

Jump Grenade

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For my wife Nancy

Thanks for your excellent comments on the manuscript, and for reminding me that everything in my life is fuel for my art.

CHAPTER ONE

Maybe It Was That Low-Cut Cocktail Dress Thursday, December 29

Universe Ryder watched the starting Bolammes drill their way through a thicket of arm-waving backup players. They leapt for perfect layup after layup, all except for the last and largest, whose shot snapped off the backboard and skipped across the rim.

"Aw, goddamn your son of a bitch face, Carter! *Goddamn your son of a bitch face*!" number thirteen Billy Bolamme snarled, pointing to his ball bouncing downcourt towards the Pilsdale Planters working through their own pregame drills.

"Wha--? I didn't do nothin'!" number nineteen protested.

"You were too slow! You got in my goddamn way, and threw my timing off, that's what!" Alone of his teammates Billy wore camouflage shorts with a dozen hand grenades clacking around his waist. He topped John Carter by a couple inches and was rough, stubble-bearded, and meaty compared to the lean, ethereal orange-clad Bolammes forward.

"Well, sorry, dude, but--"

"Goddamn you, Carter, you screw with me again and I'll rip that son of a bitch face right off ya!"

"Billy, Billy ..." muttered coach Hiram Bolamme beside Uni.

Universe shrugged. "He's just, you know ... like he needs to blow steam off before a game and all. He's just worked up."

"Yeah, but the refs'll hit him with a hundred technicals if he does that during the game."

She shifted uncomfortably from paunchy, jowly Coach Hiram with his wispy mustache, his glittering black eyes, his tie strangling his wrinkled neck, his plaid threepiece suit with its cigarette stench. Billy had told her to leave the top two buttons undone on her tight black blouse, but Billy's father's eyes were glued to her modest cleavage. Meanwhile the sweaty Billy drove downcourt for another layup.

Billy had sure been mad she wasn't a virgin. She'd asked him who was anymore. He said he was surprised a sixteen-year-old girl was having sex, but what he meant is he couldn't believe a girl as mousy as Universe could ever have had screwed anyone, much less already be on the pill and ready for action. Had she ever shocked him!

"Damn it to goddamn *hell!*" Billy screamed as he missed a long shot.

"Billy, *please*," Hiram called, pointing to a booth high above the floor of the fifteen thousand-capacity Bolamme Civic Center, its ON AIR sign glowing red. "The light's on in Dan's booth. That'll go out over the radio."

"*Git outa my way*!" Billy growled, shoving a smaller Bolammes player at the threepoint line. "Git! Ya little fart!"

"Dammit, Billy!"

Billy whirled. "Shut up, Dad! I'm warming myself up, and these buttheads are crapping all over me!"

"Billy, practice is *over*. Dan's about to announce the start of the game, so if you'll please--"

Billy scowled. Uni looked away. He'd only screamed at her once like that, but she knew he did it every day with Hiram. She was afraid that just by sitting next to his father she might catch it herself. She felt Billy's eyes on her.

"Hey, Uni, lookin' good today! Damn good!" he said, checking out her chest and giving her a thumbs up.

Uni nodded. They'd only been together two and a half weeks. Earlier this month he'd dropped by the art gallery to see his dad, then had offered to drive her home. Maybe it was that low-cut cocktail dress. Billy seemed to be twenty years old, tall and chunky, long greasy hair squeezed by a headband. She still wondered why she'd turned to ask her boss if it was okay if she went with his son. Why should she worry what Hiram Bolamme thought?

Or maybe it was the mescaline. She'd been pretty messed up that afternoon, and Billy had come on to her like a god. She could hardly wait to get into the car with him. And then everything happened all at once. Universe had been so freaked that she'd spent the entire night shuddering through eleven million hallucinogenic dimensions, trying to calm herself by holding her phone to her ear and listening to barely audible classical music.

But the whole thing with Billy had been foreordained. Although she'd noticed him their freshman year at Billy InterEagle, he'd merely come across then as a hulking, foulmouthed blank. He'd dropped out that first year and she hadn't seen much of him after that. But last February 19th she'd run into him after school. It turned out they were both waiting for the Pharmacist, and she'd nervously mentioned it was her birthday. Billy had hooted that it was his birthday too, that they were exactly the same age. Somehow this revelation had been the seed of a future relationship.

"How come you're sittin' with the old fart, though?" Billy said, pointing at Hiram.

"Well, I wanted to be close to the action, I guess."

