and Meghan. The problem with your plan is, after they go on a date with us and get tired of us, we'd want to go back to normal - but if we did that, they'd know we tricked them,"

"Okay, I'm with you so far, what's your plan?" I shrug.

"I don't really have one yet," Celery smiles, 'thought not'.

"Well okay, how bout this - we talk to them, convince them that we're happy together, that we don't need their saving," Celery looks at me like 'do you want to take a minute to think about what you just said'. I sigh, "Yeah, that's not going to work."

We walk in thought for awhile.

"Alright! Try this, we use your plan, but rework it a little. We go to Cherrie and Meghan, and say stuff like we're pretty sure we're gay, but since naturally we don't WANT to be gay if we can help it, we'd really like their help. We'll say that if there's anyone who we think might help us become straight, it's them - the hottest girls in the school." Celery grins.

"I think you may have something there,"

"Now who's the brains," I say smugly.

"Was there ever a doubt?"

"There was, and it saved Agrabah," Don't ask. It's from Aladdin the TV show. You

don't want to know.

"So we're going to give it a try?" Still me.

"Yeah, I think we should. How do you want to go about it?"

"We're going to need a couple days. It's Wednesday, we'll plan for Friday."

"What do we do until then?"

"Hesitant response to their overtures. No more running away from them and hiding in the bathroom," He sticks out his split bottom lip.

"I like hiding in the bathroom," I rap his stomach quickly with my back fingers, though lightly, in case I accidentally hit a bruise.

"You like what we DO when we're hiding in the bathroom," He raises his eyebrows. Well, sort of anyway. The best he could.

"You don't?"

"Moving right along. We have to let them think we're responding to them, that they're winning. That also means no touching for the next couple of days,"

"That's going to get tough," He says. After all, we're all over each other right now, like always.

"I know. But we can do it. Think of the reward," He nods.

"I need a kiss now if I'm not going to get one all day," I'm happy to oblige.

We're heading towards the cafeteria, struggling to be good and not touch, when Mrs. Bartin rushes over to me out of nowhere.

"Vasskez! Where have you been?!" She's like the staff advisor for the yearbook. She pretty much lives in the yearbook room. Oh shit. The yearbook room. Where I should be right now, working on the yearbook.

"Look man, I've gotta go! Sorry," He sighs, and nods.

"Sure, see you later."

As much as I love Celery and as glad as I obviously am he finally opened up to me -- in dream form or not -- his timing kind of sucks. Like, this is our new to each other time, the time we should be revelling in each other the most, but I'm just about to start running seriously low on free time. The problem is, yes, you guessed it, the yearbook. It's yearbook season. I didn't realize it, but starting today, we've got exactly two weeks before the final layouts have to be

sent in. Two weeks and about two months of work. I've got no time to be thinking about fake dates with Cherrie and Meghan or whatever else. Mrs. Bartin (our faculty advisor slash insane leader) has just proclaimed we now have forced daily afternoon sessions and she's threatening to take away lunch hours too.

Never mind the lunch hour, the closer we get to the deadline, the fewer hours of sleep I'll be getting. Having been on staff (though always to lesser extents) since grade 7, I know something of what to expect from the final crunch days. Sleeping and eating will become luxuries following yearbook and normal school in terms of priority. Having been along for the ride with me all these years, Celery also knows the score, but knowing never makes him any happier about it when it happens. Since grade 9 (when my load started to get heavy) he's always gotten this sad look in his eyes days in advance of the 2-weeks left marker, which is when the insanity really kicks into high gear. A week before the deadline -- when I'm lucky if I see my bed for more than 6 hours a night -- he's been known to go all puppy dog pathetic giving me the biggest eyes imaginable every time he sees me (which usually ends up being when I'm leaving a room in a big hurry, or when I'm apologising for not having time to talk or for having to ditch him like in the hall just then). In all our discovery and craziness, I guess we both sort of forgot what was coming. Too caught up in each other, as usual. It's here now though, and the fun's just beginning.

I spend the morning recovering from what I swear was Mrs. Bartin's most insane 'we're running out of time here people' rant ever, and am still somewhat in shaken daze mode at lunch. I'm distracted from thoughts of page layouts and grad quotes only by my hen-like worry over Celery.

"How did your morning go? Could you write okay? Feeling any fatigue or dizziness? Anything like that? I still can't believe you talked me into letting you come to school. You should be in bed or something," or possibly in the hospital I add in my head, looking guiltily at what I'm beginning to suspect is his broken nose.

'I'm fine Care. I promise.' I sigh, still looking at his nose.

"No gym today at least, okay? Have some sense," He smiles, which still looks quite off.

"Sure love. No sweating and running for me. No walking fast even,"

"Don't make fun of me. I'm worried about you," I say in a little boy pout.

"I know you are," Celery's voice is filled with kindness, patience and reassurance. "I'm just trying to show you that you don't have to be,"

"Just promise me you're going to take it easy, and I promise I'll stop nagging so much,"

"Deal." We can't kiss (come on, you remember the plan) so we shake hands instead.

"What's up with the lack of touching?" Jonas inquires. "Not that I'm complaining. I for one find the lack of gay love at this table a refreshing change," His cheeky grin saves him from an ass kicking, and the plan prevents us from starting to make out to get his goat. Don't even bother to make fun of me for using such a lame expression, I feel bad enough about it all by myself.

"You don't really deserve a serious answer after a comment like that, but we'll tell you anyway," I say, proceeding to explain operation 'Hey, maybe we don't want to be gay' to them.

"You're the masters of disaster," Jonas says dryly, shaking his head.

"What, you don't think it'll work?"

"Oh it'll probably work. I just think it's funny, you guys plotting about something like that. Less funny of course, is why you had to do it. That sucks big time. By the way Celery, have I mentioned you look like shit?" Celery laughs.

"No -- but thanks."

"You feel as bad as you look?"

"No, like I said to Care, I'm okay." I assume that Cel already gave them details this morning when they saw each other in caf, and that's why no one asks any more.

I weasel my way out of the afternoon's yearbook cram session by explaining to Mrs. Bartin that I need to take Cel to the hospital and then darting out of the room before she has a chance to say no.

Celery may be terrified of hospitals, but I'm not exactly the hugest fan of them myself. The worst thing about them has gotta be the smell. It's not like death exactly, but it sure isn't life. It's that sterilised thing I guess. Whenever I'm in a hospital all I want to do is run outside and take huge greedy breaths of fresh, wonderful, deliciously bacteria-filled air. Add that to my general worry about Celery and the fact that he squeezed my hand so hard I thought it was going to fall off pretty much the whole time we were waiting, and my hospital experience leaves something to be desired. Leaving is better though -- just seeing Celery come back alive as we're walking out the doors -- and hearing the doctors declare him to have a 'badly bruised but otherwise clean bill of health' is better still. No broken bones or anything. They offered him something for the pain, but Mr. Macho turned it down. When he declined he smiled sweetly at me, said he already had something that worked great and proceeded to retake my hand. The doctor was almost as shocked as me, but neither of us said

anything.

"Thank-you for doing this Ellen," he jokes as we're strolling home. Another movie quote that's not from A Princess Bride! Let's hear it for diversity. Points for anyone who can guess where that one's from! No? Okay. It's from 'Dave'. That's a great movie by the way, you should rent it sometime.

I can't remember the line following that so I just say, "Anything for you love."

We crash for the rest of the day. Celery is forced into power resting by yours truly and I do some of the schoolwork I'm bound to fall behind in during the coming mania of yearbook completion. We talk lots though, which is nice.

At one point, we're sitting on the couch, classic us, Celery's sitting on the end, I'm stretched out, my head and arms in his lap and Celery asks, "Do you wanna know a secret?" He's playing with my hair, making twirls of it around his fingertips.

"ANOTHER one?" I fake gasp.

"Yep. I'm a man of mystery,"

"Of course you are."

"So, do you wanna know?"

"Sure," I say reaching up to catch one of his hands, moving it gently down to my chest so I can hold it.

"I started packing my own lunch like a week into grade one,"

"You did?"

"Yeah,"

"But you always still had carrots in there,"

"That's because that's what I packed,"

"You hate carrots,"

"I liked trading with you though," Damn.

"You're like the sweetest person alive."

"I thought it might freak you out a little," I sigh.

"Not EVERYTHING freaks me out, especially not the really sweet, adorable stuff."

"I was so crazy for you back then,"

"You're not crazy about me now?" I pout. He laughs. He doesn't wheeze or cough when he does it anymore. That's like a good sign, right?

"Fool. Of course I am. It's just weird, thinking about myself at that age, so hung up on you. I was such a little kid. I didn't even understand it, but being with you made me feel so alive, so right, so whole. I was starved for you, I spent the early years just trying to suck you dry."

"Sure, and now you're full. I understand. You've had enough. Fine," I'm starting to get up, but laughing, he holds me down.

"Don't even think about it." I turn over, lying sideways in the space between Celery and the back of the couch, head just above his heart.

"Sorry I fucked with the serious moment,"

"It's okay. I know what you meant,"

"Those mind reading classes finally starting to pay off eh?"

"That's right." He kisses my head, I sigh happily.

"Teach me to know me as well as you do?" He does it again.

"Of course."

Carrots and Celery Chapter Eight
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Tue, 28 Jan 2003 15:39:33 -0600

At lunch the next day (which, after skipping out yesterday afternoon, I consider myself very lucky to be able to be attending) I notice Brian is missing from our table.

"Where's Brian?" I ask anyone who might know. Jonas appears surprised I need to ask, Celery looks slightly uncomfortable and Alex clears his throat nervously. "What?" How'd I end up totally in the dark?

"He's in the gym, or in Mr. Strattchiks's office. You know, for the track meeting. Sign-up's today. Everyone's getting sorted and all that," Track? Track? Celery's in track. I turn my head sharply to look at him.

"How come you're not there?" I mean, yeah, he's not exactly in his prime at the moment, but the actual season and even real practices won't start for a couple weeks, this is just to like check interest level and volume or whatever. He'd be fine to be on the team.

"I'm not going to do track this year,"

"Why not?"

"I don't feel like it,"

"Oh?"

"More important things to do," he's trying to smile, to keep it light.

What am I supposed to feel? Guilty for not doing the same about yearbook? Angry at him for possibly doing it to make me feel guilty? Dismiss that right away, Celery would never do something like that. Flattered? I think I should probably stick with flattered.

"You're sure?" He nods.

"100 percent." I smile. Then we frown, stupid no kissing rule.

Jonas wipes his brow exaggeratedly.

"Phew! Am I ever glad that's over! I hate it when you guys fight."
Celery and I each smack him from opposite sides. Jonas looks to Alex for help, but he's laughing.

"Everyone's against me," Jonas mutters, not looking upset in the least.

During afternoon break, Cherrie and Meghan are looking for us (as usual) but this time we let ourselves be found. We listen to them express phoney sympathy over Celery and then ramble on about how this used to be such a good, safe school. The only time they express anything that might pass for genuine emotion is nervousness when they ask Celery if he has any idea who attacked him. We play dumb, and their plastic cheerfulness returns.

Celery's still going to turn the guys in, but unless they roll on them (and I don't think they will) Cherrie and Meghan don't have anything to be worried about.

"That was fun," Celery says without even bothering to sound sarcastic once we're walking away.

"Oh, I know," I say in the same tone.

"Bitches. It's a good thing I love you so much,"

"Same to you bub," It's another one of those times we really should be allowed to kiss.

"Three more days," He says sadly. I nod.

"Jumping topics slightly, have you thought about why you were the only one who got hurt? Like, why was I spared?"

"I have, and my theory is that since I'm sort of viewed as the physically strong one,"

"Sort of?" He smiles.

"Yes. Since that, maybe they thought it would shake you up more to see me hurt because then it's like 'oh no, he's supposed to protect me, and they got him so I'm screwed' or some such twisted bitch logic."

"You're smart like this because of me right?" He laughs.

"How else?"

"What about Meghan, why would she allow you to get hurt? I mean, I assume it was a team effort,"

"Sure it was. It's a no pain no gain thing probably. Whatever works you know? Who cares who gets hurt in the process,"

"Stupid cultural taboos,"

"Huh?"

"I'd really like to beat them both up," Celery makes his little amused out of the nose sound.

"You're a sweetheart alright,"

"But they hurt my MAN! Nobody messes with the fianc of Carrots Vasskez!" Ps, I love being able to say fianc , it's totally the most fun thing ever.

"Unless of course it's Carrots Vasskez himself right?"

"Right."

We've arrived at my class.

"Aww, you walked me! How sweet,"

"Totally accidental," I roll my eyes.

"Oh yeah, I believe you. Um, not. You just can't get enough of me," He looks at me like he wants to absorb me into himself with his eyes. They're shinning a ferocious blue.

"Who could," I look quickly around, and the hall is empty except for a few puny grade 7's so I reach over and kiss him.

"I know that's against the rules, but too fucking bad."

"I love you," Sometimes when we say it, it's happy and just for the joy of it. Other times it's this desperate thing, like we NEED the other one to know it, the exact second we say it. This was one of those second scenario times.

"And I love you," We steal another kiss, and then we separate to go to our classes.

I'm in my locker after school (really IN it, practically all of me) digging around, looking for something, when I feel Celery's hands on my shoulders.

"Cheater," I chastise, without removing my head from the depths of my locker.

"How can I help it? You being so damn irresistible and all," His hands still massaging my admittedly tense shoulders. I groan a little, at having to do something I so desperately don't want to do.

"Stop. Please. I'll to have to turn around and kiss you in a minute if you don't,"

"This is so lame," He says, allowing his hands to fall away.

"I know," We try to do the express our love thing with our eyes for awhile.

"What are you doing now?" I ask, trying to change the subject, only to realize I've walked into another landmine by the confused look on his face.

"What d'you mean? Going to your house, doing homework, like EVERYDAY," I sigh.

"Have fun," He finally clues in.

"Oh, right," And there are the puppy dog eyes! Check out the extended bottom lip ladies and gentlemen!

"I won't be long," I'm such a liar, "A couple hours maybe. I'll be home for supper probably," lies, all lies. "Go over anyway, and we can hang out when I get back."

"Yeah, alright,"

"Try not to pout okay?" I beg slash instruct.

"I do try, it just doesn't work,"

"I know. Be patient though, it'll be over before you know it," He doesn't scoff audibly, but the look he shoots my way is enough.

"You better make a kick ass yearbook," He says after a few seconds of moody silence. I grin.

"Prepare yourself to be dazzled,"

"I will," He says, more cheerfully. "Anyway, don't work too hard, and see you soon," I lean in and then shut my eyes, sucking in a breath and taking a step back.

"We suck at this, don't we?" He nods.

"And that's just how I like it. Check ya later," Before either of us can lose our resolve, we walk off in different directions down the halls.

My time in the yearbook room is - much to my surprise - mercifully short, and I'm leaving the school by quarter after six. School ends at 3:30, just so ya know.

Celery greets me excitedly at the door and I have to be careful not to compare his exuberance to that of a dog. Anyway, if I did, we'd be two dogs together.

"Hey," I say, kissing him. Trying to be all cool, even though I'm like exploding over the excitement of being able to do it again.

"Hey," He says, doing the same thing. We grin at each other and let our mouths and hands do the rest.

Dinners fine, though Kyle's still visibly steaming over what happened to Celery. I find his mood is catching now that I'm not so scared for him anymore. Sometimes when I look over at him my fists will clench involuntarily and my jaw starts to grind. Celery's caught me at it a few times, and when he does he always smiles sweetly and gives some part of me a squeeze (we're talking hands and knees here people, banish your gutter thoughts!).

I wait until we're curled up for Buffy to ask, "Want to stay over again?"

"I don't know. I should probably go back to the house at some point. They may want to know whether I'm alive or not. You know, so they can start the public grieving and the private celebration if I'm not."

"Yes, but if you were dead you wouldn't be attending classes in which case the school would call Them,"

"You make a valid point," Celery says holding up a finger and wagging it around.

"So you're staying?" He smiles. I'm almost totally used to the wonkiness now.

"I'm staying."

Mom and dad don't comment on the double dose of Celery, but when we're getting undressed in my room later that night Celery asks, "Do you think we're ever going to get the talk?"

"What talk?" I ask, my voice muffled by the fact that my head's stuck in my T-shirt.

"You know. The now-that-you're-romantically-involved-we're-not-sure-it's-appropriate-for-you-to-be-spending-all-these-nights-together talk," I pop my head out and raise my eyebrows at him, tilting my head to the side.

"From MY parents?" You remember, they're the insane in the good way ones. He rolls his eyes with a 'yeah, okay' smile.

"I guess not."

"Don't worry about it. When it comes to you this houses motto is 'we never close.' What about Them? Are They giving you any trouble about it?" He raises just the one eyebrow and almost sneers.

"As if they care. Actually, if I went out and had a lot of unprotected sex, got AIDS and died They'd love me forever. Can you imagine how much sympathy Debbie could get for pretending to care for me in my final days? A dead child? Come on. What could be better,"

"If you're an evil bastard that is," I say, taking him protectively into my arms, eager as I always am to comfort him and cheer him up when he gets down about Them. I can't bear to see him slipping into bitterness and anger, even if it's only for a minute.

"Of course," He says, holding me back.

I've occasionally wondered how Celery turned out so great. Like, forgetting about the abysmal lack of maternal nurture, some of your personality comes from your genes right? So how did a kid with a physco mom and a dead-beat dad end up being one of the sweetest people on the planet? It's one of life's great mysteries, no doubt about that.

Mrs. Bartin nabs me before I've even got both feet in the door at school the next morning and I barely have time to look apologetically over my shoulder at Celery as she's hauling me away. You see, technically, I'm only the junior editor, but the co-editors are total slackers, and thus, yours truly got saddled with most of the work. Screwed over is more like it actually. In addition to my workload as junior editor, I have to pull a lot of their weight too. Plus for some reason Mrs. Bartin's conscripted me to be her 'right-hand-man', which basically means I have to do all the work that's expected of junior editor (plus those slacker seniors) AND get on everyone else's case do to theirs. What's that? You can really hear the passion in my voice when I talk about yearbook? You totally understand why I'm shafting my best friend and boyfriend to work on it? Thanks for the support. Okay, I know I complain and bitch, but I feel I'm entitled. I do love it, believe me, I have to, or I'd have walked by now. Really, whining is part of the fun. Missing Cel isn't though.

By lunch, when I see him for only about 10 minutes while I'm wolfing some unknown food down my throat, he's in full puppy-dog mode. Strangely enough, it's Jonas who goes out of his way to distract and cheer him up. I sneak away after an affectionate knock on the beak of his hat, and head

back to the grind.

The insanity kicks in from there. I'm so busy in fact, I barely have time to notice and feel guilty about it. I usually save that for when I'm trying to cram in a few precious hours of sleep or when I catch him staring at me longingly during one of our classes. It's all pretty terrible, but on the bright side, not being around him very much makes it easier not to kiss him. Less opportunities and all. Not that we don't make up for it whenever we do have a second or two alone. I know this all sort of makes him sound like the biggest asshole in the world, but the thing is, he doesn't even really know he's doing it. All the puppy-dog stuff. He doesn't bitch at me, or try to distract me from doing my work and he does his best to keep his distance entirely because he understands how important to me yearbook is and wants to be supportive of that. That said, he still can't help the looks and big puppy eyes. It's not an intentional thing, he's not TRYING to make me feel guilty. Anyway, I probably look the same in November at the end of Volleyball with Zones and Provincials and everything.

I finagle my way into an hour of free time Friday night to eat some home-cooked goodness and hopefully snag a few minutes with Celery. My house is already in view when I remember about Cherrie and Meghan. With all the yearbook craziness, they almost totally slipped my mind. I've been trying to act more friendly to them, and we've been sticking to the no touching rule, but other than that, there really wasn't any room for them in my brain. And Celery never mentioned it either. I'm not sure if it makes him sweet or sneaky, but knowing him, I'm sure his motives were of the sweet and selfless variety. Like I hoped he would be, Celery's in the living room talking with Kyle. Okay, so I didn't really hope for the Kyle part necessarily so much as the him in the living room part, but I have no objection to the Kyle-ness.

He looks up at me, and smiles.

"Hey,"

"Hey. Sorry about the date or whatever. It sort of slipped my mind." He shrugs.

"I figured that. It's okay. We can do it later. You're too busy right now anyway."

"Date?" Kyle inquires, looking amusingly bewildered.

"Yeah, we're going to go on a fake help-us-be-straight date with the bitches."

"Cherrie and Meghan?"

"Yeah,"

"Why?"

"Because they harass us all the time and cause they were the ones who got those assholes to jump Celery," I can just tell Kyle's inwardly ordering himself to breathe.

"A pair of spurned chicks are responsible for this?"

"Well you know, hell hath no fury,"

"So why are you dating them and not cutting their hearts out with spoons?" Robin Hood.

"Because this isn't as messy. What we're going to do is tell them we're gay but we don't want to be, and we're going to ask them to help like cure us," Celery explains.

"Are they actually vain enough to think they can covert you?" I scoff.

"And how."

"So you go out with them, then what?"

"Um,"

"Er,"

"What do you hope to achieve?"

"Well, they leave us alone, no more trying to get other people not to do the same. We're hoping they'll be like bored or even repulsed after experiencing us in date-like situations, resulting in their dropping us. So, you know, pretty much the same thing that would happen if they were going on real dates with us. It's just like a challenge thing with them, there aren't any real feelings involved. We're a prize, to be won and discarded. Notches on their mascara pencils or something of that nature." He shakes his head.

"Proceed with caution little bros, those chicks sound like pieces of work."

"They can kiss our gay asses. We're smarter than them."

"Yeah, but you're not eviller."

"Stop being such an Eeyore Kyle,"

"Okay."

"Well that's enough chit-chat. There's food to be eaten and it's time that I ate it." I declare with sweep of my arm. Just for fun with the sweep of the arm. Having fun being something I generally like to do.

Celery joins me in the kitchen, but I must admit, I'm not finding anything I see in here nearly as tempting as his lips.

"How long do you have?"

"Supposed to be an hour, but I could stay longer," I say, eye devourment abounds.

"No," Spurned!

"No?"

"If you blow it off now Mrs. Bartin will just come back even more physco. I'd rather take some of my Carrots now and some of it tomorrow then all now and none later, resulting in a very sad tomorrow, for only a few extra minutes now,"

"Rationing me are you?" He smiles.

"Something like that," I close the cubbord door, and do the same with the gap between us.

"I love you,"

"So kiss me." No need to tell me twice.

You would not believe how fast it's possible for an hour to go. I mean, really. Did they change the length of minutes to the former seconds and just not tell me?

"You know," I say mid kiss.

"What?" Breathless, into my mouth.

"A thought occurs. Tomorrow is Saturday," Our lips come apart for more than 30 seconds for the first time since we started this as Celery stares at me, jaw hanging open.

"You're right, which means-"

"Which means who cares if I blow tonight off, I don't have to do yearbook

again until Monday!" Celery bites the inside of his cheek.

