

## Chapter XV

### *The Demon Bag Lady of Skeet Street*

Eaten by the Monster of Love.

Don't let it get me.

(OW.)

There followed two weeks of Skeeter popping up at irregular intervals, full of hectic caprice; grabbing at him, yanking at him, saying “C'mon—”

Such as back to the trattoria on Quicksilver Street, where she ordered the fettuccine primavera and washed it down with a bottle of Gallo Sauvignon Blanc, enthusing all the while about a magnolia-yellow Dodge sedan that RoBynne O'Ring was plotting to inherit from her dying Aunt Violet.

\$230 having been deemed insufficient compensation for a DeSoto that had cost Skeeter \$400 just last August, the girls put their deal on hold till RoBynne could raise more wherewithal or find something fit to trade. (And not a lost motorcycle, either.) This sudden talk of “dying Auntie Vi” alarmed Peyton, even after Skeeter explained that Vi had been a worldly-wise taxi dancer in her day and was nobody's fool even now, on a respirator in the SMECK intensive care unit, squeezing hands once for “yes” and twice for “you can do better than that.”

Two weeks of Skeeter keeping him apprised of the latest counteroffers during her hectic pop-ups, each with its grab, yank, and “C'mon”—such as to Sumi's Sushi Palace, where she ordered the sea urchin with one green tea and a whole series of sakis.

Peyton, to his surprise, did not end up embroiled in any dickering or haggling; Skeeter managed quite adequately on her own, becoming the proud owner of a '72 Dodge Dart while RoBynne took possession of Firesweep Floyd, and Aunt Violet vamoosed to that big dime-a-dance in the sky. Peyton did get to pay his respects by outfitting the Dodge with gas, oil, spark plugs, jumper cables, antifreeze (sorry Vi) and a New Car Smell air freshener; followed by an inaugural drive to the nearest Schnitzel Haus, where Skeeter ordered the Bavarian pork roast with knödel, red cabbage, and more than enough Piesporter to get silly on.

Back To His Place then, and Through The Usual Motions: extra frisky on Skeeter's part. Grabbing, yanking, c'moning; spending the night together in the same old sofabed in the shadow of the same ~~D~~—

...but not so much in one another's arms.

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"I need a new poke, and you're coming with me!"

Peyton rounded up the usual objections. He'd just gotten home from his dayjob, still had his nightly quota of ellipses to put down on paper; no, he couldn't possibly go shopping with Skeeter this evening.

But "Aw please!" she would entreat, batting those apricot eyelashes; "*Won't* you be my sugardaddy?" To which appeal, of course, there could be no denial—or even resistance, as he found himself being reshod, rejacketed, and herded out the door.

"We'll go in Clarence, and have lots of fun, and all you need to do is keep me company. Okay? C'mon—ooh, look at the pretty sunset!"

"Mmph," went Peyton. "Yes, and shell out for this new 'poke' of yours—"

"Oh don't be such a growly turk. There's a full moon tonight too, and you know what *that* means."

(Werewolves, thought Peyton.)

"Lookit!" said Skeeter. "Isn't Clarence an A-bomb hot rod!" Auntie Vi's Dodge Dart, built like a magnolia-yellow warplane, with extra-roomy sock-it-to-me interior and every bit of chrome trim available.

“All right. Explain again why ‘Clarence.’”

“‘Cause he hasn’t got his wings yet.”

“And explain again the wings business, please.”

“‘Explain the wings’” (*rrroooooom*) “I can’t believe you sometimes, how can you never” (*vrroooooom*) “have seen *It’s a Wonderful Life*? I mean no wonder you’re such a grumpy pup. Hold on—” (*Screeeeeeee*.) “I’m going to have to make it my life’s work, getting you to watch that movie.”

“Keeping this car in tire-rubber’s going to be *your* life’s work.”

“Oh be quiet. That’s exactly what I’m talking about. You need a little—a little—”

“A little maniac in the driver’s seat?”

“—shut up—a little faith in joy, or something like that.” She dug a Big lighter out of the remnants of her old poke. “Now watch this. Are you watching carefully? Okay: cross your fingers—close your eyes—say ‘Wish I had a million dollars’—” (Flick.) “‘HOT dog!’”

“*Would* you mind driving for God’s sake with your eyes open please!”

“*Jeez* lighten up! That’s exactly what I mean: a little faith in joy... Hold this, wouldja kindly? I can hardly drive with it going to pieces on me. And get me out a cigarette?”

Gingerly he accepted Old Poke’s pieces. “Good God. What happened to this?”