"Hell," Billy drawled, looking over the emptying court, "you wanna be in on the action, maybe we oughta suit you up. Be a damn better forward than that pussy Carter there," he said, pointing to the Bolammes power forward coming in off the floor. Carter grimaced and looked away.

"TESTING--1-2-3-4--TESTING," Dan Ryder warbled over the P.A. system. An old man's voice, Uni thought. Strange she'd never noticed that about her father before. Everyone praised his deep rich voice, but for the first time Uni heard the age in it.

"Guess ol' Dan's gotta piss around a while before we start," Billy said to no one in particular, plopping down with a clammy arm around Uni's thin shoulders. He let his fingers dangle to her little breasts. She sighed. Ownership.

"GOOD EVENING, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. I'M DAN RYDER, YOUR ANNOUNCER FOR THIS GAME BOTH IN-HOUSE AND FOR KBLM 1327 ON YOUR DIAL."

"HEY, DON'T FORGET YOUR BACKUP MAN, ME, FRANK CHESTER!" a younger voice boomed. "THE UP AND COMING GENIUS OF THE AIRWAVES!"

"AND THAT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN," Dan Ryder said ruefully, "IS WHAT AWAITS YOU WHEN I GO AHEAD AND DROP DEAD."

"OR WHEN YOUR THROAT GETS SORE, DON'T FORGET, THAT'S IN THE CONTRACT, BUDDY! YOUR THROAT GETS SORE, I TAKE OVER THE MIKE! THEN WE SEE SOME REAL ANNOUNCING!"

Uni winced along with fifteen thousand people trying to ignore the boring banter her father and Frank felt obligated to go through before each game. Frank Chester was definitely full of himself. Over for dinner one night he'd corralled her in the basement and put all these moves on her, as if he were pretending to kiss her, maybe so he could feel her chest or something, except he kept his hands on her shoulders and buried his lips in her neck. It all culminated in nothing. He was just drunk. He was cute, though, with his long smooth face and his tidy little mustache contrasting with unkempt sandy hair, and more than once Uni had fantasized what would've happened if he'd been sober and seriously interested in her. He was only nineteen, after all, just a little older than she was. "WELL, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, TODAY'S A SPECIAL DAY," Ryder went on. "BEFORE WE BEGIN TODAY'S GAME WITH THE PILSDALE PLANTERS, WE'D LIKE TO REMIND YOU THAT TODAY IS BILLY BOLAMME DAY HERE IN BILLY, NORTH CAROLINA."

"Huh. How 'bout dat?" Billy mumbled. "I like totally goddamn forgot, man."

"That's why I wanted you to tone it down out there," Hiram said.

"BILLY BOLAMME IS OF COURSE PROBABLY THE GREATEST SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD BASKETBALL PLAYER ALIVE."

"AW, LAY IT ON THICK, WILL YA?" came Frank's retort.

"I GET PAID TO LAY IT ON THICK," Ryder said. "NOW AS I WAS SAYING--"

"OF COURSE WE'RE PREJUDICED IN FAVOR OF THE HOME TEAM," Frank chortled. "WE ARE THE HOME TEAM. CARD-CARRYING EMPLOYEES OF THE BILLY BOLAMMES. SO NATURALLY WE FOAM AT THE MOUTH AT THE VERY *MENTION* OF BILLY BOLAMME."

"ANYWAY, FIRST OF ALL, I'D LIKE TO EXPLAIN THE WEIRD ECHO YOU RADIO LISTENERS ARE PROBABLY GETTING ABOUT NOW. THAT'S BECAUSE WE'RE ANNOUNCING THE GAME OVER THE BOLAMME CIVIC CENTER PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEM WHILE WE'RE SIMULTANEOUSLY BROADCASTING THE GAME FOR KBLM 1327 ON YOUR DIAL. THERE'S THE TIME DELAY ECHO AROUND THE ARENA, AND WHEN I'VE LISTENED TO SOME OF THESE GAMES OVER THE RADIO I'VE HEARD THE WEIRD FEEDBACK."

"LIKE WHEN HE HAD A SORE THROAT AND WAS SICK IN BED AND THEY LET *ME* ANNOUNCE IT!"

"Aw, cripes, get to the point!" Billy yelled to the booth.

"WELL, AT ANY RATE," Ryder said. "BILLY BOLAMME. DROPPED OUT OF BILLY INTEREAGLE HIGH SCHOOL HIS FRESHMAN YEAR. 'I JUST COULDN'T STAND THE FREAKIN' BS ANYMORE,' TO QUOTE OUR BILLY."

"Damn right," Billy muttered.