"Maybe. Won't you have to go in Sunday afternoon?"

"Possibly, but still."

"But still nothing. Go back and make a great yearbook. You'll be finished for the night bout 12, right?"

"Yeah," I say morosely.

"So I'll wait up. When you get back we can talk and make out and get very little sleep. Then we'll have ALL Saturday together, and hopefully most of Sunday. I don't want to risk pissing her off and somehow lose our weekend. Okay?"

"No, but I'll take it." I kiss him. "Thanks for being so great about all this by the way," He shrugs.

"Don't mention it."

"What are you going to do until 12 anyway?"

"I might skate a little, hang out with Kyle,"

"With KYLE? I don't want you falling asleep!"

"I heard that!" Kyle yells from the living room.

"I wanted you to!" I yell back. Celery shakes his head.

"You're going to be late," I start up a healthy good bye kiss.

"12," He says finally as I try to extend the kiss.

"12," I say stopping.

He follows me out to the front hall and just before I leave I turn and look at him sternly, "Be careful," I command.

"Careful?" He says, mock innocent. I frown.

"If you're really going to go skating so soon after, um, getting hurt, don't push yourself too hard okay? We don't need you getting more beat up,"

"I'll like try and everything, but..."

"I know, I know. The beast. Keep it in semi-in check at least? No rails,"

"Alright. That I can do. Or, I think I can anyway." I sigh. I believe I've mentioned that when he skates Celery gets quite reckless? Quite probably isn't exactly the right word. More like, extremely. He gets all caught up in it and loses himself, no longer thinking rationally. That's part of the reason I like to go with him, just to make sure he doesn't kill himself.

"See you in a few hours," I say, needing to leave, wanting to do nothing less.

"The hours will positively fly by, I promise,"

"Not for you," I kid. "If you're going to be spending them with Kyle," as before, I raise my voice so it'll carry over to the living room.

"You're dead little brother!" Kyle shouts over cheerfully.

"Go," Celery says, pushing me out the door, preventing the continuation of any fun I might have been able to have with Kyle. The spoilsport.

Hey! Less of a spoilsport, he's following me out!

"What's up?" I say with a smile.

"I love you," He's all hoarse.

"I love you too, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, I just wanted to say it, once more before you go." We hug deep.

"Hours positively flying remember?" He nods.

"Yep. Don't work too hard," I grin.

"I guarantee it." We steal one final kiss, and I head off down the street.

While I'm just walking over here, have I mentioned that Celery is a world class hugger? Cause if I haven't it's a big bad on me. No one hugs better in my opinion. So what if it's an extremely biased opinion, I'm still right. What I like best is where he puts his hands. When most people hug they just sort of put their arms around your back and squeeze. Celery always wraps one arm tight around my waist and puts the other hand on the base of my neck. I'm sure this isn't a completely new and groundbreaking technique of hugging, but the true uniqueness, the wonderfulness, comes from Celery's arms. He always judges perfectly the degree of squeeze

required for each particular hug worthy situation. And he never lets go too soon or holds on too long. Even since when we were little kids, he's always been great at it. He's always hugged me the same, that intimate way with the arm on the neck. Taking that into account, I'm sure it's not that he's still hugging me in a friendly way, it's that he's always hugged me in an intimate way, like someone he loved, deeply. His hug's protective and loving at the same time. It's, 'I'll protect you from anything - don't be afraid' and 'I love you' wrapped up in two strong arms. Adding to the perfectness is that we've always been the exact right height for such a variety of hugging. Maybe that's even part of how it started. But stupid me for not realizing the depth of what he conveys in his hugs sooner. I'm just glad I've picked up on it now, lucky and glad.

I slip into the yearbook room, glancing around nervously, but see no sign of Mrs. Martin.

"You're late dude," Jem lets me know with a grin.

Jem's a friend. I haven't mentioned him, I know, but that's the case with lots of my friends. School friends you know. It's kind of a crappy thing to say and feel, but they're all sort of transitory. Celery's a constant at the forefront of my mind, then my family. Jonas, Brian and Alex are nearly in focus, and then the others are sort of there in a pretty blurred way. When I'm around them they have my attention, but not really otherwise. I don't do it intentionally, it just happens.

"Late and busted?" He shakes his head.

"Actually no, Martin's in the lab with Flo, and that's been for like half an hour."

"Cover?" He frowns.

"Course dude." Almost like he's insulted I asked.

"Where were you anyway?" Jordyn, another friend I haven't mentioned, asks, popping up from behind the computer. I didn't see her cause the table with the computer is totally covered in papers like a meter high. Plus I'm just not very observant if it doesn't involve you know who.

Unless there's a bunch of people hiding behind the filing cabinets, her and Jem are the only other ones here. No sign of those fucking senior slackers. Figures.

"Safe money's on sucking face with his boyfriend," Jem says playfully.

"So what if I was?" I say, grinning back at him. He's cool with the gay thing and so is Jordyn, I told you I made sure not to make friends with the

kind of people who wouldn't be. Even casual friends like Jem and Jordyn.

"So nothing," Jordyn says. She's a little more serious, and sometimes doesn't get that I get Jem's kidding around. She's cool though, and a good worker on yearbook. Almost freakish dedication. She reminds me of me, expect less whining, and less fooling around.

"What are we doing?" I ask, getting down to business.

"Jem and I were planning the page layout for the farewell to leaving..."

And on goes the night. All yearbook and no Celery makes Carrots a cranky boy. But okay, I admit it, when I'm doing it, I lose myself in the work. I never totally stop feeling the missing of him, but the crazed work oriented part of my brain manages to claim some major ground. Not to say I'm not out of the school like a bat out of hell at the first possible second. No question, this is harder than every year before, and I don't think it has much of anything to do with the fact that I'm expected to do more work.

Celery meets me with a kiss at the door and the only change in that trend is the intensification of the kisses. By the time we reach my bed we're both pretty heated up. We really go at it for a dozen or so minutes before Celery rips his lips from mine long enough to say, 'we should stop' before he starts kissing me all over again.

"Yeah," I say in a gasp, separating us again, lying on my elbows breathing hard.

I'm sure he's right - what I'm less sure of is WHY. We're just not there yet I guess. But if Celery's feeling half what I am - and I get the distinct impression that he is - that's not going to be the case for long.

Carrots and Celery Chapter Nine
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sun, 02 Feb 2003 11:25:26 -0600

Waking up the next morning, we smile at each other in what can be described in no other way but shyly. It's been a long time since I've felt shyness around Celery, if I ever have. Last night after the lust fest, we just curled up and went to sleep. Or you know, lay there, trying to fall asleep, willing ourselves to cool down.

"Hi," He says, keeping up with the shy theme.

"Hi back,"

"Are you, uh,"

"I'm fine. Great. Fantastic. Really," He smiles for real.

"Good."

"You?"

"I'm the same."

"Good."

We kiss, almost carefully at first, but that doesn't last. During the span of our kiss any lingering shyness is put to rest and we go back to being normal with each other. That's normal for us, which I believe would be certifiable for the rest of you.

"Let's go out today," Celery says over breakfast.

"Huh? Out?"

"Yeah, like and about?"

"Uh, okay,"

"I had a killer session last night, and I'd really like to get out there and do some more skating, if you're cool with that, that is,"

"Sure I am," I'm not about to risk letting him go by himself again thank you very much. And another thing, as genuine as I'm sure his desire to skate is, I'm every bit as sure that's not the only reason Cel wants us out of the house. I'm thinking if we stayed in and watched movies and shit like normal, it'd end up being a succession of 'we should stops' and heavy

breathing.

"Cool,"

As it is, we end up sweaty and on the street kissing each other as opposed to comfortable and in the house kissing each other. It's fun though, and great to get outside on such an awesomely weathered day. Sunny, but not hot, perfect skating conditions. A little cool is good for skating cause you get way too hot otherwise. Celery will skate until snow falls, no matter how cold it gets. I'm less fanatical (and yeah, less talented) but my love is there.

Slowly cruising back home around lunch (who knows the time, we're just hungry) Celery suggests we go see something in the theatre.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Um, maybe because we don't want to end up making out in the theatre like the, well, hormone crazed teenagers we are.

"I'll give you a minute to think about it, and then get back to me," I say, smiling a little.

"Ah," He says eventually. "Gotcha."

"Another time perhaps," He laughs.

"Oh yeah, sure."

We grab food and drinks from the kitchen and crash on the living room floor.

"I'm so out of shape," I complain, feeling my legs starting to cramp up. Celery immediately begins massaging, but it's one of the least sexual experiences of the day. For one thing, I'm in pain, and for another, he knows it, and is only thinking of making me feel better. "I don't understand how you do it. Aren't you even the tiniest bit sore?" I demand. He smiles.

"Well yeah, sure I am. Just, I'm more used to it and also,"

"Less of a baby?"

"That's not what I was going to say,"

"No, but maybe it's what you should say."

"You're NOT a baby, or a wimp, or whatever. You just don't skate as much

as me,"

"I don't really do anything as much as you."

"What about all the work you're putting into the yearbook? And the rest of the year it's the school paper, or student council, or something else. You get some of the best marks in our grade, you're an amazing brother and friend--"

"Whoa! Don't go so rantastic. I'm not having a crisis, I was just joking around."

"Joke about something else," I kiss him.

"I have mentioned you're unbelievably sweet, haven't I?"

"Yeah," he says, smiling. "Once or twice."

"Never were truer words spoken."

As we're lounging in the living room that evening after The Dark Corner, trying to keep up a conversation so we'll be talking and not necking, I take the opportunity to apologise for the crappiness of the second week of our relationship and the first week of our engagement. Then, master seguer that I am, I say, "and speaking of engagement..." He raises his eyebrows.

"Yeah?"

"What do you want to do about it?"

"Do?"

"Well yeah, I mean, do you want to have a ceremony and if so when and also if so who do you want to come and all that sort of thing," His brow goes all wrinkly, and his lips purse.

"I never really thought about all that to be honest. I just sort of got as far as the asking part and then figured, well--"

"That I'd decide the rest?" He ducks his head and smiles sheepishly.

"Maybe." I sigh, but am smiling.

"So okay, you didn't think about it. Think about it now, do you think you might want for us to have an actual ceremony, keeping in mind nothing would be legal,"

"Who cares about legal? I care about us, me and you. What we feel for

each other, not what a bunch of old dudes have decided constitutes love." This is a definite WOW moment.

"So is that a yes or a no to ceremony?" I ask, after giving him a 'you're amazing' kiss.

"It's a..."

"Do you want to have a ceremony?" I ask, going for the direct approach to hopefully eliminate rambling.

He looks at me, and I know he does. It's all over his face, mostly in his eyes. Whether he'll admit it or not, Celery's got this planned in his mind. There is a ceremony, and cake and flowers, and I'm pretty sure, us walking down an aisle.

"If you do," He says, shrugging unconvincingly.

Don't you hate it when people say that? They just completely take themselves out of the realm of responsibility. Grrr. On the bright side, at least we escaped that whole, 'What do you think we should do?' 'I don't know, what do YOU think we should do?' quagmire.

"I think it would be nice, as long as we keep it small," like VERY small, "and simple." Like VERY simple.

He smiles.

"Nothing complicated, just us declaring it to the world, the uh, small world."

So that's it. He knows it's official for us, he just wants to make sure everybody else knows it too. I can understand that, I can even be right there with him wanting the same thing.

"Okay, so ceremony check yes, when check...?"

"Later, I mean, whenever it's the right time."

"So we leave it as later for now?"

"There's no rush," I smile.

"We only have the rest of our lives, after all." Then, since we were really good and did the talking thing for such a long time, we indulge in some lip action.

Sunday morning comes and goes, and I'm back into the throes of yearbook

completion. Without having much time to process what's happening, my days turn almost completely Celeryless and it's work, work, eat, work, sleep.

Thursday night at 10:30, and I'm still up to my neck in work. Everyone else has already quit for the day - even the crazily hardcore Jordyn, but she's studying for her piano exam. So that leaves this one here with 2 hours of work ahead before I can even think about going home myself. I'm leafing through piles of photos, hunched over one of the tables stacked with them, trying to find the best one out this assembly when the Lieutenant Governor visited the school, when I hear a cough and jerk my head up. I don't think it's ever happened before that Celery's walked into a room without my becoming instantly aware of it. (Unless of course he intended for me not to notice, but I don't think now is one of those times).

"Hey," I say, realizing it's the first thing I've spoken to him outside a crowded classroom in 3 days.

"Hey," He replies.

We stare at each other for awhile before I finally notice what I failed to when he did the throat clearing thing. Celery's got a dab of something on his nose. It takes me awhile, but I understand. In the really early Buffy years, Willow was doing the unrequited with Xander and one time they were chilling outside, maybe enjoying some vampire slayage, and amidst some sort of adolescent goofing around Xander got ice cream on her nose. While he was leaning in to get it off, there was one of those almost kiss TV moments. Then stupid Buffy arrived and mucked everything up, but that's beside the point. Later that same show when Will was feeling the snub, she dipped her nose hoping he'd notice her again and do the same thing. It sort of sounds pathetic, but the way Willow did it, it was just really, really cute. Anyway, long story less than short, this is Celery wanting me to notice him. I'm sure it's not a guilt thing, he probably just couldn't stand being apart for so long. I'm not saying that because I have the biggest ego on the planet, I'm saying it because I know for myself that I've been miserable and insane missing him every time I have a few free seconds to think for myself and even sometimes when I don't. If it's this tough for me, being so busy, then it has to be even worse for Cel because he doesn't have something taking up all his time keeping his mind mostly occupied like I do.

I look at him for a couple seconds longer before I walk over and lick what turns out to actually be ice cream off his nose. You've gotta respect his attention to detail. Then I kiss him and wrap him in my arms.

"Miss me?" I ask, feeling him pushing himself into me. He starts kissing my neck instead of responding. Yearbook deadlines vanish from my mind and we have our wicked way with each other for almost 20 minutes before I have

to pull away gasping. I have to walk home in these pants after all. We both have to lean up against the table while we catch our breath.

"Do you still have a lot of work to do?" Celery asks once he has. I nod. "Can I help?" I smile. His presence will probably be more of a hindrance than a help for no other reason than that I'll have to restrain myself from jumping him every 5 seconds, but I want (NEED) him to stay anyway.

"Sure," I grab a handful of envelopes filled with photos and give them to him. "Could you check these for red eye?" He nods. "Great. When you're done that you can help me out tons by reading over the captions for the junior high section, you know, looking for typos and stuff - also, feel free to keep an eye out for lameness, that's a big problem for captions." It's not work I've made up for him to do, just something I've done already once and was planning to skim through once more. It's actually very helpful of him to do it for me.

Celery's help, balancing off with the time we end up taking off for 'breaks', gets me out of school at about the same time I expected, but the time went by a lot quicker and more pleurably than it would have if I'd remained solo.

We walk home together holding hands even though in my head I'm thinking, 'this just screams gay bashing'. Charmed life that I lead, we get home in one piece. When I say WE I mean as in I coaxed Celery into staying the night. He'd protested. All the regulars and that I needed my sleep, but I begged and begged the whole way home until he finally gave in. In addition to just wanting to shut me up, weakened by the length of our time apart and his desire not to get another taste of that any sooner than absolutely necessary.

The rest of the yearbook cram period passes and we snag a few make-out minutes here and there, the occasional throaty I love you, but never really have enough time to get carried away.

In an almost impossibly tragic turn of events, on Tuesday night we end up celebrating my freedom by taking Cherrie and Meghan out on a date. You look at sympathetically me and say 'that's rough' but you really have NO idea. It's the wrongness that really gets to me. What should we be doing? Talking, laughing, that other fun stuff we've been doing a lot of lately, but no! Instead, we get to take the supreme bitches of the world on a date. Feel the wonderful, wonderful, wonderful pain.

Here's the goodness. One main goodness for you is that I'm not going to put you through the misery of experiencing the date in full, I'm just going to recap. So that's goodness one. Now here's the rest. They totally fell for it. The 'we don't want to be gay, save us hot girls!' ruse. Then, the date was a success, albeit a very painful one. Mostly, like we were

ourselves and for a really long time they were their fake selves, but then they started getting really fed up. It was a thing of beauty. For just that part of the date, I really wish you coulda been there. There was the goodness, but there's also some further tragicness. They were frustrated, they were annoyed, they for sure added us to their Top 10 Least Favourite People Ever lists, but they didn't give up. They said because this was such a good CAUSE, they would be willing to go on one more date with us, but then we were on our own. Talk about being torn. 'On our own' equals dancing. 'One more date' equals weeping, and swearing, and wall punching. In the end, because it's more fun, we choose dancing. Well, not real dancing of course, more like grinning and mental dancing.

Walking home arm in arm (safe distance away from Cherrie and Meghan) I say to Celery, "This has been a really trying time and you've been such a champ, let's stay close - have lunch."

"I'd like that." We grin. This time, its Buffy. I'd love to explain it all to you, but just assume it's from something really hilarious, laugh, and leave it at that.

Much further down our little trek, Celery says, "You know, it really wasn't so--"

"It was awful." I state firmly before he has a chance to finish. He has to nod.

"And we have to do it again,"

"I know, but we'll make it."

"Another day at school too. I was really looking forward to kissing your neck while you got stuff out of your locker," I smile.

"That's very sweet, but you're just going to have to wait another day. Then I'm sure the neck kissing will be able to recommence."

"We are sure that after one more date they're not going to be mad when we just start being totally gay again right?" I squeeze his hand.

"We're sure that after one more date they're not going to care about us one way or another. I predict we drop off their radar screens completely and by the time they're looking at our pictures in that amazing yearbook I just finished they won't even fully remember who we are."

"Speaking of yearbook can we celebrate now?" We're at my house. I grin.

"I think it's about time."

The most beautiful thing happens on our second date with Cherrie and Meghan - they ditch us! Seriously. We're at the movies, less than half way through the date when they turn to us, say 'we can't help you' and then run off with some guys from the football team that they saw in line! This time, we dance for real, once we're on the street, in the dark, where nobody can see. But still, we dance. And then we kiss, and kiss, and eventually get home. Celery won't stay the night, but due to the earliness of their ditching, we have plenty of time to talk (for real this time) and really get on with making up for the various variety's of lost time.

It's Thursday morning, and Celery's eating my breakfast. He just waltzed in a few minutes ago, sat down, and started eating my bagel. The nerve. Kyle (who for all his protests about our kissing still doesn't seem to be able to find any time to eat breakfast except the exact same time I always do) is too busy thinking it's hilarious to eat his own, so none of the Vasskez sons are getting any food in these parts.

"Excited for your first day back in the love?" Kyle asks once he's done smirking at my expense.

"Yeah," we both say at the same time in equally dreamy tones while staring at each other. I'd make fun of us. Kyle does.

"Gotta go love," Celery says, tugging at my sleeve.

"But I haven't eaten!" He smiles.

"As if that was your first bagel," smart bastard.

Basically admitting I've been bested I sigh and say, "Okay fine. Let's go." We leave to the sounds of Kyle laughing.

All day we revel in each other and the return of our mutual freedom. Highlighted moments include when Mrs. Bartin tracks me down in the hall, NOT to drag me off to work, but to thank and praise me for all my hard work and commitment. Another day maker is when Cherrie and Meghan pass us in cafeteria without even looking our way. Jonas claps, and calls us his heroes. Brian and Alex also seem pleased. I even enjoy it when stupid Brendan (recently back from his fighting from suspension) tries to take both of us on on his own, which is a sure sign he's no longer a threat.

At home that night, doing our homework, watching Buffy and going for a short skate session, pretty much getting back to our old routine, is like the best thing ever. I couldn't have been happier doing anything else. I honestly mean that.

I have no decent or valid excuse as to why I haven't already done it, but I'm finally getting Celery a ring. I've had mine for ages now, and it's always been at the back of my mind that he needs one too, but there's been such a steady stream of stuff happening since our one week, I kept putting it off. Well, no more. So far I've just been cruising grocery stores and stuff, looking for something like what he got me, but no luck yet. I'm in the Forks at the moment. Gotta think. It doesn't necessarily have to be the same right, or even similar? Just as long as it's from the heart. So what would Celery want? Of all the things I could get him, what would he like best? Something that displays commitment and feeling for sure, but what? That, ladies and gentlemen, is the question. Maybe not a ring at all, a necklace or a token of some kind? But definitely something he can carry with him at all times. I've only known him practically my entire life, this really shouldn't be this difficult. Wait, I think I'm on to something. Yes! Success! This is perfect. Huh? Oh, right. What's perfect. Sorry. Well, it's this. A ring. Nothing really special about it, simple pattern that I think he'll like, metal that's maybe sterling silver, but it's what's etched on the inside. Must be the maker or something, but it's an entwined pair of C's. Absolutely perfect.

I'm tempted to take him to dinner and mirror the whole thing, but end up going with the totally different. We're doing homework that Monday afternoon (I got the ring Sunday while he was skating, I pretended to be too tired to go along, sneaky guy that I am) and I ask him to reach something for me out of my backpack, where the ring and it's nice box are. He sweetly complies.

"What's this?" He asks, holding up the box. I shrug.

"I dunno." He rolls his eyes. "You could always open it and find out." He does, and immediately tears up. You know how they say real men don't cry? You should see Celery. Anyone who looks at him and doesn't think 'real man' is blind. But then, 'they' are usually wrong aren't they? Yeah. In my experience 'they' don't tend to know much.

"Thank you." He whispers, putting it on.

"You saw inside right?" I ask, nervous suddenly. He beams.

"Yeah. Why do you think I'm crying?" I kiss him.

"This means I get to keep you too right?" He laughs.

"Yeah baby, that's what it means."

"I love you." I say, shocking the world by switching right back into

serious instead of joking around more. Sometimes, I do have the capacity to be serious. He kisses me tenderly.

"And I'll always love you."

Carrots and Celery Chapter Ten
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Wed, 05 Feb 2003 17:12:27 -0600

I don't know if it was the separation caused by yearbook or the whole Cherrie and Meghan thing or us finally being comfortable enough with the in love with each other part, but suddenly Celery and I - and maybe you've picked up on this - are like in total lust with each other. I mean, we've always be super physical, you know that, throughout all our friendship, and since we've been together in the new way the kissing, holding each other thing has been pretty intense, but this is something else. This is like extreme passion, desire. It's almost frenzied actually. We've always been all over each other, we've never really been able to keep our hands off each other, but there's a fire now that wasn't there before. I have to admit that the only change may very well be that I've finally caught up with Celery in what he's always been ready for, that maybe the only difference is I'm finally responding to a passion in him I wasn't ready to recognise before. But, WHY is less important than WHAT we're doing, now that I have.