“It had a nervous breakdown today at work. Where’s my cigarette? Thanks.” (Flick; drag.) “And hey! Since you keep mentioning work, and since we’re going to the mall any old way—”

“How are things at SMECK these days?” Peyton hastened to ask.

“—oh—okay—you know what hospitals are like.” [To passing roadhog: “*HEY! Do us all a favor and get your head outta your butt!*”] “What a turk! And speaking of hospitals I really ought to look for a dressy-up outfit as long as we’re at the mall, and definitely another pair of shoes and—”

“Skeeter—”

“I need a *few* new things, now that it’s getting colder—I mean, look at this old top I’ve got on; it’s practically tatters.”

Sidelong eyeful of a washed-out pullover, with *NIL NISI* stretched across the front.

“‘Tatters.’ Is that what you’re calling them now?”

“And since when have you not liked my tatters?”

“I didn’t say I don’t. Tatters are fine, tatters are fetching—”

“Fetching! That’s something DOGS do—”

“Now look: we are going to the mall, if we make it there alive, to get you a purse.”

“A *poke*.”

“So let’s concentrate on that.”

“Gnarl gnarl gnarl. *What* a grump. I was KIDDING about the dogs and dressy-up outfit! You know—kidding? (Not about the shoes, though.)”

“Skeeter—”

“And for your information, we are not going to Run-o’-the-Mall—”

(*Screeee-jerk-thump*)

“—we have arrived.”

She contrived their entrance by parking in the lot off Payne Street, getting out of the car first, and oh so casually aiming for the northwest doors, which happened to be opposite a Tickle Me lingerie boutique. But before she could execute the final feint-and-dodge and disappear into its lace-edged maw, Peyton seized her wrist.

“Unhand me, fellow!”

“Skeeter. You’ve got entire drawers full of underwear already.”

“You leave my drawers out of it. I need lots more.”

“What, for instance?”

“Um... fishnet stockings! I need a thousand pairs! How do you expect me to work at a hospital without enough fishnet stockings?”

This caused a guffaw and seemed to improve her chances; but Peyton glanced at the boutique sign and turned away. “You said you needed a purse.”

“A *poke*.”

“A *purse*. *One* purse.”

“Oh all right,” Skeeter capitulated. Then CHING! went her lower lip. “Why don’t you ever buy me underwear?”

“Begorrah, it’s unaware I was you were sellin’ your underwear.”

“Oh funny. What a *witty* turk I’m here with.” But she slid her hand up into his, gave it one squeeze for “yes,” and skipped along singing “MAWull, MAWull,” pretending to maul her escort’s arm with many beastly yawps and yowls.

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“And what’s the matter with these bags, may I ask?” Peyton yawned half-a-dozen shop-stops later.

“They’re all too small.”

“Too *small*? What about that one there?”

“Nope nope nope nope—I can’t use just any old poke; I need room for all my stuff! It’s got to be big enough and deep enough to smuggle an illegal alien in.”

“Mmph. I suppose wilderness outfitters stock something along those lines. Let’s try them and be done with it.”

So down and around a slew of outlets, each festooned with cardboard skeletons, gremlin masks, and jagged-grinning Jack-o’-lanterns.

“I ever tell you about my first Halloween dance in high school, when I went as a vampire? I wore this chalk-white fright makeup and a long black wig—”

“Yes, Skeeter, you told me.”

“I didn’t fill you in on the details. Remember Lonnie Fesso, who came as Dr. Jekyll *and* Mr. Hyde *and* busted the Halloween piñata, then went around walloping everyone with the piñata stick? Boy, could he shake it. ANYway I ran into him a few years later and guess what—he’d just started medical school, was going to study *neurosurgery*. I said to him, ‘Lonnie! are you that into brains?’ And he said no, he just liked cutting people’s heads open... Oh here we go: GoreTexarama. Hey, check these puppies out! You can forget Tickle Me—THESE are what I call over-the-shoulder-boulder-holders!”

Peyton found a rainwear display to slouch against while Skeeter frolicked among the rucksacks.

“Lookit this one—cuuuute!—too small though. *I* wanna be a bag lady when *I* grow up.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Oh spare us! Every Halloween I go partying as a bag lady. Now when I was little, I wanted to go out as a *trollop*. ‘Gramma I wanna be a trollop—dress me up like a trollop.’ Jeez, I loved the sound of that: like a lollipop on a bus, right? All-day sucker! All-*night* sucker! (Cackle.) ‘Absolutely not, young lady!’ Gramma’d say, and threaten not to let me go out at all. So then I’d threaten to run away and join the Roller Derby. I did one year, too.”

“You ran away?”

