

Chapter 1: Prom is a Four-Letter Word
(or High Heels Aren't for Sissies)

The movie theatre goes dark. Becca Gallagher, my best friend, and I munch on popcorn like rabid chipmunks. The music swells, all screechy, tense violins peppered with vocals by what sound like tight-pantsed choir boys. The title fades in: *The Scent of Evil*, and then in the middle of a black screen, *Directed by Melvin Gallagher*, boldly assaults our eyes.

“Boo!” Becca screeches. People, startled, turn to stare at her. “He’s a moronic reprobate!”

“Nobody even knows what that means,” I whisper to her. “Shut up or they’ll throw us out.”

“Well, that’s what he is,” she whispers back with malicious glee. The music, punctuated with thunder-loud cathedral bells, continues as Becca hisses in a more subdued way.

Melvin Gallagher, the guy who directed the movie, is Becca’s dad. She doesn’t like him. I’ve never met him, so I have no real opinion, other than the fact that I know he ditched Becca and her mom, and quarreled over who got custody of the Warhol prints, but not over who got custody of Becca.

Becca stands up and grabs my arm, pulling me out of my seat and toward the exit. “What are you doing?” I whisper as loudly as possible.

When we get outside the theatre, she shovels a handful of popcorn into her mouth and tries to talk around it. “I don’t want to see the movie, I just wanted to see his name and

boo. Let's go see something good."

"Like what?" I snag some popcorn before she eats it all.

"I think there's actually a *good* horror movie where a bunch of unsuspecting teenagers go to the movies and wander around looking for something good to watch, then eventually they turn down the wrong corridor, and with only the butter from their popcorn to sustain them, they try to survive in a parallel universe."

"No more for you," I chuckle, grabbing the snack bucket.

We settle on a generic boy-gets-girl movie which has already started. Snuggly couples occupy all the seats in back, so we're forced to find a spot in the middle, much to the dismay of a few older ladies who shuffle impatiently like a bunch of hens whose nests have been disturbed when we sit in front of them. With Becca's platinum-colored, spiky hair and my dangerous, spy-like auburn tresses, we frighten people, and besides, nobody wants to sit by us rude teenagers.

Becca munches loudly on the last dregs of the popcorn as I try to figure out what the story is about. An English girl is in love with some guy she works with, but he surprises her by announcing his engagement to someone else, and then the English girl quits her job, shaves her head, and becomes a monk. A monkess? I'm not sure what the proper term is. Anyway, she doesn't look very happy in her new scratchy robes. And I'm sure once your hair started growing out, it would itch like crazy.

"This movies sucks!" Becca hisses. "It's worse than my dad's movie, if that's possible!"

“We didn’t even see your dad’s movie.” One of the hen ladies behind us shushes us. I throw her an apologetic glance.

“I know this has to be worse. Come on.” Abruptly, Becca stands up, sending a shower of napkins and popcorn kernels onto the floor. The hens cackle indignantly as I follow her into the lobby.

“I don’t know why we bother buying movie tickets,” I say. “We never seem to watch anything all the way through.”

“I’m extremely picky.” Becca struts into the lobby and approaches the ticket booth. Oh no, I think. Not this again. Every time we go to the movies, it’s the same thing. I should just stop going with her. I never learn. “Sir?” she says to a fat, pimply boy behind the concession stand. He wears an oversized button that says ‘I Heart Anime’, and he’s anxiously poring over a graphic novel full of big-boobed cartoon girls.

“Large or small?” he asks, positioning his popcorn scoop strategically so he can serve us as quickly as possible and then go back to dreaming about big-eyed Japanese cartoon girls.

“No, we’d like a refund.” Becca leans against the counter, bored. “Hurry please. We have appointments.”

Anime Boy doesn’t know what to do. I suppose very few people ask for refunds from movies; I mean, once you’ve seen it, you can’t really put it back or anything. He scurries away toward the almighty ticket booth and comes back with a manager in tow. “May I help you?” the manager asks, clearly communicating that he doesn’t appreciate being called away from his important work.

“We'd like a refund.” Becca stands taller, almost nose-to-nose with the manager. “The movie stinks.”

“Could I see your tickets?” He holds his hand out, palm up, waiting.

“I don't have them anymore.” Becca grins at him. “Sorry.”

“Then no refund. Sorry.” He turns to go, but Becca taps him on the shoulder.

“I really think you should reconsider.” Anime Boy is staring at her as if she is a comic book girl come to life. “I'd hate to have to tell people that this movie theater takes advantage of innocent youth. It was in an R-rated movie, you know. Nobody even asked for my ID.”