It's Saturday afternoon, our first Saturday together after the completion of the yearbook, and all the movies are finished. Sure, we made out through half of the last two of them, but still. I'm not exactly sure how, but we're not on the couch anymore, we're in my room. On my bed, specifically. In fact, I'm lying on my back, Celery's on his knees over top of me and my shirt's half unbuttoned. I'm really not sure how it happened, but then, it's a mysterious world we live in friends, very mysterious. I'm able to tell you this, because nothing's happening. Celery's sort of frozen over top of me, this half glazed over, half worried look in his eyes, the blue and grey battling it out hard core, his fingers around the third button from the bottom.

"Cel?" I croak out, surprising myself by achieving even that. He loses some of the glazed look.

"Too fast?"

Big decision time again. I'm not even going to let myself go off on some insane rant about whether or not it suddenly being MY choice means Celery's like the guy trying not to rush his scared girlfriend. It's not a hard fight though - I'm seriously like floating away on waves of calm. We've trusted each other with our hearts, surely after something like that, sharing our bodies is less major? Besides, look at him, he's the hottest thing on earth! And he wants ME? Crazily enough he does, and the feeling is more than mutual.

I smile, "Exactly the right amount of fast," His fingers start moving again

and our lips meet once more...

What? Are you still here? Go away! No. I'm not kidding, go on, get out of here. This is a private show. Shoo.

Back again are you? Well I guess it's okay now. We're basically covered up. There's a sheet up to the middle of our torsos and we're lying on our backs, dozing and holding hands.

Hmmm? How was it? Why should I tell you?! It's none of your business, remember? I'm not a tease! Insults will get you nowhere. Look, all you need to know is that even though it was one of the most exciting, beautiful and fulfilling experiences of my life, if it had been crap for me but still good for Celery that would have made me love it and vice versa. Don't you get it? What made it special, I mean REALLY special, is that we were both acting completely out of the desire to please the other person. It was an act of total surrender to each other. That's enough to have made it one of the most special moments we've ever shared, but I wouldn't say it was the greatest expression of our love or anything. It's far from the only way we can show that we love each other, anyway. I loved it and believe me when I say I want to do it again, and again, and again... (Let's not forget who we're talking about here, I'm like a freaking teenage guy!), but that doesn't mean I couldn't live without it. I only have to LOOK at Celery to feel like the luckiest thing on the planet, talking, chilling and being totally 'regular' with him is joy, and just being held by him, or kissing him, that's more than enough to keep me satisfied, and then some.

But it was lovely, because it was us. We stayed true to the love we share, the friends and partners we've always been. It was just more of what we've always been. The same love and friendship in a new way. The same bond expressed differently, the same trust demonstrated in another form. We laughed. That's one of the things I'll always remember. Not because anything funny happened, just because there was SO much happiness in and around us during those moments that it was too much. It filled us up and then exploded out of us, way too much to attempt to contain. So we laughed and while we laughed we held each other, and it was beautiful.

Beautiful, amazing, incredible. Definitely earth shattering. I mean, I didn't know it was possible to feel like that. But as truly astonishing as the experience was, it had everything to do with who I was with, not what he was doing. I could ramble on about this forever, and maybe you'd even sort of like me to, but I'd just end up repeating myself and falling short. To know how it was you really would have had to be there, and I hope you don't mind my saying I'm glad you weren't. No offence.

But enough of that for now, Celery's waking up.

"Hey," I whisper with all the love and adoration it's possible to convey in that one word. It's a lot. You'd be surprised. His smile matches mine before it starts to take on more of an evil grinish quality.

"You didn't turn into a blood-sucking demon - kick-ass." That's my boy! A Buffy reference! I hug him.

"You really know how to relax a guy," I say still squeezing. He begins petting my hair.

"Pre-emptive strike against the possible freak-out," He wiggles back a bit, hands still on my shoulders, and peers into my eyes, "You okay?" Whatever fears that were starting to rise up in my generally irrational psyche get banished (for the moment anyway) by his touch, his look, his loving and conscious presence. I smile, the same as before, trying to get as much love across as possible.

"I'm not even in the same postal district as okay. Try unbelievable, incredible, outstanding, amazing. I think it's safe to say I've reached Nirvana," He kisses me. It's soft and tender, not the hungry passionate variety of before. It's good though, the perfect kiss for this moment.

"This is it you know," Sure. Start off with a joke and then go all serious on me. What a dirty trick.

"No trade-ins and return policies will apply,"

"No need to muster any enthusiasm or anything,"

"Sorry. A minor freak-out only," He's gone to petting my face now.

"I love you more than it's possible even to feel. There's so much love for you in my heart I have to numb myself to some of it, or I might go crazy or something. I'm making it my life's work to see that you're happy - if there's ever anything you don't feel comfortable with we won't do it. I treat you this way because I love you, and because it's what I get from you. We both have ways of pushing, but neither of us would ever mean to push the other further than they were ready to go, right?" I nod. "We're equals in this, which is why it works, why it's going to keep working until, well, death. I know we've gotten insanely serious in what has technically been a very short relationship, but as long as you think about it as the result of a VERY long courtship, it really doesn't seem so sudden." Softly, he kisses my nose. "Freak-out over?" I smile.

"Lucky for me you're a very smooth talker,"

"Lucky for you I'm insanely in love with you." He counters.

"Is there even a point otherwise?" He shakes his head.

"Not for me."

"I love you too, insanely, madly, totally without reserve, always."

We start to kiss again, not so gentle anymore.

Celery stays Saturday night and Sunday too. We spend the time in exploration. We already knew each others minds so well and the goal was to reach such a level of understanding and harmony with our physical selves. By the time he leaves (at the very latest possible minute Sunday night) our bodies belong to the other like they do to ourselves. Maybe I can explain it this way:

Sunday morning after brunch we were back in my room and when we sat down on the bed, without giving it a minutes thought, I reached over and took Celery's arm, placing it around my waist so I could snuggle up close.

I didn't think a thing of it at the time and neither did he - it was what felt natural. Our minds have always been so in tune, we've spent years finishing off each others thoughts and sentences, understanding obscure jokes and interpreting looks. Now we're getting there with our bodies. Like for instance the thing I explained with the arm. If I hadn't, I'm sure Celery would have done the same thing a second later. It's just the one step ahead thing, now with our bodies as well as our minds.

The connection is definitely deeper and that's SO wonderful, but he's gone now and I think you can guess what's happened. I mean, it doesn't exactly take a rocket scientist, right? I'm freaking out (a major freak-out this time). You see, there's this one tiny problem. This is ME we're talking about - of course there's a problem. But, like most of them it's mostly in my head. This mainly made up but still extremely vexing problem is that now we're even closer, MORE dependant on each other for absolutely everything. Seriously, short of food and shelter, Celery provides basically all my needs. I love my family, I have fun with my school friends, but Celery's the only person who I feel like if he died I would too. Like, I'm not saying I'd kill myself, but I think my bodily functions would simply shut down. My will to live I'd most certainly lose. It's a wonderful feeling being that close to someone when they're around and safe and healthy, but the mere IDEA of them being anything short of that is so terrifying if I even think about it for more than a few seconds before I push it out the fear will get so loud in my head I'll lose myself in it and someone would probably have to shake me or something to get me out of it.

There's too great a sense of joy and peace left over from our time together for me to go completely under and I end up spending the evening partly full of that joy, partly going crazy missing him, and also still partly freaking out. It's the same delicious combination all over again when I wake up the next morning, but Celery's over especially early, burning everything but the manic joy of his presence out of my brain. As long as we're together I feel perfectly fine - well, way better than fine. As long as his arms are around me I feel perfectly secure, but when he's not with me the freaking out happens again.

Near the end of the day in my last class (which I happen to sit next to Jonas in) I've finished all my work (it was just a core period anyway, so there wasn't much to do) and am staring off into space when Jonas suddenly turns to me saying,

"You look upset," chances are that is entirely true. I'm upset, I probably look it. What I'm less sure of is whether or not I want to be talking to Jonas about it. My plan was to seek sarcastic and comfortingly routine advice from Kyle, let him bully me into talking to Celery about it, thus rectifying the situation in the traditional Carrots manner (you see, I may be insane, but at least I have the sense to know what to do about it). Nothing against Jonas, I like the guy, but we don't really talk. Not about personal stuff anyway. I'm not sure it would work or where to start or any of it.

He sighs, "Okay, so this may have less than nothing to do with anything, and out of left field though it may very well be, can I offer you some advice?"

"Sure," I say with a shrug. Jonas puts his hands on my shoulders, looking me squarely in the eye. It sort of reminds me of a Celery manoeuvre.

"Join the rest of the world. Have friends, do stuff with them, be a normal adolescent."

"I have friends! I have lots of friends. I mean - you're my friend," He sighs.

"I'd like to be your friend. I'd like that a lot, but what I am right now is not your friend. I'm a friendly acquaintance. Someone you're nice to and sit with at lunch, but when have we ever done something beyond that? I've never been to your house, you've never been to mine. We've never seen a movie together or even seen each other period outside of school. I know what you like and what you think is funny but I don't know YOU. I'm new still sort of, so that's my excuse, but none of the other guys know you any better. Or if they do it's not cause you opened yourself up and shared with them or made any effort. You and Celery are so wrapped up in each other you don't even notice other people most of the time. It's cool for

you but it sort of sucks for everyone else. What I'm not saying is that it's bad for you and Cel to be close, but you can be close to each other and with other people at the same time. I think if you gave it a try you'd find you can have more than one good friend. I don't want you to think I'm saying you're a snob either, it's not something you really do intentionally as far as I can tell. My advice, suggestion, whatever, is to put a little effort in towards having other friends, people you really care about, not just stand-ins for Celery or as a faceless mob you want to entertain." I don't say anything and he starts looking nervous. "Am I being a judgmental fuck? Was I totally off? Did I over step my bounds? Are you pissed off?" I smile, eventually.

"No. It's... you're right I think. I mean like about everything. For someone who doesn't think he knows me you certainly seem to have me pretty well figured out," He grins.

"That's because you're obvious and transparent," I tilt my head and smile ponderingly.

"Is that it?"

"That's it."

"Okay then Jonas, since this was your brilliant idea, I've decided we're going to be friends. The proper kind like you said. But understand one thing, when I say 'we're going to be friends' I mean me, you and Celery," His smile is anything but surprised.

"Well, obviously. Like I said, your closeness is awesome. I'm the last person who'd want to see you guys lose that. What I want is to improve your life even more."

"So really, you're just trying to add more texture and flavour to the already rich tapestry that is my life," Jonas laughs.

"That my friend, is EXACTLY what I'm trying to do."

The bell rings not long after that and I promise Jonas that after I've talked to Celery I'll call him. Talking about Celery back there was a convenient way to segue into introducing the fact that he's standing by my locker right now, waiting for me as I approach. Because it's what I want to do for and for no other reason, I kiss him (or is maul a better word?).

Maul over, I ask, "Hey, what's shakin' bacon?" He stares at me for awhile, probably formulating an array of witty remarks, but his final decision is to say nothing. "I don't even get a hello?" I whine, arms crossed. He shakes his head.

"Later tonight we're going to go looking for you mind, do you remember when or where you lost it?"

"Ha-ha. Very funny." Back to the arm over the shoulders thing.

"How's the freaking out been?" Right to the point, that one.

"Lets walk, and then we'll talk."

Once home and set up at the kitchen table I break all sorts of Carrots in a Crisis rules by skipping Kyle completely and going straight to Celery. Mostly it's because of the talk with Jonas and the new light shed by and calmness resulting from said conversation.

"So I guess I'm just worried I'm TOO dependant on you, which has lots of negative results such as I smother you or go crazy every time you're not around or what if something happens to you and then I have to waste away... or what if something happens to me, then where will you be..."

"Nothing's going to happen to me," fucking touch wood! "Or you. You couldn't smother me if you tried, and what was the other one? Oh yeah, you're always crazy." I smile, mainly I feel better simply because he's in the room, but there's also endless things to be said about how much better you'll usually feel about something once you've gotten it off your chest somehow.

"The thing is it's my everyday insanity that's making me worry about that stuff."

"I know, it's not like I don't." Well that's good to know. The deal was supposed to be two basket cases together after all. "I just believe we can do it, whatever needs to be done. I think as a team we can achieve whatever we want. I know you believe that too, which is where I get most of my confidence from. When you're not off on one of your freak-fests, you believe right?" I nod.

"Try and find something I believe more. Even through them I'm half thinking, 'oh just stop. That's insane and you know it.' I don't doubt our future, sometimes I just freak a bit about getting there."

"Well you know, it's not the destination, it's the journey and all that." He says in a polished, fake sounding voice.

I take his hand in mine and enjoy just looking at them sitting together on the table for awhile, feeling the insanity receding once more. Holding hands is something I really like to do with Celery. Maybe because it's one of the really different things we never did as kids, like, slinging your arm around someone's shoulders is one thing, but connecting with them palm

to palm is another. To me it just seems more intimate.

In the middle of enjoying the view, I remember about Jonas. Chicken that you know and love, I decide to wait a little while. My excuse is our homework. Which we do. After that's done we take it to the couch and I start explaining to Celery what me and Jonas talked about. It takes me nearly an hour to get him pretty much won over to the 'real friends' thing idea. At first there were a lot of 'why?'s and 'you're all I need's and 'what if it makes us drift apart?'s and he pouted some. For one scary moment he got a really hurt look in his eyes and I thought he's going to cry but like I said, I've basically talked him down from that now. There's still a little more I need to say, and lucky person that you are you get to listen to it. Feel the joy.

"Cause love, this is all about how incredibly and epicly important you are to me, not something like you're just not enough for me. You're everything in my world and I love that, but it scares me. We just talked about it, I know, and that did make me feel a lot better, but I still think we should explore this. I don't think we ever could really, but I don't want us to get sick of each other and I really don't feel we should shut everybody else out all the time. We don't even do that all the time probably, but sometimes anyway. I'm cool with it happening occasionally, and if you really don't want this then okay, but I think it'd be good if we established some other people in our lives that really matter."

"You mean my life,"

"Huh?"

"Care, you have people who matter to you. You have your parents and the rest of your family, especially Kyle. That's what I forgot to say before, when you were saying you worried about being so dependent. There are lots of other people you can lean on. You're not worried about yourself, you're worried cause it's me who doesn't have anyone but you," Fuck.

"No it's not!" I say, grabbing his hands. Surprised and slightly scared by the sudden reversal, not sure I'm up for the job in the same way he was. "Look, if you're going to talk about my family, you better not try to get away with saying you're not as important to them as I am. You know how much they love you," He smiles a bit sheepishly.

"Okay, I guess that's true." He says, with a conceding shrug.

"I'm glad we've got that settled. Now look, I care about my family, yeah, but you're it for me. The one thing I couldn't comprehend living without. And frankly no friends will change that, but I still want to try this. Maybe I'm willing or brave enough to try, now, because of how confident I feel about you and US. Now with our feelings out and the commitments we've

made, maybe we don't have to hold onto each other quite so tightly - because we're both totally sure neither one of us is ever going to let go. We can be confident now that no ones going to come between us in a way we couldn't before so it should free us up. I mean, you know now I'm not going to run off with some girl or something and me for you so we can sort of let go of the strangle hold a bit. Only a bit though love. Make sure you understand that very clearly. I am NOT saying I feel oppressed by how close we are or anything insane like that. If you weren't with me, beside me, close to me, I wouldn't know how to function. That's kind of scary but it's okay because I trust you to always be there. It's like that falling backwards exercise people sometimes do. I feel like we're in constant perpetual falling backwards mode with each other. The cool thing is that we'll always catch each other. I trust you totally - without a second thought - to always catch me. I love you with all my heart and knowing you feel the same, REALLY knowing it, that's completed me and given me strength and life and everything I need. But maybe it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if we weren't the only ones standing behind the other one. Maybe we don't need to carry each others entire load. And okay, maybe it's a bit more for you than me but that's only because you're so wonderful and have so much to offer, I don't deserve to keep you all to myself. This way we're doing it together, trying to make friends we both like and have stuff in common with, as a team," I look at him, sort of finally realizing how long I'd been talking and deciding to shut-up for awhile. It's actually been awhile since we sat together in silence and it's nice, except I'm so freaking nervous about his reaction to that whole huge spiel of mine.

"Cel?" I finally ask. I told you he was better at the silence thing than me. Oh thank-goodness. A smile.

"Sorry, what did you say? I sort of tuned you out there," I hit him with his hat.

"That was not nice you jerk, I'm going to get my revenge. You just wait and see."

"I'm terrified. Honestly. I'm seriously considering heading for the hills," I kiss him.

"You'd miss me too much," He returns the kiss.

"You're probably right," We settle down together on the couch in our usual positions. What are our usual positions? Oh come on. You should know this by now! Celery sits at the end of the couch and I lie on my side or back, my head in his lap. And he plays with the bits of my hair or rubs my shoulders and back or something. You could at least pay attention. Really.

"So, I mean, are you okay with this now?" He's twirling my hair in his

fingers idly and it takes him awhile to respond. He sighs.

"Yeah I am. It's, I don't know. I was being kind of stupid before when I freaked out - but this just goes to show that you're not the only one who's capable of experiencing an irrational episode. If there's anything I'm insane about it's worrying I'm smothering you but at the same time being SO afraid I'm not enough for you or of losing any of the closeness that I have with you. I'm also like whatever, not big on new people and giving out my trust - as if you didn't know - so I just let all that get to me for a little while which is why I got so..."

"Wigged?" He laughs. It's from Buffy. Buffy talk.

"Why didn't we ever start saying that?" I shrug.

"I don't know, I tried it a few times but it never really caught on. I definitely think we should start now," he nods.

"You're so right. Yes, that's why I got so wigged. But I'm better now. Your speech, while quite long and ramby," I whip off his hat and smack him with it again, he laughs and continues, "was really helpful on settling that stuff inside me."

"You've talked me down from the ledge enough times - I owed you one."

Carrots and Celery Chapter Eleven
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sun, 16 Feb 2003 17:28:43 -0600

Perhaps this one time only, I'm going to let you make fun of me. Go ahead. Have a ball. Really. Do the take no prisoners thing. Oh right, about what? Yeah. Um, I don't have Jonas's phone number. Like, not at all. What's more, I don't know his dad's first name, or even his last name for that matter. So what this means is, I can't call him. What THAT means is he's going to think I totally flaked on him. You see, there's a good reason I've only had one really good friend all these years. I'm not very good at it. The friend thing. With Cel I've got it pretty much down pat, but that's taken us 10 going on 11 years now. I'm not entirely sure Jonas is going to be willing to stick around that long to get broken in.

When I hear Kyle thumping around I actually hope he won't stop by cause I'm afraid if he looks at me he'll just like KNOW in some freaky way, and then, lecture. But do I get what I want? Of course not. That would be silly.

"Hey bro,"

"Hi Kyle,"

"Where's your boy?" It's a legitimate question, considering Celery's been pretty much a constant around here lately. Also, I always know where Celery is. I mean, when he's not with me, I always know why and where.

"At the house," our house is universally labelled home, the other place is 'the house'. Calling it home would be like blasphemous when considering the meaning of the word.

"Huh." I wait for him to say something more but Kyle just stands there with a neutral look on his face.

"Not to be rude or whatever, but is there like a purpose to why you're here that you got off track from or are you just paying me a visit because you missed the melodious sound of my voice?"

"Well, the horrible ache caused by the missing, but also this dude called the bakery a few hours ago leaving his number, and some weird message with a lot of laughing. He said he thought you might find that it came in handy. Some wack job or a friend of yours?"

"Probably both, I think it was Jonas. I was supposed to call him but then like the steel trap that I am, realized I don't know his number. I guess he didn't know mine either, but I've talked about the bakery, and like, there's how many all organic bakery's in Winnipeg? So yeah, it must have

been Jonas."

"This isn't a bizarre love triangle thing is it?"

"What?!"

"Kidding. Learn to take a joke Care. Here's the number," He hands me a folded piece of paper.

"Thanks Kyle. Got your fix of the old melodious?" He rolls his eyes.

"Yeah dude I think I'm set, night or whatever,"

"Sweet dreams," Shaking his head, Kyle makes his exit.

Not surprisingly, Jonas makes fun of me for a few minutes before we get down to business when I call him.

"So I've been approved?" He asks.

"Yeah, or, yeah. Welcome to the insanity."

"I'm excited already."

"I don't really, uh, know..."

"We just hang out, like friends do,"

"Yeah, but, I really only have one friend, and the things we do, well, they may not be normal friends things,"

"Sure they are, you guys just make them your own, which is the thing we'll have to work out somehow. You guys not totally changing with me not totally being excluded."

"We're also going to try to like, have fun right? This is sounding more like therapy than friendship," Jonas laughs.

"Sorry. Fun, right. I promise. Hours of it in fact. Really and truly."

"You can just let us know when you're feeling lost and stuff. Plus..."

"We have to have our first date."

"Um, yeah. We might all hate each other,"

"We're not strangers, dude."

"I know,"

"Are you worried about this?"

"Yeah, sort of,"

"Which part, you don't think we'll get along?"

"Oh I don't know. We're all pretty likeable guys," he laughs again.

"What then? There's no chance either of you will like me better than each other, you can't be worried about that,"

"No, I just, like, worry. About stuff, for no reason. It's a big part of the me experience. You should be aware of that, you know, so you can watch out for it, give me a slap every once in awhile."

"Maybe I'll leave that to Celery."

"That works too."

"Really, this is eventually going to stop feeling weird and like a job and start being relaxed and fun. I have all the confidence in the world."

"I'm sorry I'm not sounding more excited about it, I'm just..."

"Worried for no apparent reason, got it. I'm a very fast learner."

"That'll come in handy."

"Oh I'm sure you guys will keep me on my toes," He says, but lightly. "But it's settled, friends?"

"Yep," I'm slowly relaxing, understanding more and more Jonas is the right fit for us. This really might work.

"Ex-clam. See you tomorrow at school,"

"Okay. Great. Bye,"

"So long."

My freak-out after the phone call is mild to moderate, and very short lived. This is like, REALLY going to work. I can feel it in my bones.

We kiss immediately when Celery shows up during breakfast, like any day, and keep going like any other day, but I've just noticed Kyle's staring us with little narrowed eyes like he thinks we're up to something.

"What?" I demand.

He keeps right on staring, until suddenly he shuts his eyes tight and goes,
"Oh ga! Mental picture! BAD mental picture!"

"What is your problem?" He peaks at us with one eye, shudders.

"Kyle," I say sort of laughing in my confusion. "What's going on?"

"You're," he pauses like he's not sure he can go on before he blurts,
"having sex! Both of you - with each other!"

"KYLE!"

"Well, you are!"

Celery's laughing, and me and Kyle are dying a death of mutual embarrassment. I guess for some stuff, blood matters. Sex and my brother in the same topic of conversation just do not work. And they never will. And oh my goodness Celery stop laughing and help me!

"Relax you guys. Yes Kyle, we're having sex, so what?"

"You're... he's... dehiih," I'm about the same as Kyle, but without the talking.