“No—joined the Roller Derby! When I was ten I put on my skates and a helmet and a T-shirt with a big number on it and went skating from door to door, ringing their bells and yelling TRIGGER TREETZ at ‘em, nastylike. At one house they got so freaked they gave me their whole bowl of candy—just handed it over—‘Here, take it all’—and shut the door *fast!*”

“Sounds like what I should’ve done a couple of hours ago.”

“Oh poop-a-doop! You know you love it.”

Eventually she chose a jumbo maroon poke that could have doubled as a sleeping bag, and busied herself with the transfusion from Old to New of cigarettes and Bic lighter and compact and lipgloss and eyeliner and eyeshadow and mascara and nailpolish and emery board and moisturizer and hairbrush and toothbrush and tampons and love gloves and Nordette Pills and No-Nonsense pantyhose and Imitation Opium and wads of kleenex (new and used) and barrettes and ribbons and keyring and rapewhistle and Mr. Wong’s jackknife and Walkman and Van Halen cassette and Men At Work cassette and Weird Al Yankovic cassette and paperbacks by Vonnegut and Tom Robbins and Ziggy address book and Ziggy things-to-do-today pad and movie ticketstubs and concert ticketstubs and broken pencilstubs and dried-out old ballpoints and clumped-together coupons and yet-to-be-replied-to

correspondence and paid?-it-is-to-*laugh* bills and a ton of Sweet ‘n’ Low packets and the innards of half a ham sandwich and Peyton’s cartoon squirrel plus a wallet stuffed with photos of Skeeter alongside Sadie and Desi and RoBynne and Uncle Buddy-Buzz and Mao the cat and Dudley Moore not to mention overextended chargecards spilling out of cellophane sleevelets into a handful of loose change mingling with random bandaids and Lifesavers and no more than three or four dollar bills, each of them practically tatters.

By the time this lot completed its change of venue, New Poke was rung up and paid for and Skeeter could tote it away, doing so with such skip-and-hop swashbucklery you’d have thought she’d reeled it in after a hard day’s deepsea fishing.

“Well?” said Peyton.

“Well what?”

“Well don’t I get a kiss or something?”

“Oh, sir!” gasped Skeeter. “You must think me a *flooze*... I tell you what. I’ll take you to a really nice bar.”

“Oh yes? And since when do you have money for treats?”

“Trick or treats?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, either way.”

“Aw please! I promise I’ll be good and have only two drinks, that’s all, no more, just two, I mean you *will* be paying for them so you can regulate me, and then we’ll see about kisses ‘or something’—and if you say no I swear I’ll go and look at earrings!”

Nor was this a false alarm, since it would involve the holding up to lobe in mirror of every last bauble in Run-o’-the-Mall. So again there could be no denial; and Peyton took her down Payne Street to Bert ‘n’ Ernie’s Bar ‘n’ Grill, where all the waitresses cried “Skeeter’s here!” and ran for the Cuervo and Cointreau and limeslice and salt.

And there Peyton nursed a single beer for the next two hours, watching his would-be bag lady’s winsome pink face ruddify while she and the waitresses updated each other’s scuttlebutt about mutual acquaintances.

“You about done with that second drink?” he finally inquired.

“You’re being gloomy *again*,” Skeeter told him, as she hitched up her *NIL NISI* pullover... and stared down with dismay at her trim little midriff. “My belly button! It isn’t winking!”

“All the better for us to contemplate it, I suppose...”

“Don’t understand this. It’s never not winked before! Maybe if I—”

“Keep your shirt on, please,” Peyton requested as her hitching neared flash point.

“Oh *quit* with the grumping! See if I wink at *you* any more,” she said, tucking her tummy away and signalling for another shot.

“There’s a time and a place—”

“Yeah and you didn’t even buy me any pretty bras to show off.”

“You don’t need any help from me to show off.”

“Damn betcha! You’re here with a celebrity! Haven’t I ever told you ‘bout the time I was up for Cookie of the Year?”

No, Peyton had not heard that particular confession. So Skeeter related the highly improvisational story of her entry in the Oxeye Biscuit Company’s annual pageant, competing for a trophy, scholarship, and year’s supply of crunchable merchandise.

“I came out third runner-up, the winner being this six-foot giraffe girl with no boobs and ugly roots—*what* a bitch. *Oh* I hated her.”

“Well, they’re usually biased toward the tall model-type—”

“—shut up—I coulda been a model-type contender!”

But her first and only booking, by a sleazoid agent, had been to deliver a singing telegram to a Little People’s convention.

“Meaning he wanted me to STRIP FOR MIDGETS!”

And she who never got maudlin drunk or bitter drunk could, when full of margaritas, certainly turn indignant.