"BILLY DID PLAY MOST HIS FRESHMAN YEAR ON THE VARSITY TEAM, BUT HOW COULD HE HOPE TO SHINE IN SUCH A MEDIOCRE ENVIRONMENT? HE WAS A DECENT FORWARD, SURE, BUT EVEN BILLY ADMITS IT TOOK WHAT HE CALLS A *VISIONARY EXPERIENCE* TO MAKE HIM THE OUTSTANDING CENTER FOR THE BOLAMMES THAT HE IS TODAY."

"VISIONARY EXPERIENCE, HELL," Frank cut in. "HE WAS TRIPPING HIS BRAINS OUT ON LSD THE NIGHT HE SCORED EIGHTY POINTS IN A ROW."

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"WELL, THANK GOD HE DROPPED OUT RIGHT AFTER THAT GAME IS ALL WE CAN SAY. IT WAS AS IF FATE *KNEW* HIS REAL CAREER COULD ONLY UNFOLD IN THE NEW JUNIOR DROPOUT BASKETBALL LEAGUE, WHICH HAS ITS NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS RIGHT HERE IN BILLY, NORTH CAROLINA."

"What're these craphead jerks sayin' about me now?" Billy grunted. "We got a goddamn game to play, dudes."

"WELL, SOMEHOW IT MADE HIM A LEGEND IN OUR TIME," Ryder continued. "WHAT A CHARACTER OUR BILLY IS!"

"YEAH, THOSE PLASTIC HAND GRENADES SURE AIN'T REGULATION!"

"WELL, REGULATIONS JUST AREN'T FOR OUR BILLY, I GUESS. ANYWAY, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE CERTAINLY KNOW HOW IMPORTANT OUR DROPOUTS ARE. THEY MUST BE NURTURED WITH ALL THEIR FOIBLES, DON'T YOU AGREE?"

"HELL, YEAH! I WAS A DROPOUT MYSELF, A TOTAL SUCCESS STORY IF I DO SAY SO! PLAYED A GREAT SEASON FOR THE BOLAMMES. I WAS EVEN NAMED MR. JUNIOR DROPOUT BASKETBALL."

"OH, HOW WE ALL REMEMBER," Ryder said. "LIKE THE TIME YOU BLEW YOUR BEETS ALL OVER THAT REFEREE IN THE FOURTH GAME OF THE DROPOUT CUP."

"SCREW IT! THAT WAS THE THIRD GAME, DUDE. IT WAS THE FOURTH GAME WHERE THAT JERK STOMPED ON MY KNEE AND BLEW MY CAREER! MAN, I COULDA GONE PROFESSIONAL, EVERYONE KNEW THAT. BUT HERE I AM SCRAPING BY, TRYIN' TO GET ANNOUNCER GIGS."

"Get to the goddamn point, fartface!" Billy screamed, shooting the bird at the radio booth. "We got a goddamn game ta play!"

"WE SEEM TO BE HEARING SOMETHING FROM BILLY HIMSELF. CAN'T MAKE IT OUT VERY WELL, RADIO LISTENERS, I'M AFRAID," Ryder said.

"HE'S SAYING, GET TO THE GODDAMN POINT, FARTFACE," Frank noted. "HE THINKS WE'RE BEING TOO LONG-WINDED UP HERE."

"OKAY, OKAY, LET ME JUST READ THE REST OF THIS THING HERE AND WE'LL GET IT ON. WE NOTE THAT WHEN HIRAM AND MADELINE BOLAMME MADE THEIR FORTUNE HERE AT BILLY, THEY WERE SO GRATEFUL THAT THEY WANTED TO GIVE BACK TO THE COMMUNITY. SO THEY NAMED THEIR ONLY CHILD AFTER THE TOWN. THEN, WHEN THEY FUNDED THE JUNIOR DROPOUT BASKETBALL LEAGUE, THE FIRST TEAM WAS NAMED AFTER *THEM*. AND NOW THEIR SON PLAYS FOR THIS TEAM AND IS ITS GREATEST EXEMPLAR."

"AND SO ALL THIS HOT AIR IS TO EXPLAIN HOW WE GOT BILLY BOLAMME PLAYING FOR THE BILLY BOLAMMES?" Frank said.

"EXACTLY."

"CRIPES, NOBODY EVER OFFERED TO NAME A TEAM AFTER *ME*. EVEN THOUGH I WAS DAMN GOOD. I COULD SUIT UP EVEN NOW!"

"FRANK, WE HEAR THIS BEFORE EVERY SINGLE GAME."

The chatter from Uni's father and Frank boomed crazily. It was odd enough when someone spoke only a few words at a time, but the endless drivel vibrated mindlessly through the arena. "How do people *stand* this?" she cried, putting her hands over her ears.