"Baby," Celery says, prying my hands off my face and holding them.
"Breathe," He kisses my cheek. "Is this really such a big deal?" YES!
Oh, I don't know. I guess not. "We're in love with each other, it's sort of what people who are in love with each other do. Kyle knows that, he's a big boy." Kyle and I manage to look at each other, and there's another moment of pain before we burst out laughing.

"Dude, you should have seen your face!" He says between trying to laugh and breathe.

"Oh yeah, mine! Sure Kyle! You were the one who started having like a panic attack," Celery sighs.

"Another crisis averted." I kiss him.

"Thanks sweetness."

"My pleasure."

Are you wondering about why Celery said sex and not something like 'making love' back there? You are? I thought you might be. Well, we talked about

it and decided that while that is what we were doing, making love - CREATING it between us - saying it is too Soap Operaish. And neither of us can stand to even THINK of it as fucking, so we've opted for good old clinical S-E-X.

The next week of school and the befriending of Jonas both go surprisingly well. Cherrie and Meghan continue to ignore the pants off us, and we soon forget to cringe in horror every time we see them. They'll always have a special place in our hearts (the part of your heart you hate someone with) but they're also in the past. Over and done with. They only matter if we keep letting them, so we just aren't. Jonas has been fitting in as well as hoped, but the real test won't come until Sunday. He's going hang out with us for the afternoon. Of course we're not giving up Saturday. That's like a holy day with us. Jeez. But I think it's going to be fun. I'm feeling almost totally calm about it, and Celery seems to be doing okay. All other new, er, areas of our relationship are coming along, um, let's dramatically understate and just say 'quite well', so life's pretty fantastic all around. A sure sign that Kyle's recovered from his trauma is that he's making fun of us now, but only when we're alone, because though I'm half sure they know anyway, I'm not really ready to talk about all this with my parents. Not because they'd be upset, but because of how scarringly supportive, and possibly graphic they'd be.

On Sunday, as soon as Jonas arrives saying, "Let's get this party started," in a dry tone, obviously mocking that gag-worthy PINK song, I know things are going to be okay.

It's like, so natural feeling. The three of us. We take it casual and don't launch into big speeches about what it all means, and how this is all going to work. He doesn't try to compete for our attention or wedge himself between us. Hanging out with him really sort of makes me feel closer to Celery. More secure about us. Like we really can have other friends and not totally fall apart. And whenever we go off on some bizarre whatever, Jonas will periodically let it slide or just ask what's up. We try to explain the first couple of times, but then we actually start doing stuff on purpose, just cause, and Jonas doesn't seem to mind. Actually, I think he kind of likes it. His favourite way to handle an unexplainable fit of laughter is to make fun of us about it. And I mean, how much more right for us could the guy get? We spend the afternoon mostly talking and goofing around, getting to know each other better. It really does end up being hours of fun. Just before he's getting ready to leave, Jonas tries to explain us to ourselves a little better, and by that token, how he hopes us to all get along.

"You two, well, you've read Burger Wuss right?" We nod, it's like the funniest book alive. Fall out of your chair funny. I kid you not. "A lot less annoying, but you guys are like Rick and Jen. You're your own little nation with your own separate language. It excludes people a lot of the

time. For example, do you remember what you said when we met?" Celery and I raise our eyebrows at each other.

"Um, 'hi'?" I say with an 'and this is important WHY exactly' shrug. Jonas shakes his head.

"No. Or, yeah, but after that." I shrug again and so does Celery.

"Please enlighten us," I say, only partially sarcastically.

Choosing bravely to continue, Jonas says, "It went like this. Alex and Brian were around but mostly it was you boys doing the play the charming welcoming committee to the poor new guy thing,"

"We liked you, it wasn't like we were trying to be jerks about it," I protest. He smiles.

"I was mocking myself there, not you. Have no fear," I give him a 'go-on' nod.

"We got to the part where I asked you how the school was and Celery listed some stuff like evil cafeteria food and who all the bad slash insane teachers were, and then he said, 'but all things considered, it's an okay school - I mean, it's not like we have any serious problems...' he drifted off and Carrots you jumped in saying, 'like the spontaneous combustion of cheerleaders!'. That's what I'm talking about. I know what you were talking about NOW, but at the time I was like, 'huh?' The thing is that's really cool, it's just the way you guys are, but what you are is exclusive. Pretty much anyway. Cel you weren't there but what I basically said to Carrots over here was that I don't believe you should or need to water down your relationship, just that you could stand to try and broaden yourselves a bit. Let some other people in on the fun - not ALL the fun," we laugh.

"I didn't even mean it like that, but that's certainly also a good point. What I did mean was you don't have to tell all your secrets, you don't have to include people in every one of your inside jokes. It's important that you keep some of that just between you. But there are some cool people in the world - me especially," We laugh again. "And the fact that you're freakish soulmates does not necessarily mean you shouldn't get to know a few of us." I'm staring at him, I can't help it.

"What?" He asks, noticing. I shake my head.

"You're like a nice version of my brother," Celery's eyes widen.

"You're SO right!" He looks at me gravely. "We can't let them meet - ever. The lectures and life lessons will never stop," I nod with equal gravity. Jonas sighs.

"He'd better be as cool as me cause I'm thinking I'm going to need an ally against you two and the craziness," He grin.

"Even with Kyle, you'd be no match for us,"

"That's right - for we are," We both leap up, posing heroically.

"The Super Vegetables!" Jonas shakes his head.

"That's just not funny boy," Celery and I light up. If there was ever a doubt about whether or not Jonas is the right man for the job, hearing him say that makes it fly straight out the window.

"Oh! The guy was from Torwranna!" We start to laugh so hard we need to sit down and Jonas joins in.

Sorry. You're confused again aren't you? I guess I could explain, you know, in keeping with this whole trying to be a smidgen less exclusive thing of Jonas's. You'll try to contain your excitement will you? Maybe I won't tell you after all. Ha! You were bluffing. You see? I knew you were bluffing. Dude, the record is broken. RENT A PRINCESS BRIDE! In fact, don't rent it, BUY it. But if you won't do that, this if of course if you're insane, at the very least rent it. It would be so much easier for everyone. Digressing again eh? But whose fault was it anyway? Don't look at me. We both know who's to blame here. I'm right, you're wrong, let's move on. What was I talking about? Oh right. Why we were laughing. Major points for anyone who can guess? No? Okay, I'll just tell you. It's from a commercial. An annoying phone commercial. Annoying, but also hilarious if you happen to be making fun of it. Happy now? No? Not even a little bit? There's no pleasing some people.

Jonas leaves soon after we've all stopped laughing, and I'm still wearing the grin left over from my laughter when I turn to Celery expectantly and say, "Well?"

"I like him."

"More than me?" I gasp. He purses his lips in mock disapproval.

"You're making fun of me," He whines. I laugh.

"Would I do that?" I widen my eyes innocently. He wraps his arms around my torso and starts rubbing his nose along my cheek.

"Of course you would, but when I deserve it, it's okay."

"But you like him?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"And you?"

"Oh I love him." Now it's Celery's turn to play the mock hurt.

"More than ME?"

"No dripweed. Not even a little bit. But I really like him and I think we should hang out. Do the real friends thing. He's cool,"

"He's extremely cool." Celery agrees. Feeling suddenly up for a little fun, I scrunch my face, adopting of look of indecision.

"I don't know about extremely cool,"

"What do you mean, he's really great," Celery's puzzled, having failed catch on to me yet, which of course makes me the champion of the world, but it's not time for victory dancing quite yet.

Instead, I hide my face in my hands and pretend to cry uncontrollably.

"It's happening already. We're drifting apart,"

Celery tackles me (none too gently I might add) and pins me to the floor.

"You're the worst possible kind of seed," He says, shaking his head. I grin seductively.

"So what are you going to do about it?" Sure it's lame, but do you see either of us caring? He grins back.

"Let's go to your room and you can find out."

Teenage boys remember? With hormones? Who are madly in love with each other? Yes. That's what we're going to do. It's nice to see you're finally catching on.

On Monday morning Celery kisses me and eats some of my second bagel, just like always, which is a good thing, because it puts to rest that final .1% of doubt we were both harbouring about life after (or is it with?) Jonas, leaving us relaxed and even excited about the day.

We keep our relaxed and excited feelings as we enter the cafeteria and locate Jonas drinking coffee with Brian and Alex. I like Brian and Alex,

and can't help feeling a little guilty or disloyal for not really ever thinking about including them in the real friends plan, but I'm barely keeping my head above water with one extra friend - three I just couldn't handle. You saw what happened with the phone number. With three, well four with Celery, life would just be one phone number-like debacle after another.

"It's the Super Vegetables," Jonas says with a wry grin, making us smile.

"Hey Jonas," I say, sitting down. Celery just nods, sharing his grin between us. I feel guilty all over again, seeing the 'huh' faces of Brian and Alex, but I don't think explaining it to them would really make them feel any better.

"Working out today Celery?" Jonas asks, sneaking a peak at me, and winking.

"Don't encourage him!" I admonish, glaring at him. It's been quite awhile since his attack, but Celery's still not back to 100%. He's still feeling it sometimes. Physically and emotionally. I guess we both are.

"Not yet," Celery says, placating me and saving Jonas.

Once it's over, the exchange makes me smile. This is the way it's supposed to be, isn't? I've heard about this. Friends and stuff. Damn. I kind of like this.

In class, when Jonas and I talk, it's like it has so much more meaning than it usually seemed to. Like all this talking and getting to know each other stuff has a point, a purpose. And then at lunch when we ALL talk, it's even better.

Over the next few days we do a pretty good job of hammering out a decent sized dent in our lives for Jonas without either of us experiencing the desire to cling to each other and stop acknowledging the presence of all other sentient life. Jonas IS cool too, just like we thought he was. What's more, he's a lot like us. Not an exact prototype, not some generic sameness, but where he's like us it works and where he isn't it works too. The way it works is, it's like, Celery's my best friend and I'm his, but Jonas is OUR best friend. Collectively. Like he's our kid or something. It's a joint thing. We only hang out when it's the three of us so it can stay that way. Jonas is great though, let me reiterate. Really crazy. I said he was like us didn't I? That didn't tip you off to the craziness? You really haven't listened to anything I've said, have you? I can't say I'm surprised.

Let me give you the visual Jonas. He's like 5'8" or something, skinny. His hair is incredible. I mean it - Jonas has some of the best hair I've ever seen. It's bleached this terrifically light almost white colour.

Except he uses this weird herbal stuff (I swear his mom makes it for him) that washes out, so from day to day his hair is like this weird version of varying degrees on an all-blond rainbow. But that's hardly the best part. He has dreads. Not the dirty, really thick kind and not the wimpy ugly really thin kind like posers. Just the perfect, slightly wispy kind. They're always all over the place, but he hardly ever bothers or pays attention. The longest ones are only like down to his jaw, but they can get in his face pretty good. His eyes are naturally brown - I think - but he wears an array of coloured contacts. The unnaturalness about them makes him even more striking. He's as much of a bundle of energy as me, if not more so. I'm thinking his times of more even weirdness than me could be because he hasn't had the benefit of Celery's soothing presence in his life since he was 6. I find that's been really helpful. But it's only certain over stuff (like, the God Father movies for example, who knows why) that he gets crazy, wild and me-like about. Other times - most times really - he's got sort of Oz like stoicism about him. You know, calm and like unaffected.

He gets a lot of our jokes without us even having to explain them to him, and like the first day, when he doesn't get something, sometimes he'll ask, sometimes he'll let it slide, sometimes he'll mock us, and sometimes when we act especially crazy just for the hell of it, Jonas always takes it with good humour. Despite the fact that I found him first, Jonas sort of turns into Celery's advice-go-to guy, but I guess that's just because Kyle's already mine. And just like Kyle, Jonas's advice usually consists of a few quick words and then the order to go talk to me about it.

We're a pretty happy three part family until Kyle shows up one afternoon (we agreed having Jonas join us for our after school homework sessions wouldn't be too traumatic) and they click instantly. From that point on it becomes us against them in the best possible way. As pairs we team up on each other in the teasing, lecturing, and mockery thing, but it's all in 100% good clean fun. A big topic for the endless ragging is gay verses straight. They have a field day with our kissing and moony eyes, and have also taken it upon themselves to promote a positive heterosexual image around us, in hopes that we will one day forgive the orientation as a whole for the wrongs committed against us by Cherrie and Meghan.

You have by the way, entered the deliriously happy zone. Welcome. It's really nice here, I think you'll like it. Cause you know, it's chalk full of love, joy, pure happiness, all that good stuff. Happiness. My names isn't Carrots Vasskez if the air doesn't reek of it. This is like, exactly the way life is supposed to be but usually never is. It's almost like being reborn or something, in the all the good ways, like everything seems new and fresh and beautiful, but none of the bad ways like having to go through all the crap again to get to where you are. The air's not the only thing that stinks of happiness, I'm pretty much in eau de it myself. It's like fucking walking on sunshine man. Happiness to it's zenith and love as

it was designed to be experienced. All corny lyrics and movie lines apply. Nobody, I mean, ESPECIALLY not an idiot like me, deserves to be this happy.

It's been almost two weeks since Jonas's been hanging with us now, and we're all feeling pretty, bordering on totally, comfortable with each other. I'm comfortable enough to finally ask him something I've been wondering about for awhile now.

"So what's under there dude?"

"Huh?" He asks, lazy grin.

Jonas is almost always wearing a lazy grin these days. It's like his grin gets a little lazier every day. He's a happy, mellow guy. More and more all the time, his attitude tempts all of us to call him the Zen master. When teased about it he'll just calmly informs us he's merely content with his life. 'What's not to love?' He always says. 'I've got you three hot looking guys all totally in love me,' chuckle, chuckle, ha ha, 'plus this pretty all right sort of girl friend, good grades, good health. So what if I'm I'm happy - which one of you slob's isn't?' His pretty all right sort of girlfriend, by the way, is this more than pretty alright girl named Sam Roberts. She's a very cool girl I know from the paper. Smart, and extremely funny in a sharp way. Heart of gold though. A great match for Jonas. They're sort of in casual mode so far, but she's awesome.

"You know. Take away the contacts and the hair dye and what do you get?" He shrugs.

"Not much. It's all pretty average. Light brown hair, light brownish-green eyes. I've always figured that if I can't be good looking, I can at least be interesting looking." I doubt that and that's exactly what I tell him. "Seriously my veg," that's something he calls us, Celery and me. "Nothing special about little old Jonas. Except of course my charisma and dizzying intellect."

"At least you've got that going for you," Celery quips, looking up from his math homework and adding his voice to the conversation. Kyle has a class at the moment, otherwise, he'd be right in here, standing up for Jonas and all his alleged average glorious fabulousness.

There was this another thing on my mind about Jonas, but we've already covered that. Feeling extremely awkward and dumb about it Celery and I once forced ourselves to ask about his sexuality. Not for the because we cared either way reason but for the dying of (admittedly lame) curiosity one. Jonas took the potentially explosive topic in his usual laid-back manner. All he said was, "Basically, I'm straight, but I think it's wrong

to put labels on people. You guys, you love each other. Your gender falls second to that basic fact. As far as I go, I haven't loved anyone yet, but so far my crushes have been strictly on the ladies. However, one day in the future if some dude comes into my life and totally rocks my world, I'll be cool with that. Keep options open you know?'

That's Jonas to a tee. He's your regular laid-back, free thinking guy. I think maybe it has something to do with the fact that his parents used to be hippies, and still kind of are. That's another reason why I like Jonas so much - his parents are almost as insane as mine. And I mean, I haven't even met them. But just going by the stories he tells us, I know his and mine are birds of the same reality challenged feather. A lot of it (the insanity) is just Jonas though, and has nothing to do with his upbringing. The guy is this mass of inner calm, and yet he's also got this totally insane energetic side that I already mentioned. But he handles all the big stuff with the calm side of the coin, and lets loose the insanity when he wants himself and those around him to have a good time. Or, also when he's watching the God Father.

Carrots and Celery Chapter Twelve
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sat, 22 Feb 2003 14:30:11 -0600

"What's up droogs?" Jonas says, sliding into one of those fabulous orange cafeteria chairs found in this and so many other fine highschoools across the country. Droogs? That's from A Clockwork Orange. A totally wack book, with some very cool lingo, that Jonas loves. The book and the lingo I mean. It's his quote reference of choice, and both me and Celery had to read it to keep up. But the reading up aside, can you say, peas in a freakish pod?

"I'd say the sky, but that would be lame." I say back.

"That's never stopped you before,"

"I notice you only make jokes when you're making fun of me," I report my observance to Celery. He grins.

"Finally picked up on that eh?" I swat him with his hat. Jonas smiles.

"You're adorable,"

"Shut-up Wepeel," Wepeel? Well, there's this Weezer song called My Name is Jonas, but once in the song it goes 'my name is Wepeel' instead of the customary 'my name is Jonas', so sometimes we call him that. Mainly me.

"Where are Brian and Alex at?" I ask to move the conversation away from the further mocking of me.

"Brian's at track," just for the early morning runs alone, I can never understand why any even half-sane person would want to be in track. "And I think Alex is in detention again,"

"Damn, what does that kid do to get himself in so much trouble," Jonas shrugs.

"He sleeps in class," Celery's says quietly.

"Huh?"

"Yeah, or, he's always falling asleep in the classes I have with him. And he's late a lot. You've never noticed that?"

"I don't have any classes with him."

"Sure you do, we both have Bio with him," Jonas tells me. I'm a very bad person. Very bad.

"Oh."

"And Celery's right, he is often sleeping through that these days. How come?"

"I think he has an after school job that takes up a lot of his time and keeps him up late," Alex was supposed to be the friend I brought to the mix, how come Celery knows so much more about him than I do?

"How do you know all this?"

"I just hear stuff. I don't know if it's true, but it's better than some of the other stuff I've heard, and seems to be the most likely," Wow, my future husband (even better than fiancé!), mister gossip. Not that he takes part, but Celery has always been an intense listener.

"He's okay though right?"

"I don't know, I think so." We all look at each other, and I know we're all thinking the same thing. We're supposed to be his friend, but we barely know him. I barely know almost all of my friends.

"We gotta go to class," Jonas says breaking the silence, a second before the bell rings. Not saying anything more, we all get up and make our way to our lockers and first period classes.

At lunch I know we all sort of want to say something to Alex, but none of us knows what. But I mean maybe there is nothing TO say. He certainly seems happy and lively enough. Or is that all just an act? Have there been signs I've - we've - missed? Maybe something's wrong, but then again maybe he's just tired, or bored with the subjects he's taking. But that doesn't really seem like Alex. After all, I only met through the S courses we've ended up taking together over the years. What? Oh. In our school there's General courses (G) and Specialised courses, which are S. Alex is a smart guy, I don't understand why he's sleeping through his classes.

"Still brooding?" Celery asks me as we're walking home that afternoon. Jonas isn't with us because he had to swing by his house for a book he forgot. Plus I think he said something about his parents wanting him home more. He misses afternoons sometimes now because of that. Not often, but it's annoying. Right when we were starting to get our groove going you know?

I shrug, in response to Celery's brooding question.

"A little,"

"Cause you're worried about him, or cause you feel guilty about your lack of attention?" I smile the 'you know me too well' smile.

"Both I guess. I just feel like I'm so selfish, or like I have this major malfunction. I mean, why can't I be a decent friend to more than two people?" He gives a squeeze to my shoulders.

"You are,"

"No I'm not. I didn't even know that stuff about Alex, and he's supposed to be a friend of mine. Trying to make me feel better is appreciated, but don't lie about it."

"Look, some people hold themselves off from everyone, and just like PRETEND to be something they're totally not. Pretend to give so much when really all they're doing is holding something totally separate in. At least you're open and up front about what you think you can give."

"And I give SO much," I say, I'm getting a real good self-deprecating tone down.

"You do. Care, you give me my life - that has to counts for something," I smile sadly.

"It counts for everything."

"So?"

"So isn't that the problem?"

"I thought this was something you were basically over,"

"It's better than it used to be, but only by one person. Remember what Jonas said? That there are other cool people in the world? Not JUST him though right?"

"Baby," He stretches it out real long, like a sigh.

"No. It's okay. I mean, I have to know my limits right? Even if I don't like them. This is me,"

"It's me too," I look up at him, and realize that by judging myself, I'm also judging him. I don't see Celery as a selfish or bad person, so does that mean I can't see myself that way? He's Celery, and he's mine. That's all there is to it. I can imagine the distress I would experience if it was him talking this way instead of me, so I smile.

"You're right. It's passing," and it is too. Because of what I just said up

there. Read you fool! That'll teach you to skim through the non-dialog. Slacker.

"Good."

"It's been awhile since I freaked out about anything. Did you miss it?" I say with a taunting grin.

"Oh yeah. Everyday." His arm slips off my shoulders and we walk the rest of the way holding hands. Have I mentioned how much I love holding Celery's hand? I have? Well good, because I do.

No Kyle when we get home, but he can usually only make two or three out of five afternoons. We try to get to work while we're waiting for Jonas, (though waiting may be too strong a word since we're not totally sure if he's coming at all) but end up playing this silly game with our pinkies. How can I describe this? His hand will be lying on the table, and I'll sneak my hand over and make contact with my pinkie, then pull back, and then he'll do the same thing, and so on. It's as lame as it sounds, but we often fall into it when we're supposed to be doing something else. We're just way too addicted to each other I guess.

Jonas shows up in his usual way (that would be unannounced through the back/kitchen door) a little after the pinkie game has deteriorated into full hand holding and eye connection. Looking into each other eyes can be a dangerous thing. We'll get stuck like that sometimes, drowning in the others pools or something poetic like that, and someone will have to snap us out of it. Failing that, we'll end up kissing or more.

"Cut it out droogs," He commands, tossing himself into a chair and dropping his bag.

Jonas is going to be a bag lady someday. He's got this massive thing made out of hemp, covered with a wide and strange array of buttons and patches. His mom got him it at some weird all hemp products store, and he takes with him almost everywhere he goes. It all pouches and strings (and don't forget those buttons), filled with enough stuff to open a small store or possibly get you across country. The only explanation he'll give is that he's a compulsive pack rat, with the added twist that he needs to be WITH all his useless accumulation of stuff at all times. He promises it's not a 'you never know when you're going to have to jam' runaway thing like that chick from the Breakfast Club.

"Huh?" We both say. Huh is standard when we're emerging from one of those trance like moments.

"Don't play innocent with me. I know what you were up to. Five more minutes and I would have been prying your mouths a part," Not much we can say to

honestly refute that.

"How lucky for all concerned that you did show up then." I say. Celery's glaring, pretending to take this less casually or with as much good nature.

"Thanks a lot Jonas," Jonas laughs, mostly cause of Cel's surprisingly convincing pouty, angry tone.

For some reason, I take a second away from the levity to glance at my math homework, and realize I still don't have a clue how to work the latest and highly mysterious concept we were "taught" today in Pre Calc. One day, I really will get back at Celery for tricking me into taking that class.