The manager's ears start to turn bright red, and his little brown mustache begins to twitch. “I suppose you want two free tickets?”

“That would be fine.” Becca smiles her sweetest smile at him. Anime Boy tries not to laugh at the skewering of his boss.

“Well, I'm sure it would be, but it's not going to happen. Why don't you two run along before I call your parents?” He turns away, and I take a few steps back. I've known Becca long enough to know that when she's crossed, it's best to stay out of the way.

Just as the manager reaches his office door, Becca wolf whistles from the glass top of the snack counter, where she's standing like a semi-punk statue of liberty. Anime Boy, I notice, is getting a very nice view of her legs. “Attention! Attention!” she yells. Of course, people look. “I just want to let you know that the manager of this movie theater allowed both my friend and myself to see an R-rated movie, and when we saw the filthy content and language in the movie, we tried to get our money back, and he refused.”

A small knot of people nearby murmurs. A couple of kids point at her and laugh. The manager turns, his lips pursed in a frozen expression of rage. Becca stands, arms crossed, on the snack counter. No one is buying anything.

Manager Mustache marches back. “Get down from there,” he hisses at her even as he smiles at the gathering crowd. “I will call security.”

“He’s trying to have me arrested for standing up for my rights!” Becca screeches. “Are you going to stand by and let me be taken away in irons?”

“No!” Anime Boy shouts hoarsely, his voice cracking. He climbs awkwardly onto a stepstool, but can’t quite make it up to the counter, so he lamely pumps his fist in the air. Manager drills him with a red-hot laser beam glare of disapproval, and he dismounts, coughing.

Manager makes the mistake of grabbing at Becca’s leg. “Ouch!” she screams. “He’s touching me!”

Now several parent-types are approaching the scene, and Manager Mustache sees that he is outplayed. He puts on his best customer-is-always-right smile, and puts his hands up in the same gesture people use when trying to calm wild dogs. “Okay, let’s all just take a breath,” he says. “Could your please come down from there, young lady? I’m afraid you’ll hurt yourself.” A vein in his neck is throbbing like a Red Hot Chili Peppers bass line.

Becca reaches toward Anime Boy, who scrabbles to take her hand and help her onto the stepstool. Like a film star descending an elegant staircase, she gracefully lowers herself to the floor.

With everyone watching, Manager furiously yanks a form from his breast pocket, thunks it onto the glass counter, scribbles as if he'll wear a hole through the Milk Duds in the display case, and hands it to Becca. "Please accept my apologies, and do come back for another film as our guests." He turns on his heel, marches back to his office, and I suspect will be dipping into his no-doubt extensive supply of pain relievers.

The crowd disburses, and Becca walks around the counter, waving nonchalantly at Anime Boy. He gazes at her in loving admiration.

As we walk out of the theater, she murmurs, "I really need something to do."

Last year, Becca and I started the Queen Geek Social Club at Green Pines, our high school. This happened mostly because Becca, who is freakishly tall with a dragon tattoo on one leg, generally has trouble making really close friends, and she wanted to find others of her own kind. It worked out great, because we found each other and became best friends.

We met some other fantastic people too; Amber Fellerman, Elisa Crunch (please, no candy bar jokes), and our various boyfriends. For me, that meant Fletcher Berkowitz, a football player (I know, I know...but he's smart too!) He and I had a rough patch earlier in the year, but somehow karaoke brought us back together, and we've been inseparable ever since.

Becca met a guy as tall as she is, someone I nicknamed Carl the Giant. He's into particle physics. The four of us (as well as Amber, Elisa, and their boys-of-the-moment)

hang out, watch science fiction movies, eat pizza, and talk to Euphoria, my robot. A typical teenage life.

Except Becca has sort of an addiction. She craves global domination; she believes that everyone who's anyone should be a geek, and that it's only a matter of time before her geek army takes over the world. Because of this addiction, Becca sort of flips out if she doesn't have an impending mission. Last year, it was collecting Twinkies to send to skinny supermodels. Then it was hijacking a school dance. Then we stormed Comic Con, started a website, and put on GeekFest, a huge celebration of the strangeness that is us. That last one helped pay for a juice bar on campus, so we sort of became local heroes.

But since that happened, Becca's been adrift. We haven't had a focus in Queen Geeks, and that's lead to some problems. She's crankier than usual, she has no patience with her boyfriend, and she pulls random stunts like the showdown at the Cineplex.

Lingering over Pecan Turtle Madness sundaes at the ice cream place (we eat a lot, too, when we're bored), she says, "That was kind of over the top, huh?"

I lick my spoon and nod. "Yes. Even for you."