Billy shot to his feet. "Hey, pipe down up there, buttheads! You're hurtin' my girlfriend's ears!"

"Billy! That's my father up there!"

"All the more reason for the idiot to shut his damn yap," Billy drawled, then screamed to the booth: "Ya heard me! Shut the hell up, ya stupid schmucks! We gotta play a goddamn game!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Radio Booth

"WELL, THAT'S OUR BILLY, I GUESS," Dan Ryder said.

"COURSE IF THE REFS HAD THE BALLS TO ENFORCE THE NUMBER OF TECHNICALS HE'D GET EVERY GAME, HE'D FOUL OUT IN THE FIRST FIVE MINUTES."

"Hey! Screw you!" Billy snarled.

"AW, SIDDOWN, BILLY BOY," Frank said. "ME AND DAN ARE JUST KIDDING YA LIKE WE ALWAYS DO."

"Ya damn *swine!*" Billy hissed, snatching up a basketball, marching out to the court, and glaring at the radio booth high overhead. "You say you're sorry right now, pissheads! Both of you!"

"WHAT'S WRONG WITH HIM SO DAMN EARLY?" Frank said.

"DAMMIT, FRANK, *APOLOGIZE*," Ryder whispered, though it still came over the P.A. "YOU KNOW HOW HE GETS."

"Hey! Dimwits! Wake up there! You're pissing on *Billy Bolamme! Nobody* pisses on Billy Bolamme!"

"WHAT'S GOTTEN INTO YOU TODAY, DUDE?" Frank said.

"Ya goddamn farts! You crap all over me! Say I get technicals! Well, I don't! Nobody pins crap on *me*!"

Billy cocked his arm back and made as if to throw the basketball fifty feet up at the radio booth. Uni's father and Frank both looked down in amazement. The entire audience watched in silence. Finally there was a gentle chuckling at the absurdity of anyone being able to toss a basketball that high and do any damage.

"C'MON, BILLY BOY, JUST CALM DOWN," Frank said.

Thousands of spectators watched in disbelief as Billy's arm whirled and exploded. The basketball shot like a rocket and penetrated the radio booth in a deafening roar. A waterfall of shattered glass burst out in surreal slow motion.

"AOYIEEEE!" came a scream.

"Daddy!" Universe cried.

When the shards finished cascading to the court, a white-faced Frank Chester leaned out of the booth. "*We need a doctor!* Dan's cut! He's cut bad!"

"Daddy!"

Dan Ryder shakily emerged from behind the announcer desk, blood streaming down his temples. His white shirt was soggy crimson. "It--it's okay--everyone," he gasped. "Just--just a little scratch, that's all."

Meanwhile three men and two women, four carrying bags, all looking professionally medical, scurried up the concrete stairs to the booth. Uni made to follow but felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Sorry, stupidass ball hit the wrong guy," Billy mumbled. "I was aimin' at that Chester twit. He really has a mouth."

"Billy, that's my *father*!" Uni protested as Billy's rough hand tightened on her shoulder.

"Hey, the pisshead'll be all right. You called him a pisshead yourself the other night."

"Yeah, well, but--"

"Hey, puss, why're you going all pisshead on me, huh? Just sit down here and look pretty, hon, we got a game ta play."

"Well ... if you really think he'll be all right ..." Uni whispered, looking up to the booth where the doctors were swabbing her father's head, removing his shirt, and dressing a wound to Frank's arm.

"He'll be fine before you know it." Billy turned to the crowd. "Hey, things are okay!" he shouted. "Don't wet your pants or nuthin'! We're gonna play the goddamn game, okay? Get some flunkies to clean up the glass and let's get going."

A referee strode up. "Get out, Bolamme. We've seen enough. You're out of the game."

"Screw it. Game hasn't even started yet and you're trying ta give me a technical. Didn't you hear me a minute ago, twit? Billy Bolamme doesn't *get* technicals."

"Well, you've got fifty of 'em right now, Bolamme. Back to your locker room. Now."

"Screw it, dude. Get the Planters out here and let's do the goddamn jump ball and get this pile of crap *goin'*, man."

The ref jerked a finger towards the Bolammes locker room. "I mean it, Bolamme. Out. *Now*."

Billy folded his arms. "Hey, you're really beginning to piss me off, ya know?"

"I could care less. You're out of the game. If you don't get out right now you'll forfeit this game to the Planters."