"Dude, as much as I'd rather do anything else, can we work on math for awhile,"

Celery goes into understanding-tutor mode, and Jonas gets down to some of his own work. Unlike me, Jonas was not wheedled into taking such a ridiculous course, and doesn't have to worry about such things.

Maybe it was my lingering guilt and concern about the whole Alex, inattentive friend thing that made me go up to him, the new guy whose name I've now learned is Kaleb, or maybe it was fate trying to be funny or just some impulse, but does it really matter? No. What happened after I went up to him is what matters, what's still happening right now. We've been talking, and he's laughed in all the right places, and I've laughed in all the right places, and it's been instant click. My heads usually too full of Celery to allow for instant clickage with anybody, much less some cute new guy. Cute, very cute in fact, but I swear I recognised he had a face I didn't before I ever recognised the cuteness of that face. So he's cute and we're talking, and he knows all about movies from the 80's and has seen The Princess Bride 17 times, and in case you missed it before, we're laughing in all the right places.

"So," he says, suddenly with his hand on my arm. "What are you doing tonight, since I'm new, maybe you could show me around the neighbourhood?" Nothing's going on here though, right? I mean, he's just a straight guy who wants a tour isn't he? I've never been flirted with by another non-Celery guy before - I have no idea how it works! Ack!

"I can't, I have sort of running plans every night,"

"Running plans?"

"Is that the wrong term? Long standing maybe?"

"What kind of plans?" He asks with a patiently amused 'I still have no idea what you're talking about' look.

"Watching Buffy and hanging out with my best friend," and my boyfriend! Help, why didn't I say that?

"Oh yeah?" What's wrong with his eyes, they're all, I don't know, hiding something - no - up to something, that might be better.

"Yeah, tradition." He nods.

"Some other time?" I shrug.

"I'm usually pretty busy,"

"With your best friend," I nod and gulp. I'm pathetic.

"That's right."

"That's too bad," and before I can dig myself in any deeper, the bell rings and break is over.

I get to my locker early that afternoon, but Celery's even earlier.

"Hey, where were you at break, I got sort of worried," I smile.

"You remind me of me," He smiles back, but still looks a bit worried.

"So?"

"New kid. I talked to him. Seemed nice, funny. He's a P.B fan,"

"Cool."

"Not as cool as you," I say, kissing him lightly. The grey's gone and his eyes are normal again.

"That's a relief." I roll my eyes, we find Jonas and start heading home, but I can't seem to forget Kaleb. Not even Kaleb himself really, just how I acted around him. How he acted around me. What was up with that?

Apparently determined not to let me forget about him, Kaleb turns up at break again the next day, morning this time.

"Hey,"

"Hi," I say, trying to judge my own tone and deciding it was neutral.

"You know, I've been hearing things about you," He sounds friendly, playful, not threatening.

"Oh yeah, like what?"

"Like that best friend of yours is also your boyfriend," I don't need a mirror. I blushed. I know I did.

"Yeah well,"

"Lucky you, he's hot." I grin, after all, he is.

"I know."

"So are you." More blushing. Add also some confusion. I mean, this is a GUY right? Pretty untypical high school male behavior.

"Thanks." Really, it's not big deal. His tone was relaxed, not like seductive or whatever. Definitely not flirting.

"How long've you been together?" I shrug. Genuine curiosity was exhibited.

"Hard to say. 11 years or just under two months?"

"Sounds like a story,"

"A long and strange one, but I can't explain it now. I've got to go find him," He smiles.

"Don't let me keep you."

When I find Celery I have no trouble what so ever forgetting about Kaleb as we smile foolishly at each other and stand in the hall kicking each others feet occasionally. Who knows why.

Kaleb keeps popping up over the next couple of days, strictly in the casual, breaks and class time sense, and we're becoming school friends. I've decided that if I can't be REAL friends with more people, at least I can be a better school friend, and I've started with Alex, Brian, and Kaleb. Who I happen to like a lot. All of them, but I'm talking about Kaleb mostly. I told you about the clickage. That's wasn't a fluke. We get along really great. Quality guy all around.

"Dude," Jonas says slapping me on the back. We're just walking out of our Comp English class, Celery's in Trans. Sigh. Composite and Transactional.

"Yeah?"

"Can we talk?"

"Aren't we?"

"Hilarious, but seriously. Who's that Kaleb dude you're always hanging out with?" Huh? Always?

"What do you mean?"

"Well, who is he? You've been missing breaks lately, and whenever Celery goes looking for you, he always finds you talking to the Kaleb guy."

"He's my friend, sort of. Nothing serious, we talk sometimes,"

"Okay."

"It's not like a big deal. Why, is Celery upset?" Jonas shrugs.

"More like he's trying NOT to be upset. And he's mad at himself, cause he feels like he doesn't have a right to monopolise all your time, even though he kind of can't help but want to. He's all torn between being jealous and worrying about smothering you." Give me the prize. I'm the most oblivious person on the face of the earth. I didn't notice any of that.

"Should I talk to him?"

"You might want to, yeah."

"Thanks Jonas."

"Hey, don't worry about it. Happy to help." I return his earlier slap on the back and we split up and head to our next classes.

I pull Celery away from the table at lunch.

"Let's go for a walk, okay?"

"Okay," He says agreeably, shrugging.

Once we're outside the school grounds (open campus's are kick ass, aren't they?) and walking nowhere in particular I say, "You upset about anything?" He frowns.

"Talking to Jonas?" I smile.

"Maybe," He sighs.

"A little, but it's stupid."

"Like every single thing I've ever been upset about hasn't been stupid. When has that ever stopped you from being understanding, patient and caring?"

"It's not even that I think you like him in any way but as a friend,"

"It's enough that I like him as a friend." He nods, looking sort of ashamed of himself.

"Why am I like this?"

"Like what?"

"So fucking territorial and possessive!" Whoa. Yeah, that would be tad more than only a little upset, I'd say.

"It's just cause I'm so awesomely awesome," I say, doing my injecting humour into a serious conversation thing. He doesn't react. "Oh come on Cel, laugh," He smiles at me finally, but then turns away again to stare straight ahead.

"I don't like being this way. Feeling like this," I squeeze his hand.

"There's nothing wrong with you,"

"Sure there is! I don't own you,"

"Yes you do."

"What?" He stops walking abruptly, looking at me again, shocked and possibly angry.

"I'm yours, I belong to you. Same way you do me, isn't that old news?" I wiggle my ring finger at him.

"But you're not my property," Not ready to let it go just yet.

"No, I'm your friend, and your lover, and the person who you're going to spend the rest of your life with - if I have anything to do with it. So it's okay to feel like you want to keep me all to yourself, sometimes, as long as you know and accept that it isn't always possible. I'm cool with you having a say in who I spend time with, cause mostly I want to spend time with you - so if other people are going to be involved, it's important that you like them too."

I can see what's going on in his head through his eyes, the swings of thought and mood, until he eventually settles on the one he voices.

"We're not normal, are we?" He asks, shaking his head. I grin.

"So who wants to be normal?" Dancing on my Grave friends. That's a cool book.

"You're getting pretty good at this,"

"What?"

"Talking me down from my freak outs,"

"Good teacher."

"Aww." In the same second, we squeeze each others hand.

I do my best to explain the situation to Kaleb, but for some reason he doesn't seem big on hanging out with both of us, or even sitting with the whole crew at lunch. He's still friendly to me in class and stuff, but he acts like he's holding back or something, keeping me at arms length. And I mean, I'm not even usually paying close enough attention to notice something like that. One day I ask him about it.

"Man, what's up with you? You seem down about something or whatever," He smiles.

"I like you. I know you have a boyfriend and I'm cool with that, but I still like you."

"Like me like me?" What an uncomfortable conversation this has suddenly become.

He nods.

"Yep."

"Why?" He laughs.

"Cause you're hot and funny and you understand that Adventures in Babysitting was one of the most brilliant films of all time." I can't help but laugh myself.

"Well, okay, you're right about the last thing, and there's no denying that I'm hilarious, but hot? Don't be silly,"

"Trust me. You're very hot. Doesn't Celery tell you that?" I shrug.

"Yeah, but who's going to listen that guy? He's also been known to tell me I'm the ONLY person he thinks is hot."

"You don't believe him?"

"Oh I believe he believes it, I just also believe it makes him a highly unreliable source of information." Kaleb laughs again, and then shakes his head.

"This dude, is why I like you. You're just fun to be around." I frown.

"I'm sorry." He rolls his eyes, grinning.

"Please. I should be sorry. This is all weird for you now, I probably shouldn't have told you, but I figured what the hell? I already knew what your reaction would be, and I'd heard sharing your feelings with people is supposed to make you feel better."

"Does it?"

"Not really," He says, still grinning.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Get ugly, mean and dull?"

"I think I can manage that." Damn. Am I flirting? Is this what flirting is? Tell me honestly, am I tramp? Shut-up! I am not.

"Dude," he says quietly. I sigh.

"Yeah."

"I know there isn't any feeling behind what you're saying, but it still sort of gets my hopes up you know? Even though in my head I know it won't happen, so maybe, I don't know,"

"We can't stay friends?" I ask-state sadly.

"Maybe once I get over the crush..." He offers. I smile.

"You're sure you wouldn't even want to like eat lunch with all of us? Those guys are really nice," he shakes his head.

"Not right now. Like I said, maybe later." He laughs. "I wouldn't want to risk pissing that boyfriend of yours off, he'd eat me for breakfast." I shake my head, suddenly feeling totally serious.

"No, if he thought I really liked you he'd encourage our relationship." My statement, and the fact that I clearly mean it, sort of blows Kaleb's mind.

"Wow." I nod.

"That's pretty much what goes through my head about 99.9% of the time I'm with him, yeah."

"Lucky both of you." The bell rings. And another break bites the dust. We look at each other guiltily.

"I should go, class,"

"Me too."

"So, like, I won't be seeing you?" I say, trying it on. He shrugs.

"Later."

"Yeah okay."

"Ta."

"Bye." So we go our separate ways.

In class Jonas raises his eyebrows at me, and I write him a quick note just saying how I had to get some stuff sorted out with Kaleb. He writes back, 'what was the problem' and I mouth back 'tell ya later.'

"So what's the deal?" Jonas asks me as we head to my locker.

"He was acting sort of weird around me and I asked him why and then we just had to talk about it for awhile." Jonas shrugs.

"Well he has a major crush on you, that's obvious." What?! Seriously! Am I like blind or something? Am I doomed to NEVER be able to tell if someone is interested in me or not?

"How did you know that?"

"Just like I said. It was obvious. But to his credit, it was also obvious he wasn't planning to do anything about it." I nod.

"That's what we talked about. He said he was going to keep his distance for awhile, but then when he gets over the crush, maybe we'll talk more again."

"You going to tell Celery this?"

"Of course! I tell him everything." He nods.

"Good."

A few beats or pauses or whatever later I ask,

"Jonas, do you think I'm a tramp?" Jonas laughs loudly.

"A 'tramp'? Not only are you not a tramp, the very fact that you used the word 'tramp' is the funniest thing I've ever heard. Dude, you crack me up." He's still laughing and shaking his head.

"So I'm not a tramp?"

"Definitely not."

By the way, we haven't been walking to my locker the whole time. We got there around the time he informed me of the obviousness that is Kaleb. Celery's just absent for some reason. I look around.

"You don't think he's like, mad or something do you?"

"Mad? Celery? No. He's just late."

"Doing what?"

"Who knows, he'll meet us at home, come on. Walking will help ease your worry."

"It will?"

"Yes. It will."

Less than half-way through the journey Celery the stealth master sneaks up on me, almost scares me to death by shouting 'boo!' really loud from behind and then gets a smack with his hat followed by a grudging kiss.

"Where were you?" I ask.

"Where were YOU?" He counters. We mock glare at each other for awhile.

"I was talking to Kaleb," I say.

"I was talking to Alex."

"Really?" I say, suddenly very distracted from Kaleb and interested in his news. "How come?"

"No come." Let's not even go into how bad that sounds. I'm sure he didn't mean it like that. Or at least I'm hoping with everything in me that he didn't mean it like that. "Just cause. I passed him by his locker and we talked for awhile. He told me he sleeps so much in class because he's always driving out to see his girlfriend in Transcona and getting back late. I heard that rumour too but I discounted it cause I didn't think Alex would do something like that. I thought maybe he was covering, but I'm pretty sure it's the truth. He said he knows they have to tone it down, but apparently she's going away for the summer, so that's why they've been kind of extreme lately. So I think he's totally fine. Like, when I offered my condolences about detention he just grinned and said it was worth it."

"Visiting his girlfriend? That scallywag." They both look at me.

"What?"

"Scallywag?" I roll my eyes.

"Sure. Make fun of the one with broad vocabulary."

"Life's so tough isn't it Care," Celery says, putting his hand sympathetically on my shoulder. I shake my head.

"I cry myself to sleep every night,"

"No you don't." He rebuts, with an 'and I know that for a fact' tone.

"Well of course I don't. I was being sarcastic."

"Really?" Okay. I know. I set myself up for that one.

"So are we off the Alex topic now or what?" Jonas asks.

"I have no more news." Celery says. I shrug.

"So," Jonas looks at me expectantly.

"Oh! Right, um, so where was I right? Well..."

Once I've finished giving Celery a run down of all Kaleb and Kaleb related events he smiles smugly and says, "So now are you finally starting to believe me about the hotness of you?" I laugh.

"Yeah. In fact, I've realized I'm so hot, I can do much better than you. So from now on, you're on notice. You can stick around until I find someone better, but we both know considering how hot I am that won't take long." Celery rolls his eyes and hip checks me hard enough for me to go stumbling

into the yard of the house we're passing.

"Brute!" I say, wiping myself off. Just for emphasis you understand. It's not like I actually fell or anything. He didn't push me THAT hard. Celery's a real soft touch, he can't help it. He's gentle as a lamb.

Like most other times when we have an altercation like that one, Jonas remains on the sidelines laughing at both of us. I kind of like that about him. It's like he's a part of things without interfering in our weirdness. Sometimes he gets involved, but he's gotten pretty good at judging when it is or isn't the right time. That Jonas is a pretty smart guy.

Carrots and Celery Chapter Thirteen
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Thu, 06 Mar 2003 21:01:32 -0600

And so life goes on. Our new Jonas filled existence goes pretty much like this: he'll hang out and study with us after school (except on the occasions when his parents get weird) and Kyle will often be around too, depending on whether or not he has a late class. Evenings are still for just us, but that's mostly because nobody can stand to watch Buffy with us. Apparently we get a little too involved, and they don't care for our commercial activities much either. Then comes Friday and Saturday, which is still very much me and Celery's appointed alone together time, followed by Sunday. You know the drill for Sunday mornings, and in the afternoon we always hang out together, the four of us.

We never really have a plan for what we're going to do, but it always ends up being something. Even if that something is just sitting around the living room talking and watching movies. But, actually, that's another thing Jonas does for Celery and me -- he gets us out more. He's always the one to suggest we go out and do something instead of the just staying in and chilling yet again. The way he leads us all around the city makes me feel like I'M the one who only just moved here a few months ago. Luckily, like me, Jonas is a lover of public transit, though we do bitch to each other about the seemingly endless cost increases. The bus experience is one of the rare topics where the group dynamic changes, however briefly, and it becomes me and Jonas (bus riders extraordinaire) against Kyle and Celery: "we hate the bus". All the other people on the bus make them feel self-conscious. Jonas and I on the other hand, see the bus as an ideal opportunity to meet someone new. The running joke is Kyle and Celery sitting far away from Jonas and myself, shooting us `we're not with them' looks the whole time. But like everything else, it's just a joke. I'm hoping, by the end of all this, you'll be able to recognize one on your own, but I know we're not there yet.

I'm hoping that reading that previous paragraph helped you get the idea that I love riding the bus, but have I shared with you my love of Kyle's car? I haven't? Well now is the time. I love it way more than an anti-car advocate such as myself should, but I can't help it. It's this big beige Le Baron and it's the most beautiful thing you've ever seen. I mean, it's hideous, but it's SO hideous it's beautiful. It was totally S-class back in like the 80's and you know how I feel about that decade. Kyle got it really cheap from a friend whose parents bought him something new because they couldn't stand to have it parked in their driveway -- so he's pretty free with it. Meaning he lets us drive it pretty much whenever we want. When I say we, I mean Celery. Oh, and Jonas. Me, I don't even have my licence. I never even got my learners. I don't know why, but I've never been a member of the teen masses with a burning desire for the open

road. I don't really even like driving, it sort of makes me nauseous. To be honest, I don't really like it when Celery drives either. I prefer it if Kyle or Jonas is at the helm. It's simple really, when he's not driving we get to sit in the back, holding hands and making-out. When Celery drives we hardly get to make out at all.

Why all the car talk? It has something to do with the fact that we're in the car right now, and I'm yacking so much cause this doesn't happen to be one of those times Celery isn't driving, and I figure if I can't be frenching I can at least be rambling. This isn't one of those random cruises, we're going somewhere. Where we're going you would not believe (or knowing us you shouldn't anyway) and hence I will now explain it to you. How we got to be going where we're going. It's not so much the location of our destination, but that fact that it's me and Celery who are going, that's so shocking.

Here's how it happened.

It's Saturday now and it started Wednesday already, the harassment. Wednesday morning and me and Celery were sitting in the cafeteria like every morning talking and doing whatever, waiting for school to start and all that regular, everyday jazz. Then in raced Jonas, late, which hardly ever happens, looking way too excited, like he'd just been told the secret of life and was about to share it with us.

"Dudes, I have news, the best, most wonderful news ever in the history of news,"

"So tell us," I said, leaning back into Celery. Even in the cafeteria, we can't help ourselves. Celery sits on the orange chair far enough back with his legs open that there's room for me, and with his arms around me, life's about as good as it gets.

"I know where Jamie Meranz is having his party this weekend," I have to admit, I was unimpressed. Like sure, that's a big deal if you actually like to go to parties, but that's not me and Celery.

"So?" His eyes bugged out.

"SO? SO? Carrots! The Meranz May Long weekend party! It's like the biggest party ever, of the year, perhaps even of our entire highschool careers!" He wasn't even really over exaggerating, The Meranz family have like a million sons and the oldest one started having this party in like the late 80's. There's an insane amount of lore about past parties, and excitement about the upcoming one usually starts building months in advance. This is the first one in two years, which is adding to the current frenzy. But none of that changes the simple fact that the party scene has never been ours.

"We don't go to parties Jonas," Celery nodded, pulling me a little closer against his chest.

"We also don't go to dances, or any other events of that nature."

"Look, I get that you guys are the most anti social people in the world, but this is the party of our LIVES! If you never go to another party in your lives -- if you only go to ONE party your whole existence, let it be the Meranz May Long Weekend Party." All Jonas needed to do to complete the performance was to get on his knees.

"Really Jonas, we wouldn't have any fun. Nothing about parties is us. We don't drink or smoke or do any other kinds of drugs, we don't want to hook up with hot girls and go have sex in some strangers bedroom. We don't want loud and I'm sure VERY bad music damaging our ear drums. If we wanted to have a party, then we'd have a two-member party. Maybe four if you and Kyle felt like putting up with us, but that's it." I turned my head back a fraction, just to make sure I was speaking correctly for Celery, but he smiled and kissed my head. Checking was a bit silly, I should have known better.

"Guys, guys, guys! This is so much more than drinking, sex and today's worst popular music. This is the greatest party, the party of all parties. The big one. I'm not even FROM here and I know how amazing it's going to be. I heard about it all the way from the hick town I'm ashamed to admit I come from. It will be a million times bigger and better than any party you've ever not been to."

"No man."

But Jonas wouldn't let up, there was a reason he started three days before the actual night of the party. He knew he'd need at least that long to wear us down, and persistent he certainly was. The party, apparently, would be nothing without us. By not going, we would be depriving him of a truly good time. As his friends, we had to go. He tried other stuff too, and kept trying it, over and over, until finally Friday afternoon we just yelled,

"FINE!"

"You've made the right choice." Celery and I looked at each other and shook our heads. The things we do for our friends.

So now we're going, in Kyle's beige Le Baron, Celery's driving, Jonas is navigating, and I'm stuck in the back seat all alone thinking to myself that this isn't where I'm supposed to be. I SHOULD be on my couch cuddling against Celery watching Buffy kick some vampire ass, but no. This party is

going to have to be the coolest thing I've ever seen for me to even not hate it. But then again, maybe me and Celery can just sneak away from wherever the main partying is going on and be alone. There will definitely be no sex in the room of a stranger, (even with each other that still wouldn't be cool) but that way we could at least talk and maybe kiss a little. Holding his hand would be enough to make my night. I'm easy to please that way.

"We've been driving around for a really long time you guys, maybe we won't be able to find it," I don't even bother to mask the hopefulness in my voice.

"Pipe down back there crumbum, we're going to find this party. Find it, enjoy it, and then remember it with `those were the days' looks in our eyes for the rest of our lives."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's exactly so. Now hush, some of us are trying to navigate."

"Celery," I whine.

"I know baby. But it's for a good cause. Try and remember that."

"What's the cause?"

"You." I can hear the grin, even if I can't see it.

"Oh really? And just why am I a cause?" Jonas asks, sounding a bit peeved.

"You need love. Or at least a hot girlfriend. I mean, what happened to Sam anyway? You can't keep going on double dates with us and Kyle for the rest of your life you know. Speaking of which, that guy needs to get some action himself." Eww to the action and my brother in the same sentence, but that said, it's true. They both need a little loving. And how.

"And I'm sure hanging out at a party with my two gay best friends is really going to help me score with the ladies," Jonas scoffs.

"Hey, don't you know how much girls like us gay guys? You saw what happened with Cherrie and Meghan," Lately, I've been testing the joke about Cherrie and Meghan waters, and so far Celery seems to be taking it well.

"If those are the kinds of girls you droogs plan to hook me up with, that's the kind of help I can do without."

"At least you admit you need help. That's a good start."

"Grrr man." Jonas says, twisting around and looking at me with clenched fists.

"Never force me into going to a party with you Jonas. This is what will happen. I hope you've learned your lesson." He's slumped down in his seat, arms crossed I bet.

"I think it's sinking in."

"Be nice baby," Carrots admonishes.

"I'm not being nice?"

"We're going to have tonight, all three of us. Together. Okay?"

"Fine." I mutter.

"Jonas?"

"Okay." In the exact same `recently lectured by parent' little kid pout.

We drive for another 15 minutes maybe, before we get to the party. It's in some kind of fucking barn or something. We're way out of the city, and there's this huge field, and this warehouse barn type thing and starting from like a kilometre down the road you could hear the music blasting, the lights flashing out of every crack. People are going in and out in a steady stream and even more people are just chilling outside. There are cars parked everywhere, occupied and empty. Jonas is going nuts up front, and I'm actually feeling vaguely excited myself. New frontiers right? You only live once, cease the night, that kind of thing. Celery looks at me, and we can't help but grin. Jonas pounds the roof of the car a few times in triumph.

"Yes! You see, I KNEW you wouldn't be able to resist the fun!" We roll our eyes.