“I mean who the hell did he think I was, the turk! You know what I told him? I said to him, ‘Hey!’ I said, ‘just because I act a bit demented now ‘n’ then does not mean I’m some sort of cheap dimestore slutto! *And*,’ I said to him, ‘maybe you’re thinking, “This girl’s on drugs—I bet this girl’s on drugs!” But not so, buster! I am a junkie *au nature!*’”

“...Skeeter...”

“That’s right! I tol’ him, ‘I smoke ‘n’ I drink ‘n’ I’m a natural-born blonde ‘n’ I shower every morning AND I douche when I need to, thank you very much! *I* am one talented lady!”

Before she could demonstrate this by attempting cartwheels down the length of the bar, Peyton and a worried waitress-chum seized an armpit each and removed Skeeter, poke and all, from Bert ‘n’ Ernie’s premises.

“Whass goin’ on?” she wanted to know, out on Payne Street. “Wha’ happened? Did they throw us out? They *tried* to, din’ they? Well, I’ll show you goddam midgets!—”

And with no hesitation whatever she began to pull off her pullover.

The waitress chose this moment to helpfully disappear.

“—Skeeter!—”

“—SHUT UP—”

Even entangled within a snarl of sleeves, her intent and extent were sufficiently apparent for whooping dudes in passing cars to fill the night with honks and *whoas*.

“Skeeter, for God’s sake—”

“I AM NOT A FLOOZE!”

Fearing he might at any moment be joined by the whoopers or taken for an assailant, Peyton grabbed Wild Irish Rose and wrestled her into an alley happily empty except for dumpsters. There she freed herself from her practically-tattered pullover and flung it to the ground.

“I’M NOT! *I’M NOT!!*”

“Come on, baby, settle down—”

“**NO!!!**”

Her face looked pandemonial in the lurid alley lamplight. Eyeballs bulging hubcap-huge, their veins thick and spirally as telephone cords; mouth distorted like McDougal’s Cave with Tom and Becky trapped inside. And mauling at his arms again she shrugged off all coverup restraint: CHING! went her winsome pink chest, like wrathful bowlfuls of jelly.

“Whatsa matter?! Doncha like t’watch girls undress?!”

“Yes but not *here*, now come on—”

“Doncha like t’lookit ME then anymore?! I’M a girl!”

“The girl of my dreams.”

“Course I am!... Am I?”

“More than you know, Skeeter.”

“Really?... Am I?... All right then. I’m tired...” And into his beleaguered arms she flopped, as confident of being caught as any Gatsby-party swooner. Reclining there she smiled up at him, all her fleeting ire gone: Tom and Becky rescued, angelface restored.

“‘A little faith in joy,’” he quoted. “Just what do you expect me to do with you?”

“Um... point me in th’ right direction?”

“I try, but you keep going deaf—”

“M’up *here*,” she told him.

He transferred his gaze from jellybowls to angelface. “Sorry. Force of habit, I guess.”

*Wheeeee* went her angelfissure, briefly, even as apricot lashes fluttered shut.

“Y’could take me home ‘n’ put me t’bed... fellow.”

Redressing his galvanic little charge as best he could, Peyton lugged her hundred-and-one pounds out of the alley. And miraculously no cops were waiting there, nor any whooping dudes or accusatory Take Back The Nighters. But all the way up Payne Street, underneath the full moon, Skeeter slooped a tune of her own recomposition that sounded something like:

*So hoist up the Dodge Dart’s parts,  
see if the engine starts,  
call like an ExtraTerrestrial:  
Lemme go home!  
I wanna go home....*

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At last they reached wingless Clarence, against whom Skeeter got propped while Peyton caught his breath.

“Jeez,” she mumbled, “whass alla wheezin’ for? I mean, whole point’s t’ get th’ girl drunk ‘n’ have y’wicked way with her, izznit?”

*Like hell.* A top-forty adolescent fantasy, all right: take Dream Girl home and put her to bed, with her well on the road to topless unconsciousness *and* in his close embrace—

—but the foremost image in his stark staring mind was of Skeeter suddenly chucking up her Cuervo and Cointreau and choking to irreversible death on them, right there in his arms.

Unwise instinct tightened those arms around the girl in question, who reflexively sneezed over most of his shirtfront.

“Oops,” she burbled. “Sorry. Um... maybe you better drive. Oh—I almos’ forgot—”

Getting a grip on his shoulders she was able to peer upward, find his face, and on precarious tiptoe deposit a great big sloppykiss thereon.

“Thass for nothin’,” she carefully informed him. “‘N’ *that...* ol’ poop-a-doop... is from *Issa Won’ful Life*.”

She subsided then and resumed her shuteye while he, with a wheeze, began to rummage about New Poke in search of Skeeter’s keys.