"Huh. We sure can't have that now, can we?" Billy said. He unfolded his arms and

marched to the ref, who ratcheted his head up to Billy's advancing figure in shock. Fifteen thousand fans jerked in their seats as Billy's casual solid punch rocked through the arena, sending the ref sprawling ten feet across the broken glass. The ref groaned, turned over on his back, and passed out.

"Get the Planters out here," Billy said. "You there--Carter--get a broom and get that glass up. Move yer ass! Bateman! Austin! Drag that sonofabitch off my court! Jump ball in one minute!" He moved to the unconscious ref and jerked the whistle off the man's chest. He blew it once. "Hey, Chester! Got a little air circulatin' up there now, huh, dude? You gonna announce this suckfest or not?"

"SHEESH ..." Frank muttered over the P.A. as he swiped glass off his seat with a magazine. "OKAY, MR. BILLY BOY. I'LL ANNOUNCE YOUR DAMN GAME." He looked to the doctors leading Dan Ryder away, then cleared his throat.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. WELCOME TO TODAY'S GAME BETWEEN THE FIRST-PLACE BILLY BOLAMMES AND THE FOURTH-PLACE PILSDALE PLANTERS. THIS BROADCAST IS BROUGHT TO YOU TONIGHT BY THE BOLAMME CENTER FOR HURT FEELINGS, WHERE DREAMS BECOME REALITY AS INCREASINGLY SOOTHING STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS ARE BROUGHT TO FRUITION IN *YOU*, THE BELOVED CUSTOMER, BY EXPERT CAREGIVERS AND LOVING NONPROFIT BUREAUCRATS."

"Stupid twit," Billy said. John Carter had found a push broom and swept glass. Billy grabbed a basketball and moved to center court where another referee and the Planters center stood.

"Uh ..." the ref quavered. "Let's--get started now ... shall we?"

"Damn right, dude," Billy said.

The ball went up and Billy came down with it, his elbow ricocheting off his opponent's face, sending the Planter twirling to the floor. Billy flew down the court, ball arcing in a high majestic dribble.

"Uh--foul--number thirteen--Bolamme--" came the referee's call behind him. Billy proceeded to sink his layup.

Another ref charged up. "Technical!" he shouted. "Two shots for the Planters! Your basket doesn't count, Bolamme!"

"Whazzup, dude?" Billy said, taking the ball out of bounds to toss it back to his teammates.

The ref stared in amazement. "You--you--give me that ball! You fouled number six

on the jump ball and you ignored the whistle and you think you made your basket and you have the gall to claim the ball *again?*"

"Made the basket fair and square," Billy drawled. "Basket counts. No technical, our ball."

"You--get out of here! You're not playing a game! You're just--just--"

Billy swung hard. The referee crumpled insensible beneath the basket. Billy rubbed his fist. "And that goes for any ref who messes with me! Ball in play! Dammit, *ball in play!* All you pissheads--get going! I mean *right now!*" He hurled the ball at a small Bolammes player who immediately took a shot and made it.

"See, that's the spirit!" Billy said. "That's Bolammes teamwork for ya!" He picked up the ball and moved out of bounds to throw it in again.

"May we please have the ball after you guys score?" a gangly Planter complained.

"Yeah, it's like, in the rules and all," another said.

"Uh--Billy," a ref said hesitantly, "it is their ball after you make a basket."

"Well, sure nuff. We're all doin' the teamwork thing here, dudes. Sure you can have the ball!" Billy laughed, windmilling the ball off the Planter's left eye socket.

CHAPTER THREE

Encyclowhatever, by Universe, or, The Library School's Library

Near the end of the third quarter the Bolammes led the Planters 89-24, and Billy was up to seventy-six points. Uni had to go to the bathroom, but dared not move. Cimmara Sturgis had flounced by in her Billy InterEagle High cheerleader uniform a few minutes ago, and Billy had given her cow boobs an appraising leer, even though she wasn't a dropout like Billy and herself. Hadn't Billy said last night that he might care to "sample" Cimmara again? That it wasn't really over between the two of them? Uni had been determined to make Billy forget Cimmara Sturgis. Last night she'd stunned him by pulling his jeans down right in the car and going down on him. She'd had him writhing! So there, Cimmara! Top that!

Cimmara didn't have guts. She shunned the big hallucinogens and just popped downers and smoked dope. Big deal. Okay, she had a fantastic body. But Uni could tell Billy had probably been getting bored with the buxom cheerleader. Of course Uni had never thought Billy would ever notice her. She was too skinny and plain. He'd laughed at her braces.

But now, somehow, magically, they were a *couple*. Cimmara couldn't touch that, could she? After Uni had finished with Billy last night he'd blurted that Cimmara would never do that with him. So Uni was automatically ahead. Why was the bitch in her tawdry cheerleader uniform today anyway?