"Points to you Jonas."

Ignoring the rather sarcastic tone of my voice, Jonas rushes out of the car and yanks my door open. You actually can't open the door from the inside, so it's not really like he was being a gentlemen or anything. Just another one of the many quirks that's makes the Le Baron experience worth while. Celery's out of the car also, and we stand together, taking it all in. There's a lot to take it. Sensory overload for sure.

"Let's party!" Jonas says grabbing each of us by the arm and running towards the barn.

Inside everything is even more crazy. The lights, the music, the dancing. This is no house party, Jonas was right about that. It's more like a rave, except no techno, thank god. The music is actually okay, too loud maybe, but okay. There's an actual band, playing good sort of nondescript music suited for slightly wild dancing. Almost everyone is taking advantage. There are fringes of people just standing like we are now, drinking, talking, whatever, and even there's a couple old couches and stuff with people sprawled all over the place, but starting from the centre and spilling out pretty much everywhere else, people are dancing. Jonas looks ready to jump right in, but Celery holds him back.

"First, checkout the water supply, you'll get sick if you don't have enough water. Then, either find someone to dance with, or we'll all go together. I don't want you getting lost in there." I'm sure he was yelling, but it sounded about normal volume.

"Okay," Jonas says nodding. He looks around for awhile, then smiles. We look where he's looking, and see Sam. His casual, sort of, sometimes girlfriend. I always forget he's going out with her cause she's never really around, and yet, he seems to like her a lot the rare times she is.

"Go for it man," I say, pushing him. He grins.

"I'll be back -- eventually!"

"Alone at last," I say sidling up to Celery, curling my fingers around his waist. He smiles.

"Do you want to dance?" I shake my head.

"Not yet." That's invitation enough, and he starts kissing me. Maybe that sounds sort of dangerous, but there are so many people everywhere doing so much different shit I can almost completely guarantee no one even notices.

Jonas comes back about half an hour later, with Sam in hand.

"Having fun?" Jonas inquires smugly.

"Sort of," I say with a shrug, even though under oath I would be forced to admit I'm having a great time.

We haven't even been making out the whole time, we did dance. And it was pretty awesome, dancing with Celery with so many people around and none of them caring. We'd never danced before in our lives, but all dancing is really is moving to the beat of the music and your partner, letting your inhibitions go. Moving together has never been something we've had a problem with, so we quickly got the hang of it.

"Say what you want, but you can't fool me. I see those grins you're trying to hide." We let them loose, and Jonas grins back. "Damn, you know already, but I should still do some introduction action. Carrots and Celery, Sam," We smile at each other.

"I'm surprised to see you guys here," she admits.

"He made us," I say, pointing at Jonas.

"That doesn't surprise me as much,"

Suddenly out of the corner of my eye I see someone very familiar dancing with this chick with brilliantly red hair. Kyle. What's he doing here?

I try it in my normal voice and they don't even look at me. I think the music just got louder.

"Hey!" I yell. They turn. "I see Kyle!"

"What?"

"KYLE!"

"WHERE?"

"OVER THERE!" I point to where Kyle and the chick with the cherry red hair are dancing.

"WHAT'S KYLE DOING HERE?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" Celery starts waving his arms around in the air, trying to get Kyle's attention. It works eventually. Kyle starts winding our way, evil grin on his face.

"Jonas!" He shouts clamping him on the back. "This is your work I take it?" Jonas nods proudly. Kyle thumps him again. "Allow me to be the first to congratulate you on a difficult to impossible job well done."

"We're not that bad," I protest.

"Yes you are." Kyle says firmly. Celery smiles at everyone, but mostly me.

"We are baby, but so what right? Who wants to be normal remember?" I grin.

"Always." Kyle looks at us, multiplying his actual surprise into full blown over dramatic shock.

"Don't tell me you're actually having a good time!" He gasps.

"Don't be such a jerk Kyle," I say, shaking my head, but smiling. I guess maybe we deserve all this, after the fight we put up. Celery's also seems to be from that school of thought on this one.

"I knew they had it in them," Jonas declares. He's all about proud smugness tonight.

"You're a miracle man Jonas, I kneel down before you,"

"Better you than me," Sam suddenly fires out of nowhere. I almost (okay, completely) forgot about her. We all stare at her, stunned, and then laugh. Jonas pretends to be offended, but I swear he's pink in the ears.

"I like this girl," Kyle says to Jonas. He grins.

"Yeah, me too." Sam smiles, pure happy this time, unguarded. Forgetting her tough girl tongue for a minute and just liking what he said. There is definitely some like connection action going on here.

"What are you doing here anyway?" I ask, turning back to Kyle. He shrugs.

"You don't have to be in highschool for this party to be a big deal. Everyone's here." Pretty much too. I can't seem to stop spotting people I know, and like Kyle said, not just from highschool.

"How'd you get here though? We have the car,"

"I came with some friends," He says, shrugging again.

"Oh," He grins.

"But I think I'm going to hang out with you kids for awhile now," I smile.

"My excitement cannot be contained."

"Naturally."

We're far from the centre still, but Sam and Jonas are half dancing anyway, pretty tuned into each other. Me, Kyle and Celery are all just joking around and stuff, doing the laid back survey the fun thing, but amongst all the love and the fun, I'm starting to feel a little ill. Too much loud music and unaccustomed body movement I guess. I'm about to say something when Kyle rubs his hands together.

"Come on everybody, let's have our own little retro boogie dance party," He says preparing to lead the whole group back into the throng. Celery takes my hand but I stay where I am.

"I'm going to get some air I think - but you go." He pout-frowns.

"Are you coming down from having fun mode?" I shake my head.

"No, just going for a short interlude into getting some air mode. I'll be back. My heads just spinning a little. I'll be fine though, don't worry."

"You don't want me to come with you?"

"No, fine remember? It'll be easier for me to return to the mode that is fun if I know you're in here waiting for me, having fun of your own. Okay?"

"If you're sure,"

"I am."

"My level of fun will seriously decrease during your absence," I smile.

"That's all part of the getting back to the fun. But really, air = me, dance = you. I'll be back before you know it,"

"Okay, you're REALLY sure?" I kiss him quick.

"Sure sure. I'm going now," He lets go of my hand and I head for the exit.

It's good to get outside. Breathe in some of that country air. Or you know, urban sprawl air. Whichever. Either way, it works. The spinning subsides and in only like a minute or two I'm ready to go back in. I'm walking that way when someone touches my arm.

"Carrots?" The someone sounds surprised. I look, Kaleb. "I didn't expect to see you here," He says, shaking his head. I shrug.

"Me neither. Jonas talked us into it."

"Us? Celery's here?"

"Of course."

"But not right here."

"No, inside."

"Oh, you're not fighting or anything are you?" It's weird. It's like he wishes he could be concerned, but he despite himself still comes off sounding closer to hopeful.

"No. I just needed air and I didn't want to drag him along."

"Oh."

"How bout you?"

"What'd you mean?"

"Are you with anyone?" He laughs shortly.

"That would be a no. I was thinking I might meet someone. Instead I met you," I've heard about these. Loaded statements. I'm not sure I'm a big fan.

I smile apologetically.

"I'm sorry."

"This is something you are around me a lot."

"Sorry?"

"Yeah."

"I can't help it. Another thing I'm around you a lot is confused. I don't get why you like me - that is, if you still like me. Do you, uh, still like me?" He smiles.

"Yes Carrots, I still like you. So far the distance thing isn't doing much for the getting over you process."

"Maybe you need to spend MORE time with me, once you really get to know me you're sure to get me right out of your system." He laughs. That's bad, isn't it?

"Dude, I don't think that would work. I'm not sure what will. Time probably."

"Yeah, time's good. But like, you're going to be over me so fast, I promise. I mean, there are way hotter fishes in the sea." He sighs.

"Sure there are."

"It's not like you're a leper or something. You're funny, good looking, easy to be around -- other than that weird attraction you have to me -- you've got lots going for you," He touches my shoulder, for the briefest second.

"Carrots,"

"Yeah,"

"Can you go away?"

"What?"

"If you stay out here talking to me, I'm going to continue to feel the urge to kiss you, which is a bad urge. An urge resulting in absolutely no goodness what so ever, so really, and please, go."

There's the time that passes while I'm stunned, the time that passes where I try to think of something to say to make him feel better, and then the time when finally I turn around and scurry back into the barn. In my nervousness, I rush right past Celery, who's standing just inside. You know about barns right? There aren't really doors so much as this whole big space, gap, whatever? You can see everything. I double back, and look into his eyes. Even with the weird lights of the party, I can see they're grey.

"Cel?" I say uncertainly. He stands there clenching his jaw for a few seconds before pulling me to him tightly. I hug back, every bit as hard.

"Did you see?" He nods. "We didn't, I mean, we didn't like PLAN it or anything, we met each other out there, but it was like we were 'meeting', you know?" I'm a little frantic, but Celery takes hold of my face, his eyes filled with understanding.

"I know. I knew, the whole time, it's just for a second, or half a second or a fraction of a second, I didn't know as much." I put my hand over his own, the one touching my cheek.

"I'm sorry," Who else can I find that I can apologize to at this party?

"You've got no reason to be."

"And yet I am." He smiles, it's faint, but it's there.

"Is he okay?"

"I guess, still liking me though apparently. But like, I'm sure he'll get over it," After all, it's ME we're talking about. Just your regular, gangly brown or perhaps black haired guy. What's special about me is Celery, and I'm pretty sure that's not what's attracting Kaleb.

"I'm not."

"What?" He sighs.

"It's hard to explain, and I'm probably going to do a bad job, but bear with me. I'm a bad example, but it's, like, a weird thing, liking you. I mean, you're not really normal you know? So the people who like you, really like you, there aren't that many of us." I know he's not TRYING to be insulting, but come on! "You're funny and interesting, very good looking, all that stuff, and everyone likes you, but it's not like the FULL, deep you, know what I mean?" Oh yeah. Totally. "In some ways it's hard to get to REALLY know you. A lot of that's my fault I guess, but that's not the point I'm trying to make here. You're different you know? You're like, an acquired taste. It's like for a person to REALLY really like you, they have to BE like you, or have the right stuff in them to fit with your stuff. But cause you're made up of such unique stuff, there aren't a huge amount of perfect matches for you out there, or even really close ones. It's like we're blocks," blocks? "And you've got a really distinct shape, and only a few other blocks fit in really good. Others can fit, but not perfectly, right? But when it IS a perfect fit, jeez. Once you're in, you're in far you know? Speaking from personal experience, falling for Carrots Vassekz means you fall hard." I roll my eyes.

"You are insanely biased. It's a crush, he barely knows me."

"I loved you before I knew your name."

"Yeah but,"

"Yeah but what?"

"Yeah but I don't know. It's different. That's you and me. This is Kaleb, it's totally not the same."

"The only difference may very well be how you feel. I'm just the one who lucked into being loved back."

"You didn't `luck into' anything. I hope my love for you is a result of more than luck,"

"Luck, hard work and a strange obsession with 80's movies then." I kiss him, it feels so nice to do.

"And you love me because,"

"It's your hot ass. That's really all I like about you." He's never going to let that go, never. There's nothing I could ever do to stop him from teasing me about that. I might as well not even try.

"It's so comforting to know what we have isn't random or shallow," He laughs.

"Shallow maybe, but random? I don't think so. I spent years carefully orchestrating the whole thing, thank you very much. I want my credit." I kiss him again.

"How's that?"

"Not bad."

"I'm sorry it's not my hot ass, but that's just something that's going to have to wait." That's one shocked look for Celery, one point on the invisible big board for me. I am the champion.

I grin. The colour begins returning to his face. "I'm going to kill you." I keep right on grinning.

"It was worth it."

We go back all the way into the party, and locate Jonas and Kyle, who are dancing, if you'll believe it -- and I'm having trouble with that myself -- together. Pretty darn close too, Sam's nowhere in sight. We force our way through to them, and then just spread our arms open, silently demanding `what the hell?' They laugh, breaking up the little dirty dancing thing.

"Sam had to leave, so I've been comforting my boy here," Kyle says, touching Jonas's back for maybe the fifth time tonight.

"Relax droogs. Just cause we're straight doesn't mean we can't DANCE together." Yeah, dancing. That's all it was. Sure.

"As long as everyone's having fun," Celery says, saving me from trying to come up with anything that wouldn't sound and be sarcastic.

"So let's keep having fun," Jonas says, moving once again to the music, grabbing me. I'm confused as he begins to dance around me. "You can't dance with your brother," He says, like it's totally obvious.

I glance over at Celery, who shrugs and faces up to Kyle. It's not like it's slow music or anything, but it's still fucking weird seeing Celery dancing with my brother. Then again, there's been very little about this night that hasn't been weird. But I can't say it hasn't been interesting, or for the most part, despite all the weirdness, pretty fun.

Carrots and Celery Chapter Fourteen
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Mon, 10 Mar 2003 20:17:22 -0600

Kyle goes home with us after the party, and drives, but me and Cel are too tired to really take advantage of the backseat-ness, so we just end up cuddling and dozing all the ride home.

As we're pulling up to the driveway, I wonder aloud, "Uh, shouldn't we be taking Jonas home?"

"It's pretty late, if it's okay, I thinking I'm just going to crash here. Kyle?"

"My couch is yours." Kyle says, smiling. I'm too tired to wonder if this is strange or suspicious or whatever, and I let Celery help me out of the car and up to my room.

"Good night," He mumble-whispers before we fall simultaneously into bed.

"Nite," I say as my head hits the pillow.

In the morning, I wake up with a headache.

"Ug, I feel like I have a hangover but all I drank was water," I complain to Celery, cradling my head.

"I know, me too. But how would you know what it feels like to have a hangover, you've never had one in your life," I shrug.

"I've heard things." He laughs, quietly.

"Yeah, that's the same thing."

"Don't be so mean to me. I'm in pain."

"So am I." The Sunday ness of the day is beginning to dawn on me.

"Are we late yet?" He rolls over to check.

"It's 9, so not really."

"Nine eh? That means we can't go BACK to sleep though, doesn't it?" He nods. Waaa.

"But we didn't get home until like 3!"

"I'm aware of that." We share commiserating looks for a minute or two, and then drag each other out of bed.

"Screw clothes," Celery says. "Let's go in our pyjamas," That's allowed, but not something we do much.

"Jonas will probably be there," I say as I remember. He shrugs.

"So? It's Jonas," I nod.

"Okay. Let's go."

Sure enough, barely seconds after we've arrived at the table, Jonas shows up, wearing Kyle's extra pj's. Kyle's right behind him. I watch my parents reaction with great interest. Mom's eyes are seriously wide, and dad's blinking way more than can be considered normal.

"Jonas," Mom says, confused more than anything. He grins.

"Hey, sorry to just show up at the table unexpected, but I slept over last night. Is that okay?" Kyle winks at me. What are they up to?

"It's fine dear. Where did you sleep?" She's asking out of curiosity and concern, probably thinking there wouldn't have been anywhere comfortable.

"He stayed with me," Kyle answers for Jonas. Mom's confused again.

"Did you say you slept with Kyle last night?"

A weird and heavy silence ensues.

"At Kyle's - on the couch," Jonas adds after seemed like a really long time.

"Cause of the party," Kyle finishes.

The effect is immediate. Understanding hits, and both parents let out a breath. Kyle smirks.

"Where do you think he was sleeping?" The twins snicker.

"We didn't think anything," Mom insists. "That's was why we asked. We were confused."

"Okay. Well, confusion over. Jonas bro, lets eat." They sit down, and promptly tuck in. Celery and I can't stop glancing at each other and raising our eyebrows for the rest of brunch.

"What the hell was that all about?" I demand once we're all up in Kyle's master bachelor pad (the last refuge for those seeking privacy and silence on a Sunday). They shrug.

"What ever are you taking about?" Kyle asks, innocent as a baby lamb. Jonas is smiling sweetly.

"Strolling into brunch wearing matching pyjamas and leaving mom and dad hanging like that. What was the point?"

"The point was that there wasn't one. We never lied, or misled anyone. We were totally up front. He stayed over cause of the party, plain and simple."

"You know full well the way you acted left plenty of room for interpretation. As if you didn't plan it that way."

"Care, there was no plan. We showed up, saw the looks on mom and dad's faces, and just sort of went from there."

"But why?"

"To help them grow as parents and human beings," He's only half kidding. What the heck is he talking about?

"What?"

"Look, they're totally great about you and Celery - excellent. That's as it should be. But there IS still a possibility there's more than one gay kid in the family. I'm not saying I know this for a fact or even that I have suspicions, I'm just saying it's possible. Today when I saw their reaction, I figured it was a good opportunity to introduce the idea to them. I guess I was just doing little potential trail blazing, just in case such a trail needs blazing. Look, I know mom and dad, and I know what went on in their heads, what's probably going on in them right now. First they were really surprised, and then I think, despite themselves a little disappointed or upset, like they failed somehow maybe, even though in their hearts they know that's bullshit. It's just the natural parental reaction kicking in momentarily I guess. The thing is, now, even though we've explained and understanding achieved - they're probably still thinking about it, or talking to each other about it even. I bet you anything they're helping each other reach a place where they're okay with the possibility. I saw the opportunity to take them there, that's the why I did it."

"What about you?" I ask Jonas.

"I saw where Kyle was going in his head, I didn't exactly know why, but I

figured he knew what he was doing." They smile at each other. Those two definitely have a bond.

"It's just, mom and dad HAVE been really great, I don't know if it's fair to test them like that."

"Testing had nothing to do with it, I know they'll be cool with it, weren't you listening? I just thought, hey, make them cool with it now, not after it happens - if it ever does. Like, if say Kara is a lesbian, and she comes out to them. Sure, they'd come around, but why not have them already around? That way no ones hanging in the wind, in pain during their `getting used to it' time." Never in my wildest dreams, did I ever think Kyle could come up with something like that. That's a deepness I did not know he possessed.

"Okay. I mean, I get it now. Sorry for getting kind of weird, but well, it was just weird."

"This is something you might want to try to get used to yourself huh?" Kyle points out knowingly.

I look at Celery. He's just been taking the whole scene in, calmly and quietly from the sidelines. I bet he figured Kyle out even before brunch was over. Ever the watcher, the listener. He smiles, already down with it. I sigh.

"So this is just me then?" He shrug is `well yeah', but his continuing smile softens the blow.

"I'm having absolutely no trouble getting my freak-out groove back." Kyle pats my back. When did he become so big on doing that to people?

"Don't worry, it was a strictly spur of the moment type thing. Not something you have to start worrying about yet, or about us."

"I don't know about that," Jonas says, running his finger along Kyle's cheek, smiling seductively. Kyle leans into it, closing his eyes, and just a split second before my head explodes, they both start laughing.

I'm too stunned, horrified and relieved to give them what they so richly deserve (their asses, getting kicked, have you no brain?) but I do make angry gurgly noises and give them the evil eye. Celery didn't join in on the laughing, but he obviously wasn't as gullible as I.

I'll have my revenge on all of them, oh yes, revenge will be mine.

By Tuesday morning, it's all forgotten (including my plans for revenge) until Jonas arrives (like he sometimes does in the mornings) and sits down

on Kyle's lap. That not would be customary behavior, in case you were wondering.

"Not funny," I say through my teeth. But, you know, going by the fact that they're laughing their asses off, I'm getting the feeling Jonas and Kyle don't agree with me. Even Celery is doing the silent laughter thing. Dirty traitor. "You all suck." Celery leans over to kiss me, and Jonas gets off Kyle's lap.

"Feel better?" I crunch up my face like a big baby, but then relent.

"A little. Just don't do that anymore. It freaks me out." They smile.

"Oh we'll do it again veggie, just be ready for it next time. Like, I'm not going to spell it out for you, but if you want us to stop you know what you've got to do. If you're going to have any hope of ending the love fest you can't keep reacting like that. It's way too much fun to watch," They have me there. In this life, with these people, the only way to get what you want is to give back worse than you're being dished out. It's a strictly fight fire with fire job. Let the plotting begin.

I look at Celery, he gives me the old indulgent smile.

"Yes, I'll help you."

Suddenly we all grin at each other. Can't help it. We've got a new toy. It's a strange and unexpected toy, but it could end up being hours of fun.

It's cease-fire throughout the day, what with the no Kyle aspect of school, but there's a million other things we can tease and annoy each other with, so the day passes with relative quickness.

We all filter in as usual that afternoon, but the filtering of Kyle does not occur. We share a pouty moment.

"So, real schoolwork?" Jonas suggests, sounding less than enthused.

"Looks that way," I say with a lack of enthusiasm surpassing his own.

"Oh guys, cheer up. Learning is FUN!"

We frown at each other at each for awhile before Jonas asks, "Do you want to punch him or should I?"

"I think it would be best if you did it."

"You think it would be best?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he'd hit me back." Jonas takes a quick sideways glance of Celery, who happens to be grinning dangerously and at that very moment does a quadruple knuckle crack. It makes a spectacular sound.

"I fear for my own safety as well. I'm taking the cowards way out. Droogies, let's study."

Much bummage, Kyle never shows, and we end up working straight through all our work. How fun is that?

"I've gotta go, check ya later super V's." Jonas gives us a lack lustre salute, which Celery and I return, and slips out the back (also sometimes known as the kitchen) door.

Celery looks at me.

"Nobody's home."

"I noticed that."

"When do the twins get back from practice?"

"Not till like 6:30."

"And Kara's at Sues'."

"Uh-huh." He grins, finally ending the deadpan.

"We're not upstairs right now because?"

In the spirit of efficient time management, I don't respond, I just race for the stairs, with Celery hot on my heels. Every so often, I really love Tuesdays.

We're more relaxed about the sex thing now (in case you hadn't noticed). The first time it was like this monumental event, the same as the first kiss, but now we're getting to be as relaxed and comfortable about it as we are with the kissing. We can even joke around about it, and talk to each other more openly. The joking happens before and after, but never during. During we tend to be unusually serious. Because really, there are just some events where you couldn't hope to have the presence of mind to make a joke. No pictures will be drawn, and I'm sure you have at least a vague idea what I mean. That's really all you ever have anyway, so why change things now? But the main thing is that all this hasn't taken any of the

magic or wonderment away, only sweetened the experience.

The next afternoon there's more joy on the Jonas and Kyle front. Everyone shows up for the afternoon session of studying and fun, plus I've concocted an evil plan, so it's good all over.

"You guys," I begin in a serious tone that gets everyone's attention.

"I've been thinking about this a lot, and I've come to a decision. I don't think it's right that we're joking about the feelings you two share. It's obvious that by brining out into the open and then joking about what are clearly your deep rooted subconscious feelings for each other, we're trivialising your emotions. It's not right. You guys have to face what you feel, and you have to know that when you do, Celery and I will take you seriously and accept you - not mock and disbelieve you. That's why all this has to stop." Jonas and Kyle are looking grave. Rats.