Uni peered down her cleavage. Opened a third button. There, more skin for Billy. For everyone. She was still growing. She knew it. She was learning about all these sex things.

The crowd roared as Billy made an impossible leap over three Planters to jam the ball through the hoop. He held onto the rim and sneered as a referee whistled the foul. Billy just shoved the ball at a Planter and stalked on down the court to defend. The ref threw up his hands in despair. Universe had seen that all night long. She'd lost track of his unpunished fouls around twenty-five.

The buzzer blared to signal the end of the third quarter, and the teams headed to their benches. "Well," Hiram said as the Bolammes came up, "we're so far ahead I'm going to put in some of our younger players, give 'em a chance to show what they can do."

"Aw, cripes, Dad," Billy complained. "Just when we've got a good passing setup

going."

Uni had noticed the passing setup, which consisted of Billy screaming at his teammates to throw him the ball. But they'd seemed to settle in an efficient pattern of moving the ball downcourt and feeding it to Billy zigzagging through defending Planters.

"We need to see what these youngsters are made of," Hiram said. "Portsmouth, in for Austin. Raphael, in for Carter."

"What the hell?" Billy said. "You're putting that *kid* in for Carter? When Carter was finally learning how to feed me the goddamn ball?"

"Billy, Wally needs a chance to play. There's no way we can lose now. It's only right we give the boy some practice."

"The little twit's only twelve, ain't that right?"

"Billy, he's a dropout just like all the rest of you. He's earned the right to play basketball in this league. And you've got to admit, he's got height. If you'll just--"

Wally Raphael stood up. Universe was astonished. He was taller than Billy's 6'3", but he was built like a kite. Would he just hover over the court?

"Screw it," Billy muttered. "Raphael, you feed me the damn ball and don't do nothin' else. I'm going for a hundred goddamn points today and there'd better be no screwups, you got that?"

"Uh--yessir!" Wally squeaked. "I can do that, uh, Billy, uh, sir--"

"Crap on it all." The buzzer sounded for the fourth quarter. Billy whirled to the bench. "Any of you dudes notice I scored the last forty points without a goddamn miss? Huh? Huh?"

"Really?" Hiram said. "That's amazing!"

"I did," Uni said. "I didn't keep count of how many, but for a while I've been amazed you haven't missed a thing."

"Damn straight," Billy said. "Even the goddamn three pointers. I got eighty total now. Wish me luck, Uni, I'm gonna go for a hundred and I ain't gonna miss once! Unless this Raphael butthead craps all over me."

Wally looked at his size eighteen shoes. "Uh ... no, sir."

The whistle blew. Billy tipped the ball to Bolammes forward Brad Bateman. The Bolammes were moving easily through the spooked defense until one of the Planters batted a pass aside. Wally snatched it and shot it on a hard bounce to Billy going for a layup. A Planter in Billy's way now lay in severe agitation on the floor.

"That's eighty-two!" Billy cried. "Hey, not bad, kid!"

Referee whistles. "Charging--number thirteen--Bolamme!" called a ref.

"No basket!" yelled another.

"Aw, piss on this," Billy said. "*No foul,* twits, can't you understand plain English?" Silence between the two referees.

"Give these farthead Planters the goddamn ball and let's get moving," Billy said. "I got some points to make."

Uni was astounded at how well Wally Raphael played. He had great ball control and was an expert passer. His split-second timing set Billy up for some scarcely believable shots. Before long Billy had 96 points. No misses so far.

A Planter threw the ball back into play. Wally batted it away from its intended receiver, two more Planters leapt for it, and finally Wally struggled with three Planters for possession.

"Jump ball!" shouted a ref.

Wally was so tall that he easily got hold of the tossed ball. He came down to the floor, ball under his chin, elbows splayed, with the same three Planters angrily disputing his right to it.

"Hey! Here! Behind ya, Wally boy!" Billy yelled.

Wally noted Billy's position but whirled free, standing tall. Twenty-five feet out, he executed a lovely hook shot that swished through the net. The arena roared with approval.

Whistle. "Traveling--number nine--Raphael!"

Wally stared back. "No--no traveling," he gasped. "Basket counts."

"No ..." the ref moaned.

Billy ran up. "What the hell? What the hell?"

The referee backed off ten feet. "Look, *okay*! If--if that's how you guys wanna play, just--just do it! No traveling! I'm sorry! I'm so damn sorry! I'm outa here!" He tossed his whistle to the floor and turned.