"You're right," Jonas says with a nod. "I don't think I admitted how I really felt - even to myself - until just now." He turns to Kyle. "Kyle, I love you." I'm a little annoyed, cause my plan didn't work (not that I totally expected it do), and feel a grumble coming on, when Kyle smiles tenderly, and Jonas kisses him on the mouth!

There is no possible way to describe what happened to me. I think my heart may have stopped. Shock is so much less than what I felt, and obviously, it showed. Humorously so apparently. There's a good long period of time when they leave me hanging, and then the laughing starts. This time Celery doesn't even have the decency or a sense of loyalty strong enough to laugh silently, it's full barrel, loud and long. My recovery takes ages.

"I'm going to fix ALL your wagons." I say holding up a threatening fist, standing for the threatening affect. I find one is seen as more threatening standing than sitting down. But that's just me. Maybe you go for that James Bond evil guy spin from behind a chair, `hello mister bond' thing. I don't know.

"You could kill me, and that it still would have been worth it. The look on your face was without a doubt the most hilarious thing I have ever seen in my entire life. I will weep for the rest of my days, over the thought that it wasn't recorded somehow for future generations to enjoy. Luckily for me, it's something I'll never be able to forget."

"Especially yours Wepeel, you're at the top of my list." I sort of like muttering darkly. It's kind of fun. Give it a try some time, you'll see what I mean.

"You have to give them credit Care, full mouth for effect? I was even shocked for a second. That was a master stroke, and you know it." I sigh. There's no denying it.

"Yes, yes. It was a brilliant manoeuvre." I say begrudgingly. Then, over that and on to curiosity, "Did you plan it?" They shake their heads.

"Pure improv," Jonas grins. "You think you were surprised - how do you think I felt when Kyle started kissing me back!" Kyle kicks him in shin. I know cause of the wincing, and past experience. Kyle's a kicker.

"Better watch out, now you've got both the Vasskez brothers out to do some wagon fixing." You've never heard the expression `fix your wagon'? It's another one of those fun things to do I suggest you try. Few threats are better.

"My bind is black with terror. Can we get to work now, Carrots obviously needs some additional time for scheming. Dude, your delivery was very convincing, and I admire you for setting your sights so high, but you've gotta think a little more basic. You've got to set that kind of thing up better," I shrug.

"You're right. It was worth a try." I sigh, giving them what I hope is a thoughtful look. "Besides, in all seriousness, I'm still not entirely convinced I was even totally off base." There's a fraction of a second where eye widening occurs in both of them, and so that's some gained ground.

"You may prove to be a worthy adversary after all,"

I grin.

Carrots and Celery Chapter Fifteen
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Sat, 15 Mar 2003 19:23:43 -0600

We're all just sitting, having lunch, the regular five, and I'm sitting happily on Celery's lap when I feel his arms go rigid around me. I roll my head back onto his shoulder and look at him.

"What's wrong? You've got that bad taste in the mouth look on your face." He lets go and I slide over onto my own chair. I keep looking at him, but straight across now, not upside down. He sighs.

"I can't help it. I know it's stupid but I can't help it. I don't like him."

"Who?" I ask with genuine confusion. He nods in the direction of a table occupied, among others, by Kaleb.

"Why not?" Still with the genuine confusion. Celery makes a `why do you think' pssft sound. I half shrug in acknowledgement. The non-verbal equivalent to `yeah, okay'. "He's not going to do anything."

"It's what he's already doing."

"What's he already doing?" Celery makes a sad little noise.

"Looking at you." I do the sort of `so what?' weird laugh-cough of astonishment thing. Celery struggles to express his thoughts. "He just has to be around, looking at you - liking you and looking at you, and that's enough."

"I'm happy to see you've gotten over your worry about being possessive." I say dryly with just a pinch of sarcasm.

"I know, I know. It's awful of me. Really grease burger. I should feel sorry for him - and I do - it's just, he looks at you. YOU. And I don't like it. Or him." I stroke the top of his hand reassuringly.

"If he's been looking, I haven't noticed. Not once. I'm not saying he hasn't been looking, if you say so I believe you, but it's not something I've been aware of in anyway. Do you understand why that's important? It's only your looking at me I notice or care about. Okay?" He smiles.

"Yeah."

"But you still don't like him right?" Celery laughs.

"Never could get a thing past you."

"Except the fact that you were totally in love with him. That you got past him for years," Jonas interrupts our nice moment. But we have to shrug `you have us there' shrugs. Honour dictates. Bet you thought I didn't have honour, well I do. Lots of it. That's right. I reek of honour.

"Yeah, cept that."

Now that the after school fun includes three to four people, we all just sort of meet up at my house whenever. Mostly Celery, Jonas and I all walk home together, but it doesn't always go down like that, and when it doesn't nobody really worries too much about it. For that reason, it is a very unworried me that strolls into the kitchen that afternoon, where Jonas and Kyle already have their books spread out and are studiously ignoring them in favour of talking to each other.

"Dudes," I say, smiling. I mean, they didn't start making out on my arrival, so that's gotta be a good sign right?

"Where's my dude?" They shake their heads at me with identical `we're sorry, that request does not compute, please try again - idiot' looks of their faces. "Some people have no sense of humour," I say, plunking down my bag and myself.

Kyle's nodding approvingly. "Admitting you have a problem is the first step towards recovery."

"Ha, ha, ha." I say flatly. "Now seriously, where is he?" They shrug.

"How should WE know? You're the one who's joined to his hip," Jonas replies hottily.

"Well exactly! So where is he, and why isn't he joined to my hip?" Just like me, a little panic already sneaking it's way into my voice.

"Who?" You know, I never did get around to putting coins or some other noisy something in his pockets.

"Nobody," I say, craning my neck to meet his kiss.

"It's like a minute after four," Celery says, laughing and seeing right through me. "Don't tell me you were starting to get worried already?"

I frown, and in a very babyish voice say, "I worry." He smiles.

"I know, but you don't have to. I can take care of myself," tactfully, no one mentions the incident with Brendan and friends, but I guess Celery knew

it was in my mind because he gives my shoulder a squeeze and then a pat before he sits down. We're all quiet for awhile. You know what they say, the physical scars heal way before the emotional ones do.

I'm sort of mellow for the rest night, related and un to the after school reminder. I ask Celery to stay, and for once he doesn't resist. If you're wondering how Celery just up and sleeps over whenever without ever going back to the house for like clothes or whatever, here's the answer. I have a dresser, and my clothes take up three drawers. The other two belong to Celery. My room and bathroom are totally Celery ready, at all times. He has his own toothbrush and everything.

When going to bed, we share a kiss and exchange I love you's, but nothing more. You remember, the mellow? And anyway, we haven't like turned into sex crazed beasts or anything. We still love just being together, holding hands, kissing, lying beside each other. None of that's changed, well, no that's not true. It's improved. It's become more meaningful, deeper. Because of the `your body is my body' thing. I've explained that. You probably skimmed through it, you lazy person. But I ask you, is that my fault? No it is not. So if you're confused, that's your problem.

I'm all out of the mellow mood in the morning, and Celery notices right away. I think waking up to find me straddling his torso was Celery's first clue. Or maybe it was the rampant lust in my eyes. I can't be sure.

"Hey there," He says invitingly.

"Hey," I reply, already kissing him.

Breakfast is short and sweet, but not because of the waffles I ate. Not those boxed grocery store bought waffles mind you. Bringing non-bakery baked goods into this house is like a crime punishable by death. Or, at the very least, serious maiming. My spotter duties and the first two morning classes pass with similar ease, and all is going well until break when I notice Kaleb's sporting the nastiest set of facial bruises I've seen since that thing I've been trying really hard to forget. You know, the really bad one involving the love of my life. Got me? Good.

I race over to him, trying not to think about what I'm trying not to believe happened to him.

"Oh god Kaleb, what happened to you?" I whisper, reaching out to touch his face as worries, doubts and irrational fears threaten to short-circuit my brain. He shrugs.

"Some people don't like us fags Care, no matter how liberal this school claims to be."

"So it was a gay bashing?" I hear myself whisper. He looks confused.

"Well yeah, I certainly didn't call up a bunch of guys and ask them if they wanted to `take this outside' or whatever." He cocks his head at me, and then his eyes roll back in his head. "Don't tell me you thought Celery did this to me!" He exclaims, almost laughing, except he sounds too shocked.

"I didn't, really. In my head, and in my heart, I knew he could never have done something like this - not in a million, billion years. But there's this insane part of me that doesn't listen to either one of those things, I think it may be located somewhere in my intestines."

"Well don't worry. Let the insanity go dormant once more, it wasn't him. I swear,"

"You don't have to. I know he didn't do it. Even if you told me he did, I wouldn't believe you," I'm telling him, but really, it's for me. I'm celebrating with myself the restoration of my faith in Celery. It was a pretty short-lived slip, but definitely something I want to put behind me. The only reason that tiny insane part of me even had those kinds of thoughts at all is because of the I don't like him talk we had and his lateness yesterday afternoon. I know, circumstantial evidence at best, but this is me and my insanity we're talking about. Not really one of those `we check, and recheck' kind of things.

"But anyway, this isn't my crisis. Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine. The bad guys will be punished, and I'll try to recruit some big friends to protect me. There's this burly lacrosse player I think I might be able to lure from the closet," I laugh.

"You're pure evil."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"When have I ever been less than nice to you?" His face goes serious.

"You've always been nice. Nicer than I'm used to. Maybe that's why I'm a little in love with you," I sway a bit, like you do when you're light headed or suffering from blood loss. I didn't just hear him say that that did I? I look at him fearfully, and he shakes his head.

"Not fair of me I know, but hey, I'm injured. I'm just demanding my share of the slack cutting given to victims I've heard so much about. I hope this doesn't complicate your life too much. I thought after the party, with the way you've been in avoidance overdrive you already knew, but going by the look on your face I'm thinking it's a surprise. It's just a little. It's not total and it's not hopeless. I'm sure I'll live to love another,

you don't have to feel guilty about it. In fact, make this your `is there anything I can do to help?' task. You could even be happy. It's good to be loved isn't it?" I can't think of a single thing to say or do, so I neither speak nor move.

I don't think he realizes how much, but Jonas saves me.

"SV, we've got a class," I let myself be led away, and as the distance between us and Kaleb grows I hear him pleading, "Don't feel guilty Carrots!"

"So, what the hell was that?" Jonas demands after he's dragged me into the empty landing of the set of stairs leading to our next class. I tell him everything in one long disjointed breath. Jonas goes slightly white.

"This is more serious than I thought."

"You can fucking say that again." I'm still weak from it, and my voice reflected that.

"He really said he loves you?" I nod, wishing what I felt was as pleasant as miserable.

"I can't really believe it. I feel so horrible for him," Jonas looks alarmed.

"You can't be going there dude. I mean, I feel bad for the guy too, but Celery's the one you've got to be thinking about here. Someone else is in love with you - that's like his worst fear. To make matters worse, this is someone you get along with, someone funny and great looking. He's all ready been pretty worried about the whole Kaleb situation, and I can't think of anything that could shake him up more at this point. I don't even know if you should tell him."

"Of course I should tell him! I tell him everything,"

"For almost 11 years you didn't tell him you loved him," Jonas reminds me sharply. "And that was something good. This could damage him in bad and permanent ways."

"Lying to him won't?"

"You don't have to lie - just don't mention it."

"I am the king of lies of omission," I say, sighing. Jonas brushes his hand nervously over his hair, gathering up a bunch of dreads, and then gives his head a shake, trying to kick some of the rogue ones out of his eyes. Doesn't really work.

"Look, I don't know. Maybe you should tell him. I'm not really the right guy to be giving you advice on this. I'm not the trusting type. I don't really get how you guys can put so much faith in each other without existing in a constant state of being scared shitless. You know him way better than me, and if you think he'd be okay, then you should tell him."

"I don't know how he'll react. I'm half afraid he'll wish us lots of luck and kiss me good bye." Jonas rolls his eyes.

"You can't believe he'd give you up that easily."

"If he thought it was what would make me happy, yes I do."

"Well yeah, that's true, but not before he'd first put up a hell of a fight. He loves you more than himself - anyone can see that - but his own happiness does matter to him somewhat. Neither of you are totally selfless. Let's say you went to him and said you had some feelings for Kaleb - it'd take more than that for Celery to give up on you. He'd try to help you work out your feelings, see if he could win you back if he felt he'd lost you, do just about anything he could think of to keep you, and THEN after all that if he really believed you were happier with Kaleb or anyone else for that matter, he'd let you go. But never before." My minds reeling, and I still don't have much to say.

"We're majorly late for class," I say, cause it's true, and cause it's all I could manage right now. Jonas nods slowly, he's knows that I need time to think.

"You're right,"

It's a good thing we just get a reading assignment and are told to 'get on it' cause my heads far from the classroom. Staring at my book with pen in hand, I'm able to think. I decide the best way to figure out how Celery might react to this news is to put myself in his shoes. I think we love each other equally, so my imagined feelings should be pretty close to his potential ones. I think about what Jonas said. For me, it would be exactly like that. If Celery said he was interested in someone else, I'd fight for him, tooth and nail, but after all my attempts, if I truly believed he'd be happier without me, I'd wish him all the best and let him go. I also believe that's how Celery would react. Of course, I'm NOT interested in Kaleb, and that's cosmically important to remember. This is a one sided thing. His love is as unrequited as it gets. Because Celery's always been so adamant about not even being attracted to other people, I don't really think the idea that someone else was interested in him would cause me to worry that much. My fears have historically stemmed from the idea we love each other too much, never not enough.

But, then again, I am insane. I probably would freak out. I'm just like that. Celery's isn't. At least not outwardly so. His panicking will be internal, probably making it more dangerous. I'm more of a verbal freaker, which is easier to spot. I am afraid he'll start to doubt himself. That's the kind of thing he'd do. He's probably already thinking along the lines of Kaleb being better than him (like that's true), and I've certainly seen him be the 'I'm not good enough for you' guy on more than one occasion. I know for sure he'll feel really sorry for Kaleb, and the disliking is also bound to increase. I mean, LOVING me and looking at me has to be worse than just liking me. Or maybe he'll feel so bad it'll erase the bad thoughts. I can see that happening. I'm just not sure. I have decided to tell him though. That's progress of some kind I guess. Yep, I'm gonna tell him, I just don't know when.

I'm still nervous after school, and stumble a lot on the pre calculus Celery's trying to walk me through as a result. Jonas and Kyle clear out pretty quick, giving us time to talk before dinner. Jonas cause he knows what's bothering me, and Kyle just because he could see something is. Celery too it seems.

"What's wrong?" he asks bluntly. Since I have to tell him sometime, it might as well be now. `There's no time like the present' can't be such a common phrase for nothing right?

"It's um, well, Kaleb. We were talking today - cause he got beat up, did you see?" He nods. "Yeah, so I went up to him to see what happened and stuff, and we started talking. He told me, that um, he said he, well, only a little but that he -"

"I know."

"What?"

"I know."

"What do you know?"

"That Kaleb is in love with you." Colour me flabbergasted.

"How did you know that?" He shrugs.

"I watch him watch you. I see the look in his eyes. I look at Kaleb, and I see myself. How I must look when I looking at you. It's been there for awhile. Before the party. Maybe that's why I let seeing you two together get to me."

"So you know?" He smiles at my lingering disbelief.

"I think we've established that, yes."

"And you're okay with it?"

"No less okay with it than I was the last time we talked about him. I still can't help but dislike him for stupid jealous reasons, and I still feel really bad for him. I don't need to try to imagine what's it's like loving you and not feeling it back. I know. It was brutal, and I had some hope. Not much, but more than Kaleb must know he has." I'm awash with guilt. For Kaleb now, and for Celery then.

"I don't understand you people," I mutter. I've said it before, and I'll say it again - what's so special about me?!

"We're a strange breed alright." Celery kisses me ever so softly. "Don't be too hard on yourself about this, okay? I'm sure that isn't what Kaleb wants. I sort of wish he hadn't told you, cause it's obviously upsetting you, but I guess he had his reasons. It'll be okay. He'll get over you - you're not that great," I smile, grateful for his joke more so than amused by it.

"I can't be - if you're the best I can do."

"And I'm only with you out of pity." I roll my eyes. He smiles. "I get my terrific sense of humour from you, you know? You brought this upon yourself." Gotta love those can't help but smile moments.

"You're a menace."

"I know."

I want his arms around me, so I snuggle up to his chest.

"I love you." I've gotten my wish.

"I love you too. Nothing and no one's ever going to change that."

Even though it's Saturday, Jonas shows up in the morning, and we talk while I eat. Celery's still asleep. Beauty rest and all that good stuff. What we talk about is mostly Kaleb stuff. I'm still weirded by that. Like, I'm counting my freakishly lucky stars continuously that Celery is handling it all so calmly, but there's still stuff I need to vent. Stuff I'd sort of rather spare him. Kyle's also around, but he's not commenting much. Jonas isn't either, really. It's pretty much all me.

I've just been talking, rambling, whatever, working through some other stuff, and here's where I've gotten to now, "I feel bad that amongst all the love business we've all sort of forgotten about the fact that Kaleb got

bashed."

"Yeah, I also have feelings of badness about that," Jonas says, holding up a hand in guilty agreement. Kyle shrugs.

"Nobody told me he got beat up."

"He did, pretty bad. That's how this all got started in the first place."

"He loves you cause he got beat up?" Yeah Kyle.

"No. That's how I started talking to him. Cause I saw his face, which is all fucked with, and I wanted to see if he was okay and stuff."

"Oh." He takes a minute to get all bummed and grumpy looking. "That really sucks. What happened to that school? When I went there it was better than it sounds like it is now, and that was like in the dark ages." I shake my head.

"I think it's just a like a select few idiots. By and large people are pretty cool."

"Very Osmonds. Way to not let a few bad apples spoil the whole bunch,"

"Finish that lyric with 'girl' and I kill you." I warn Kyle. He smiles.

"Fine." I sigh, getting back to Kaleb thoughts.

"And the thing is, I don't know how to be there for him without, you know, like,"

"Being there in the encouraging, leading Kaleb on, making Celery jealous and insecure way?" Way to spell it Jonas. Oh, and try to be a little more blunt. But also, yeah.

"Pretty much." There's silence.

"I've got nothing."

"Also, with the nothing for me." Kyle adds, ever Jonas's partner in crime.

"This has been such a big help."

"We do what we can."

"And you do it so well."

"Hey people," It never ends with the sneaking up on me and the scaring!

But there's no denying that I'm always happy to see my boy. No matter what the circumstances.

"Hey Cel," I say, customary kiss to follow. It's a bit cool, but that was sort of expected. Things are still a bit weird about Kaleb and all.

"Hi," He sits down.

"Still in love?" He asks Jonas and Kyle. They shrug.

"Not so much." That's a surprise. I didn't think they'd had nearly enough fun with that one.

"How come?"

"Jonas left me for the twins,"

"Dudes!" I say, almost, but not quite, speechless from the grossness.

"Just trying to make you smile brother," I glare.

"That's no way to try."

"Why do you need to be made to smile?" Celery asks, running his hand up my arm. Thanks a lot Kyle.

"It's just side effects of over exposure to Kyle. That's all," He frowns.

"It's not, but we'll talk about it later. I can guess, and I think that's more of a just us conversation. No offence guys, but there's bound to be like really gay kissing and stuff once we're into the `over it' stage, and I know you don't really want to witness that."

"We could be like not here if you wanted," Kyle says, in a very `whatever helps' way.

"No that's fine. You stay."

It is sort of weird though, I mean, that they're here at all. Kyle's been going to parties way less since the introduction of Jonas, but he's still hardly ever around on Saturdays. As far as Jonas goes, I think this is like the first time ever he's been around on one. Not that I mind really, especially on day like today, with the edgy moods Celery and I are both in. I'm thinking buffers will be a good thing. And like, that's not all they're good for, they're also like, fun and stuff.

"Cause, it's not really even that we mind about that sort of thing," Kyle says suddenly. "It's just, I'm still hurting over the break-up with Jonas,

and could kind of do without the reminder," There! You see? Fun. The scarring, gross kind of fun, but still, fun. I still give him a dirty look though.

I wonder a bit about what we're going to do, but an idea comes to me pretty quick.

"You know what I'd really like to do," I ask, cause, I bet they don't.

"No, what?"

"Watch Cartoons. It's been like years since I've done that," My suggestion is met with unanimous grins.

"That may be the best idea you've had in years," Kyle congratulates me, already getting up and heading for the doorway. We all follow suit.

Riding the nostalgia wave, we settle in for all the best in today's children's programming. Not just cartoons either, really hilariously cheesy shows like "Just Deal" and "Sabrina the teenage Witch" (who knew that show what still on?). Plus all the greats like "X-Men" and Spiderman. I don't understand why we didn't start doing this sooner. It's like way fun. Accommodating Kyle and Jonas always takes some manoeuvring, or at least, some adjusting, since we can't really sprawl out on the whole couch when there are two other people around. Usually what we do is Celery sits far back on the end of the couch and I snuggle in between his legs. That way there's lots of room for Kyle to sit on the couch and Jonas'll usually take the armchair. Other times we go all four on the couch.

Today it's different. Kyle's on the opposite end of Celery, Jonas is on the air chair, but I'm not cozzied in between Celery. I'm sitting beside him. We're holding hands, but only sort of. Like, there's basically two ways to hold hands, right? You can do the interlocking fingers thing (my personal favourite) or the palm to palm, fingers around other persons hand thing. Do you know what I mean? I hope so. Cause I really can't think of any other way to describe it, so it's that or nothing. To me, palm to palm is way less personal, less intimate. But now's not really a time for interlocking fingers. It's not that we're mad at each other - that can't even happen. We're just not RIGHT with each other. It's like we're out of balance or harmony or something. But anyway, it's already sort of better than it started out. Like he squeezed my hand a couple times during "Student Bodies" and he's been rubbing my hand with his thumb a little bit.

"We need to be getting outside," Jonas says, rubbing his eyes. I have to agree, we've watched like 4 or five shows, that's more than enough. I've satisfied my craving for a remembering simpler times fix.

"All in favour?" Before we can say anything, Kyle continues, "Motion

carried!" I grin.

"Nicely done."

"I thought you'd like it. So out? Where,"

"Who wants to go skating?" Celery says really over enthusiastically on purpose, knowing it's only him. Maybe me a little bit, but not really today.

"You could go,"

"No." Pause. "On second thought, yeah, go do that. Take your time,"

"Jonas!" I exclaim happily. He smiles.

"I have watched Buffy before you know. Spike is very cool,"

"Except not so much now that he likes Buffy," I feel obligated to add. He nods.

"Very true."

"That's from the one when he's dating Harmony right?" Celery asks.

"Yep, that one's good, but the best line of the episode has got to be the one Spike says about Sunnydale being the place that had seen some,"

Together we say, "Truly spectacular kickings of his ass!" And then laugh.

We smile. It's one of those lock in moments, just him and me, when everything else is static and blur. He leans over, taking my face in hand, and kisses me softly. I sigh happily once the kiss is over. We're right again. My amount of relief and happiness is immense, and it's only then that I realize how much even that little bit of discord between us upset me.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"I'm sorry too, though I'm not sure either of us has anything to be sorry for."

"What's all this about?" Kyle asks.

"Never mind." Celery says, gently, to Kyle and me, so I won't explain and Kyle won't press.

"We were planning to go out earlier weren't we?" Jonas says, helpfully

trying to move things along.

"Indeed we were, any ideas?"

"I came up with the cartoon idea, I've contributed enough."

"Skating," Celery says kiddingly.

Jonas just shrugs.

"So that's a big no all around. It's down to me then I guess. Hmmm," Kyle adopts a look of great concentration for a few moments and then nods.

"Never fear, Kyle the king of fun is here. I have the solution to our so much Saturday, so little to do dilemma. We'll go to the beach,"

"Dude it's like not even June yet."

"So?"

"So the waters going to be freaking cold,"

"Don't be a wuss,"

"Don't be insane."

"If anything, I'm saner than you. I thought you'd be down with the idea."

"You actually want to swim in May,"

"We don't have to swim necessarily, just hang out."

"Hang out?"

"Yeah, play Frisbee and stuff,"

"Kyle, when have you EVER played Frisbee, in your entire life?"

"Hey man, I'm like the Frisbee master."

"Sure you are."

"Alright boys, that's enough. I think a nice drive to grand beach in the Le Baron, with Frisbee fun to follow is a great idea. It's sure beats hearing you two argue about it. Jonas, are you with me?"

"Damn right. Let's be blowing this Popsicle stand."

I may very well be doomed for a life of being dragged places in the Le

Baron I don't think I want to go but where I end up having a great time at. Yes, though I'll never publicly admit it, the beach was lots of fun. The near emptiness was a big selling point. So was the big slam city Frisbee jam. We did it sort of 21, DONKEY style. You have no idea what I'm talking about do you? I don't know why I'm surprised. You do know about 21 don't you? Like, as in the basketball game? Not all people play this way maybe, but every time you miss you get a letter, that's the DONKEY part. Well, we did the same thing, except there was no basketball. Remember, we were playing Frisbee? Sheesh. Okay, so every time someone missed a throw, they got a letter, and if you eventually spelled the whole word, you had to go out into the water in up to your waist, and stay there for 30 seconds. Pants wearing optional. That sucked for me, cause I have like zero hand eye co-ordination, and I nearly froze my ass off when I had to go in. Luckily, it was pretty sunny, so I dried fast. Celery was really sweet and loving to me once I got out and was all blue and freezing, but like, thanks a lot. Be nice to me AFTER all your killer throws land me up to my waist in a frigid lake. Some boyfriend he is. Anyway, Kyle had to go in too so at least someone else shared in my pain. Crappiness at sports basically runs in the family, cept the twins. But I'm still not totally sure they're really ours. You never know. My mom could have had an affair with some random organic flour delivery guy. That's right. It could have happened alright.

All in all, it's cool to spend the day with Kyle and Jonas, and it really helps relax me and Celery. It like puts stuff back in perspective or whatever.

Jonas kicks it before The Dark Corner, and Kyle goes with him. I don't know where they went, but I don't really care either. I mean, I'm sure they're having a good time. Just like we are.

"Care," Celery says. We haven't talked in awhile. Cause of like, the fact that we've been watching TV. Though, that doesn't usually stop us. It's been a good silence though, nothing angry or uncomfortable.

"Yeah?"

"Do you remember what I said at breakfast?" He can be talking about only one thing. The bad thing.

"Yeah, and I know we still need to talk about some stuff, but can we do it later? Like tomorrow or something? I'm having such a nice time, just being with you, I'm so at peace. I want to stay like that awhile longer, okay?" The way we always sit is very conducive to him kissing my head, and he does.

"Sure baby."

Carrots and Celery Chapter Sixteen
by Karla Schulz (lanky_lanka@lycos.com)
Date: Wed, 26 Mar 2003 17:33:07 -0600

Waking up on Sunday morning is an unpleasant experience. I start it off by making a series of grumpy noises over the fact that I'm awake at all, and then further grumpiness ensues when I discover, upon trying to move it around, that my left foot is asleep. I need to get up and go to the bathroom, but my stupid foot is asleep. I really hate it when this happens. Every stage of the asleep limb experience blows. The dead feeling, then the tingly, wobbly, trying to wake it up time. When you're trying to walk or whatever and it's your foot or leg, those first tingly steps are the worst. Sometimes my leg like buckles for some weird reason too, which I can't stand. It's all crap. But as you know, I'm a lucky guy. Much luckier than I deserve in fact, and Celery proves it once again by sliding down to the end of the bed almost immediately, beginning to rub my foot awake.

"Good morning," I'm assuming he's been up for some time. Celery's not usually any more alive than I am when he first wakes up.

"Hi, and thanks." He smiles sweetly.

"All part of the loving boyfriend package."

"The deluxe of course."

"Why settle for second best?"

"I knew there was a reason you picked me instead of Kyle."

"That was cold, dude."

"Yeah, and he wasn't even here to appreciate it. Damn." He kisses me, but promptly goes back to reviving my foot.

"Why on earth are you so mean?" he asks, talking to my foot. I give my toe a wiggle. I'm getting there.

"Years of practice."

"Oh."

"And also, your fine example."

"Again, oh."

"I think my foot's awake enough now."

"Yeah? Good." He leans down and kisses it. Yep. It's definitely time for him to be back closer to my mouth. I sit up and put my hands on his shoulders, pulling him up closer to me.

"I'm going to ignore that fact that they were recently on my foot, and ask you to please put your lips on mine now," he smiles.

"More than happy to oblige."

We're rather subdued yet again at breakfast (or in this case, brunch for you detail sticklers), but this time it's 'cause we're in an euphoric haze, not a moody, ungood one. The day goes well, and while I'm still mostly in the haze, Celery decides to go all serious business guy again. We're up in my room.

"You ready to have a talk now?"

"Mumph, do we have to?"

"No, but just because we don't talk about it doesn't mean it won't be on our minds. It won't make it go away. Yesterday was bad enough, I'm afraid if we leave too long we'll fight for real. I don't want that. You?"

"Of course I don't want that. It's just, I know we have to talk about Kaleb and stuff, but I don't even really know what's still bothering you. Or me."

"Why don't we start with what you were talking to Kyle and Jonas about while I wasn't there."

"Is that what's bothering you?"

"Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"As in almost but not quite entirely?"

"Yes, thank-you, I know what the word means. I wasn't asking for a definition."

"Really."

"Well parried, but - mostly?"

"I'm still also a little upset with myself over my loser possessiveness, and the dislike fuelled by jealousy. But it's mainly the other thing. The, you were upset but you couldn't talk to me about it, mostly because I was the

problem, thing. Not like ME, but you thought whatever you talked to them about would hurt me, right? That's what it was, wasn't it?"

"I'd give that estimation a perfect 10."

"Okay, so?"

"I just, like, feel bad. About everything. You, Kaleb, me. I don't want him to like me like he does, but I also don't want him hurt, which he is. That's what I was getting around to with Kyle and Jonas. I have a friend who was hurt, but I can't really be there for him, 'cause it'll maybe or probably hurt the person I love." His eyes are all sad, surprised.

"You CAN talk to Kaleb, comfort him, be there for him. That won't bother me,"

"You're such a liar."

"Okay, it'll bother me, but not enough for you to not do it. A little yes, but like, that's okay. It's like, what is it like? Um, collateral damage? Maybe? It has to be done. For the greater good."

"I can't do something knowing it'll hurt you,"

"Sure you can. If I'm asking you to, you can. It's a scary time, you know? You feel so violated, so useless. No one should go through that alone. And you got me through it like a pro. You're the best man for the job,"

"But how is this not going to just make things worse and more complicated for all concerned?"

"It will make things more complicated, especially if he goes Florence Nightingale on you, but I still think you've gotta be there for him. I'll be okay, WE'LL be okay. We'll emerge stronger than we were before." He's teasing, Celery couldn't say something that cheesy and not be teasing, but it still makes me feel slightly better. But we're only talking very slightly here. I'm still acres away from what I'd call happy about the situation. It's not even just me and Celery I'm thinking about here, Kaleb is still somewhat in my mind. I really think this will make things worse for him too, in the long run. I just don't know what else there is to do. I'm back in needing to be hugged mode. Luckily, Celery knows. I guess he probably is too.

"Comere, baby."

It's one of those cling to him all night nights, and Celery lets me have my clingy way with him without protest or even very much moving around. I even slept good, which is a surprise.

I'm still all confused and anxious about everything with Kaleb, but inspiration strikes during breakfast.

"Hey!" I exclaim excitedly. Kyle, Jonas, and Celery all turn and look. "I know what we can do about Kaleb."

"You do?" Celery asks, keeping his voice carefully neutral.

"Yeah. Like, why don't we talk to him together? You and me by ourselves or Jonas too, either way. Then it's not a me and him alone thing," his eyes are serious-thought grey and his face is scrunched.

"Maybe. You don't think he'd get overwhelmed?"

"You three? Overwhelming? No. I mean, for the sane maybe." Thank-you for that sarcastic report, Tom. There isn't actually a Tom by the way, if you're confused. It just seemed newsy to me. That was Kyle.

"Also, don't forget about Celery's lack of love for Kaleb." They're both just SO helpful. Celery scratches his head (after removing his hat), no solutions or rebuttals to the flaws they've pointed out in my once brilliant plan.

"What if just me and Jonas tried some of the being there action?" This is my last ditch attempt here, don't make fun.

"Making me the chaperone?" Jonas curls his lip with a mix of discomfort and scorn.

"Please, Jonas," I beg, hands clasped. He looks at Celery, who's doing the impassive observer thing.

"Give me something here, man," Jonas entreats.

"Oh," Celery says, snapping out of it. "I don't mind. But I wouldn't mind if Carrots talked to Kaleb by himself either," he turns his attention to me. "I trust you. I know you won't do or even think about doing anything with him." He can be so difficult sometimes when he's being understanding.

"Yeah, but that's only half the point. Sure, I won't do anything, and I don't really think Kaleb will either, but if it's not just me, there's less chance he'll get the wrong idea, get his hopes up, you know?"

"I guess," Jonas is looking sort of lost, uncertain about the part he's being asked to play. Celery smiles at him. "We will be requesting your chaperone expertise,"

"Okay then."

"Great! So we have a plan?"

"It's one of your loser plans, but it's a plan." Again with the helpful from Kyle. So good to have him in my corner.

"Thanks for that vote of confidence, bro. Really appreciate it,"

"You know you do," okay. Maybe a little in the all your advice and even praise to me is mean and sarcastic kind of way, but that's it. And that's just a sentimental value, I don't like change thing.

"Whatever." Like I was going to say all that to him. Yeah right.

We do the walking part together, but when we arrive, Celery goes off alone into the school, while Jonas and I linger by the doors, waiting for Kaleb. He shows up after only a few minutes, coming out of a car I don't recognize. Someone gets out with him. It's a guy, good looking as far as I can tell, tall and probably a few years older than us. But no more than a few. Nothing gross or scary. Not too old for him, if it's like that, which we of course all hope that it is. They're talking and smiling at each other, comfortable and having a good time. Good signs, right! Well, that's what it looks like at least. The comfortable fun having. They keep talking for awhile, and then hug tightly (another excellent sign!). The guy gets back in his car, waves out the window, and drives away. Kaleb starts to approach, and he sees us about half way.

"Hey, guys," he says, smiling still.

"Hey," I say. Jonas nods. Kaleb's obviously waiting for me to say something. "Brute squad?" I ask, grinning, meaning the guy. Also flipping back to what he said about bringing some people out of the closet for protection. Yeah, and brute squad's a Princess Bride thing. Who's surprised?

He grins back, but shakes his head, "Not really. My brother Darren. He's in University at the moment, but he's taking a few days to do the loving support for the violated one thing."

"Oh, that's nice of him." But boo to the just my brotherness. So much for the whole love connection dream.

"Well, we're pretty close. He's the only one in my family I have that with actually." I don't know what to say. There's so much I don't know about Kaleb. We're all sort awkwardly lost for words, until Kaleb decides to press on. "So like, I'm covered, you know? Thanks for the gesture or whatever, chaperoned or not, but I'm really okay. I was afraid you were going to have a crisis of conscience about the whole thing, and I'm glad you figured out a

way to sort of make it work for yourself, but there's no need. I really, truly appreciate it, but I'm good. Darren's playing the caring supportive one really well,"

"I'm still your friend," I say sort of helplessly.

"I know, but you've got to be my friend from afar for now. It's really the best thing you can do for me."

"Okay, I mean, if it's what you want."

"What I want isn't coming into play here. This is more of a what I need deal." I can't not do it, I have to. I hug him. Very platonically, but still with arms and contact and all that. He stiffens at first but then hugs me back, letting go quickly though.

"What part of the giving me space plan didn't you understand?" he teases. Jokes instead of being serious, half quotes instead of your own words. So much like me. But, I don't dwell on the sad, I just laugh.

"Sorry." He rolls his eyes. I guess we're making the sorry thing into a joke now.

"Let's not even go there. You should be going though, huh?" he mostly suggests, after catching a look from Jonas, I'm guessing. I nod.

"Yeah, you're really okay?"

"For sure."

"Alright. But I'm here, we're here, if you need, uh, us."

"I know. Thanks again," I nod and then me and Jonas leave.

"Well chaperoned," I say to Jonas as he practically drags me away, Celery bound.

"I don't much like the guy myself, I have to admit." This is basically him excusing his rather rude behavior.

"Why not?" Am I like the only one here who likes Kaleb?

"I'm sure his brother likes him. I only dislike him because I don't trust people who find you attractive."

"You're too funny. And nice try, what's the real reason?"

"Same one Celery has, I guess. I don't want him to mess things up for you,

and he keeps doing stuff that does. I know he always has like a cute reason or excuse for dropping bomb after bomb, but I still think he knows what he's doing, that he's less innocent about all this than he claims. Of course, let's all remember I'm the cynical, untrusting one. Why should you listen to me?"

" 'Cause you're my friend, and you obviously care and want the best for me and Celery. Your desire to look out for Celery rockets you into my best books always, you know? I'm glad you're around, saying what you think. I may not totally agree, but I don't think you're completely off either. Either way, I know what's motivating you, so it doesn't upset me. You're just being a good friend,"

"Thanks," he says, smiling gratefully.

"Any time."

"I just couldn't bear it if something hurt you guys. You're the bright light at the end of the dark depressing tunnel of life. My 'yes, it really CAN work' poster children. You give me hope in sad and dreary world."

"Wow. Here I was, thinking you were a happy, chipper guy."

"Nope. I'm as freakish and complex ridden as the rest of the human race. I just tend to be a little more calm and deadpan about it. It helps project an image of tranquility."

"How much of this is a joke?" he smiles.

"Worry not. Almost all of it. And the rest is normal, natural, everyone's got it stuff. No cause for alarm."

" 'Cause you can talk to us if something's bothering you,"

"I'm fully aware of that, I assure you. I'm really fine." I obviously don't look convinced, so he repeats himself. "Really. FINE."

"Fine is the same as bad," he makes a mock annoyed sound in his throat.

"Arrgh! Then I'm great and fantastic. Satisfied?" It's his grin that does most of the satisfying, but yeah, I am.

"Yep."

"Good. Can we find Celery now?" I nod.

We find him, working out (without his trusty spotter!!!) in the weight room. I guess he just had to do some stress burning.

"Hey," I say, kissing his sweaty self. I don't even know why our school HAS a weight room, Celery and like two other guys - and that's very rarely - are the only ones ever use it. It's nice for him though, so I shouldn't complain.

"Hey. How'd it go with Kaleb?"

"Good. Sort of. In the sense that he's okay and taken care of. I was sort of relieved from my duties as supportive friend guy. His brother's taking care of him."

"His brother?"

"Yeah, he's older. In University, but they're having a bond. And I'm sure he's much nicer than Kyle, so I think he's going to be okay."

"You keep coming up with these very nasty things about Kyle when he's not even around to appreciate them."

"But on the bright side, he's also not around to come up with a comeback or just start beating my ass."

"There's a silver lining to every rain cloud."

"I demand my chaperone credit. I stopped him from mauling Carrots repeatedly," says Jonas, probably having gotten a little tired of fading into the background.

Luckily for Jonas, Celery takes it well and laughs. If he'd gotten upset, I would have been pissed off. Jonas gives me a private smile of acknowledgement, which is enough to get him fully back into my good graces, and I smile back. Celery keeps right on 'feeling the burn', barely paying attention. He's back like 'in the zone' or whatever.

Lunch is happening, and we're in sitting in the caf with the guys, sharing a chair (by now, we're masters of the one chair lean back thing). The guys all on their own chairs. Personally, I think they're missing out, but hey, no one listens to me anyway. It's all pretty quiet, what with the eating, but upon finishing his sandwich Celery asks, "You know what?"

"No. What?"

"I think it's high time we had another John Hughes marathon." Translation, I think it's high time we spent some time just the two of us. Snuggling on the couch with the hottest, sweetest guy on the planet, watching the finest in 80's cinema? What sensible person would say no to that?

"I'm right there with you on that plan. Saturday?" He nods, happier than most people usually tend to be about spending the day watching 16 Candles, Pretty in Pink, and other fine John Hughes films. But hey, he gets to hang out with me while he's doing it. Who wouldn't be excited.

"You guys are freaks," not Jonas apparently.

"Thanks a lot. You're such nice and supportive friend. We really appreciate it."

"Honesty is a feature you SHOULD appreciate in your friends," wow. Alex speaks. And it was an insult, sort of.

It makes me happy. I like to see him and Brian involved at least slightly, even if it's only at lunch. I don't want to ever forget how great and supportive they've been about our rampant homosexuality. Like, how many 17 year old straight guys would be cool with having two of their male friends sit on each other's lap and kiss at their lunch table in the middle of their school cafeteria? Not many. I know they probably take heat for hanging out with us too, but they've never once complained or even mentioned it. In truth, they're much better friends then we've really earned, but like, hopefully they know we do care, even if we're distant, random, and confusing most of the time.

After I'm leaving my first class that afternoon, someone grabs my elbow. "Can I talk to you for a minute, minus the chaperone?" asks the elbow grabber, who happens to be Kaleb. He looks all worried-determined, plus, the bruising, so I nod. We find an unpopulated alcove.

"There's something I need to say to you, and this time I think it'll actually help matters," let's hope so. I don't think I can handle any more complications.

"Okay," he takes one of those, 'throw yourself over the cliff' breaths, and then looks me squarely in the eyes.

"I know I can't have you. Celery could DIE and I still wouldn't be able to have you. And, because I know that, I've really got to stop trying. I never meant to be trying, whenever we were around each other, but I think it still ended up happening. So, that's stopping. I know this may not be a huge change for you, considering we don't really talk or have much contact now as it is, but maybe it'll give you - and Celery - some peace of mind. You can know now I've taken the conscious step to go into getting over you mode, and that I won't be creepily pining for you or like staring longingly at you all the time when you're not looking," my surprise comes out in my eyes. He grins. "That was pissing Celery off, wasn't it?" Okay, how did he know that? "I'm a smart guy. And I think I understand yours pretty well. He's like, one of my kind or something. Anyway, was I right? Is this good?" I actually find

myself smiling.

"Yeah, I mean, I hope it's good for you as well as me."

"It is." He's confident, firm, looks to be truthful. It's like this major lift to my day. I'm happy for him, for me, for Celery! No more guilt and badness! This is wonderful! I'm so excited, I do something really stupid. I hug him. For the second time in one day. I am SO good at not sending mixed signals. Like, I deserve a medal or something. We both jump away, like it hurt to be touching each other, like the other's skin was on fire. Then, keeping up with all the synchronisation fun, we both look guiltily at the floor.

"Sorry," I mumble.

"Uh, don't worry about it. It's just..." let me finish his sentence for you: that was a different kind of hug.

"I know, it wasn't like."

"You were happy, excited. I was really just there."

"That's not."

"Sure it is," he smiles. "But I'm getting over you, remember? True, this would definitely qualify as a minor setback, but I plan to overcome. I want to love someone who's at least capable of loving me back. We all know that isn't you, so... it's really more than time I let this particular dream go. Regardless of the fact that you can't stop hugging me."

"I'm really happy for you," I say it, because I am.

"And that means a lot. I'm happy you're happy and all that stuff. But like, this is getting kind of suspicious and secret agentish, and we should really be getting to class."

"Yeah, you're right. Okay, so, like, bye?"

"Catch you on the flip side, man."

It's a good exit. Decisive, no looking back. It has all the qualities of an event which should be followed by big letters proclaiming THE END and then credits. What really happens is I wait a few seconds and then start walking to my own class, emotions mixing again, happy for Kaleb, but somewhat sad as well. We'll never really be friends, I guess I know that now, and that's a shame. 'Cause, well, despite everything, all the weirdness, I still really like Kaleb. I always will.

Celery's at my locker at the end of the day, which is less common these days. He looks troubled, and his eyes are so stormy you'd think the world was about to end. But me, with the good news, so maybe I can cheer him up. First I have to figure out what's wrong, of course.

"What's the matter, love?" It's the first time he looks fully at me. Whoa. That's not a very fun look. What's that? Anger? Definitely sadness, possibly even something like betrayal - what the hell is going on? "Celery?"

"If you honestly like him, you can tell me. You don't have to go hugging him in alcoves!"

"What?!"

"I saw you," he's 100% miserable now. I'm having no trouble deciphering that emotion.

"Who?" I'm a bit too stunned to do any manner of putting two and two together. I'd probably end up with 63 if I did.

"You, and Kaleb!" What is this? A fucking Soap Opera! That kind of shit isn't supposed to happen in real life!

"We were just, it was like, good bye. He had just told me he was like, making the decision to really actively try to get over me, and he was all happy about that. It was just such great news, and I knew you'd be happy about it too, I just like got excited and then, hugged him. It wasn't a thing, there was no, you know, feeling."

He closes his eyes, rubbing them and inhaling deeply. "Really?"

"Really." As solid and firm as you can be about anything. Opening his eyes again, he's haggard but relieved.

"I'm sorry I freaked out. I said I trusted you and I do, I don't know how I even let myself start to believe what I was saying."

"It's okay," I really don't care about anything but making him certain that I love him again. Nothing else matters but that.

"Is it?"

"I think so, yeah. Finally."

He's weak and worn out like you are after you've been crying for hours or having a huge rage at someone, but he's smiling faintly. Since I seem to be in such a hugging mood today, I figure I should get with the hugging of the person who really deserves it. As hugs go, this is one of our best ones. And

I've already told you what an amazing hugger Celery is all the time, so hopefully that will help you appreciate how truly outstanding this one was.

"I love you so much."

"Me too, baby."

Can you believe the stuff we get away with in the middle of a highschool?

THE END

(Relax! Just of part one!)