"Hey, hold on, ref! Do your goddamn duty, dude!"

"You--"

"No basket. Planters ball," Billy said, pointing to the rolling ball nobody had bothered to retrieve.

"Of--of course--" the ref stammered.

"What?" Wally said.

Billy turned to Raphael. "And if I *ever* catch you cheating again I'll whip your sorry ass around the goddamn block, boy!"

"You--but--but you cheat all the time!"

"Why, you little jerkoff! I'm playing my goddamn *ass* off for the good of this goddamn team, and you sit there crapping all over me! Damn your ass! I'm gonna *pulverize* ya!"

"Noooo!" Wally moaned.

"Hell, Billy, this is one of our own guys," said Neil Wilson, Bolammes shooting guard. "You can't punch him out in front of all these people."

Billy glared. "This jerkoff's pissin' all over the honor of our team."

"Billy, please! I--I'm really one of your biggest admirers!" Wally wailed. "Please! I was just trying to be just like you! That's all! I swear!"

Billy breathed out hard. "Crap. Crap on this whole crap. Okay, squirt, maybe you *were* just trying to do right, even though you screwed it up royally. Just do me one favor and I'll forget the whole thing."

"Well ... well, sure!"

"I got a six-pack of GutSuds in the locker room refrig. Sneak me one out here, wrap it in a towel or something. I got a terrible thirst all of a sudden, man."

"Well, sure, but I can't just walk off court, can I?"

"No prob," Billy said. He whistled to his father. "Hey! Daddo! Get Carter back in here for Wally for a sec." He turned back to Wally. "Look, kid, you said you wanna be just like me. I think you might make it. You're not bad at all. You probably just need to de-reg your uniform a bit, ya know. Look, I'll even give you one of my grenades. Hang it on your shorts there--like so."

"Wow!" Wally said, admiring the black grenade. "Thanks, Billy! It's really heavy!"

"Yeah, I like my grenades to feel just like the real thing, man."

"Look, Billy, I'll get some grenades of my own! I'll get some camo shorts for next game, too!"

"For sure. So just gemme that beer and we'll be square."

"Sure, man!" Wally ran into the locker room behind the bench.

Uni stood. "I--I'll help him. I know where it is."

"Oh, he can find Billy's beer by himself," Hiram said. To her amazement Billy's father took her by the wrist. She saw why. The old man was staring down her three undone buttons. Here, in public, unashamedly!

"Sit down, Guenevere, just sit," Hiram said, patting her forearm as she obeyed. Why didn't she have any will of her own? Why did he insist on calling her Guenevere? Just because it was on her job application? She was *Universe*. Even her parents called her Universe. Family joke. She hadn't been able to pronounce her real name as a child and it had come out sounding like "Universe." The name had stuck.

But she *needed* to be Universe. It was simple respect. She was one of the dropouts, after all. She'd only lasted a month of her junior year at Billy InterEagle, to late September. A few weeks later Hiram had seen her delivering newspapers in the rain, and offered her a job. She'd been working at Bolamme Art for two months now. Hiram insisted on her calling him Hiram. He was nice. Probably too nice. He made her dizzy. She didn't know why. She wondered if she were mentally sick. She often felt as if the whole world were ... *shifting sideways* ...

Here it came again. In fact, the bench beneath her rocked. The whole arena seemed to reverberate. Or was it the cacophonous drone of her dad announcing the game over the P.A., and she'd just tuned it out until now, but all during the game it had been making her mentally sick? She needed some mescaline. Now. It would keep her mind flowing. She couldn't bear it when everything got dizzy. Hiram made her dizzy, Billy made her dizzy, this game made her dizzy--

"Whoa--!" said Carl Austin down the bench.

"What was that?" Hiram said.

She shook herself alert. "What was what?"

"Probably some car backfiring outside," said another Bolammes player. "Scared the crap outa me for a sec."

The entire arena had paused at the backfire. Uni was relieved. So the fabric of reality wasn't really ripping apart. She *wasn't* mentally sick. "Wow ... wow ..."

"It rattled *me*, too," Hiram said, patting her wrist once more, looking down her blouse. How old was he, anyway? Fifty?

She'd go back to school someday. When things settled down. They would, wouldn't they? Didn't they have to? What about that *Seventeen* article that said you shouldn't try to tame your boyfriend? That it was impossible. Was she really trying to tame Billy? Why

would anyone want to do that?

Last night she'd gone over to see Gail and Karla. They hadn't dropped out of school, but they seemed glad to be around Uni. Maybe they thought they were there to ease her back into civilization. Uni had pulled out her tablet to play DoomReilers of Mars, but Karla insisted they play her brother's old board game of Risk. The point was to conquer the world with your little plastic armies. Rolling the dice to see which army would win.

She wanted to be away from Billy anyway, so she'd played this stupid game, even though none of them knew the rules and they had to keep reading them aloud to make sense of them. Karla said Russell played in tournaments and had explained it to her once, so she knew enough to get them started.

Uni was the yellow army. She was like the Napoleon guy they were reading about when she'd dropped out. She rolled the dice and she was Ms. Aggressive and she conquered most of the world straight out. Gail and Karla really thought she was being a bitch. Man, she was wiping them out! But then they all saw what was going to develop from there. Before too long Uni was too thin on the ground, strung out all over the world, and finally they penned her up in Australia and destroyed her.

Was Billy the same thing? Rolling the dice? Yellow armies conquering the world? Was she just like Billy? Didn't they both blast away to grab whatever they could? But at least Billy was hers now. No one could do him as she did. Not Cimmara, not anyone.

Did Billy really not know that he'd been the major force in Universe's life since February 19th, the day they'd waited in the rain at the high school basketball court for the Pharmacist and his drugs? She'd never thought he'd notice her because he was always hanging with Cimmara, arm around her shoulder, fingers dangling over her giantess boobs.

Uni would never have taken a job at his father's art gallery if it weren't for the chance of seeing him now and then. The problem was, as Billy later told her, he hated the art gallery and would never set foot there unless he absolutely had to. Two and a half weeks ago he'd finally showed up, needing Hiram to sign something. Hiram had no idea what was about to happen, no idea that when Billy drove her home he'd reach inside her art gallery receptionist dress and fondle her breasts, no idea that they'd screw in the back seat of his car.

How had she gotten into this? How had everything come up so suddenly? How could she sit here and take it?

One day she'd been on mesc and Billy was on acid and they were laughing about her mother of all things. She was trying to explain how much she loved her mother's library. "It's not just a library," she'd told him. "It's a *library school* library." He had no idea what she was saying. She said her mom was the dean of the library school, but that just made him laugh harder. She told him about the miles and miles of old encyclopedias they kept there even though nobody in their right mind would ever use them now that they had the Internet, but she couldn't pronounce the word *encyclopedia* to save her life. She always had trouble pronouncing things when she got dizzy.

They'd laughed about *encyclowhatever* until they could hardly breathe. She tried to get across to Billy how much they needed *civilization*. That the old library school library was really an important thing. It was so dark, with those weird low metal mesh ceilings. She'd even told him she wanted to go back to school. They were tripping and she was telling him she'd liked school! He'd thought she was nuts. All he'd wanted to do was bang her.

There was no way to control Billy! What was she thinking?

A deafening buzzer cut though Uni's thoughts.

"The--the game!" she gasped. "I forgot all about the game!"

"It's over!" Hiram laughed. "We won, 131-34. Billy scored 106 points."

"And the last sixty-six all in a row--no misses!" Billy said, coming to Uni for a wet hug.

"That--that's great ..." Uni said. "I--I've been flying, I guess!"

Without any drugs? Did that mean she was losing it? What had been going through her brain all this time?

"Huh," said Billy. "It's a lotta damn points in a row, if you ask me."

"Sixty-six!" Neil Wilson said, moving for the locker room. "He was in the goddamn zone."

"Hell yeah. I was tripping my brains out the whole time. No way I could miss. I just kept *connecting*--through this magical *arc*--the ball'd leave my hands and I *knew*, I just *knew*--"

"Well, it calls for a celebration," Hiram said. "Pizza and beer for everyone at Mushroom Paradise!"

"And LSD! Everyone'll be in the goddamn zone!"

"I ... I don't know," Uni said. "Maybe I'll just walk home ... my dad, you know. Gotta

see if he's okay ... I'm so dizzy all of a sudden."

"Crap, I'm outa acid," Billy said, unscrewing a hand grenade and shaking nothing into his palm. He turned to Universe. "Honey, call up the Pharmacist and see if he can't refill my goddamn prescription tonight, will ya?"

"I ... I ... I'm really ... I don't know ..."

Hiram pulled her aside and whispered, gazing so far down her undone blouse she was sure he could see her braless nipples: "Oh, please do come drink some beer with us, Guenevere. You have no idea how *thrilling* you look tonight."

She shook her head. "Not--not here! Not--not now!"

Neil Wilson came screaming out of the locker room. "Oh my God! Oh my God! There--there's something--there's *meat* in there! *Meat everywhere! Something blew up!*"