"Well at least we got free tickets," she says brightly, patting her purse.

"You almost gave that poor guy a stroke. But I bet you'll get free popcorn for the rest of your life. That snack jockey looked at you like you were a goddess."

"And why not?" She digs down into the layers of caramel and frowns, deep in thought. "But still, I think we need to get moving. We've just been sitting around...well...happy."

"Oh, yeah, we don't want that. Happy is bad."

“You know what I mean.” Leaning her head in her hands, she gazes longingly through the sun-drenched windows. “I just want to create chaos. Is that so wrong?”

“Do you have something in mind?”

“Actually, I do.” The door swings open, and our boyfriends, Fletcher and Carl, stroll in looking smug.

“So, we found you!” Fletcher laughs maniacally and squeezes my shoulder. Whenever he's close to me, my tummy starts doing little flips flops, and today is no exception. Carl leans over and gives Becca a peck on the cheek.

“I didn't know we were lost.” Becca digs aggressively into the ice cream dish. I don't think she's very pleased that we've been discovered just as she was about to hatch her next Big Plan.

Carl and Fletcher pull up chairs and scoot in next to us. “Did you think about what you want to do about Prom?” Fletcher asks, getting straight to the point.

You see, two weeks ago, he asked me to go with him to the huge, overbloated excuse for spending your parents' money that is called the Senior Prom. I don't know why they call it 'senior prom', because any junior or senior who can afford the ticket can go. Oh, and it's not a ticket. It's a prom *bid*. Like they're auctioning antiques or selling mail-order brides or something.

Since Fletcher asked me, I've been really wrangling with what I want to do. Of course, if I were going to go, I'd go with him; but the question is, do I want to go? Becca and I have been discussing it off and on since Fletcher asked, and Carl asked her pretty much right after, so we both have the same basic problem.

Becca twirls caramel on her spoon, staring at it as if it will give her some wisdom.

“We’re not totally sure we want to go.”

Carl, whose huge frame makes him look like a wire sculpture bent uncomfortably onto the little café chair, has tipped back so far that the chair goes over, taking him with it.

“Oops,” he rumbles from the floor. “I’m okay.”

Becca shakes her head and reaches down to help him up. “We need to get you a car seat for life,” she says. “That’s the third time this week you’ve fallen off a stationery object.”

“The stool in science doesn’t count. Melanie Flick kicked me.” He dusts off his jeans, eyes the offending chair with determination, and sits cautiously.

“Back to prom,” Becca continues as if nothing has happened. “It’s too expensive. And it’s just this big excuse for everybody to party and get a hotel room and waste a bunch of money on fancy dresses they’ll never wear again.”

“I, for one, will not buy a dress I’ll never wear again,” Fletcher says decisively as he eyes the menu board. “I will get a malt, though. Carl?”

“Sure.”

“You just sit. I’ll get it. I don’t want any further injuries.” Fletcher pulls out his wallet and saunters up to the counter to order.

“I just think it would be fun,” Carl says, folding his arms to avoid knocking anything off the table. “I know it’s expensive, but I can afford it. It’s no big deal.”

“It’s a big deal to me,” Becca murmurs.

We table discussion of the prom for the moment. I know the subject won't be dropped; Becca doesn't drop anything once it's entered her field of vision.

"So you came all the way down here just to harass us?" I ask.

"And to buy malts." Fletcher slurps his like he's a vacuum cleaner.

"It's going to be kind of tough for me and Fletcher if you all won't go to the prom," Carl blurts out.

"Tough for you? Why?" I ask, knowing I won't like the answer.

Fletcher squirms uncomfortably. I can tell that he wishes Carl hadn't brought this up again, but Carl doesn't really have the ability to keep things to himself. He also can't read people, especially girls. For someone who studies particle physics as a hobby, he can be kind of dense.

"I think Carl is talking about in terms of the King/Queen issue." Fletcher leans back in his chair and sighs. "Since I was on the football team, and Carl is a basketball freak, we're sort of natural picks for King. And then, if we get picked, we have to go. And if we go, we sort of have to have dates."

"So you're saying that if you get chosen to be the big prom king, you'll take someone else if Shelby won't go." Becca's blond hair spikes seem sharper than usual. Probably just my imagination. "You don't see that as a problem?"

"Let's not call it a problem," Fletcher says smoothly. "It's a challenge."

Now, just for the record, I never said I wouldn't go. In fact, I was kind of looking forward to it. I'm a sophomore, and prom is one of those things that most sophomores don't get to do. I suppose it's sort of superficial, maybe even conformist, but the idea of

getting dressed up and having a nice dinner and dancing with Fletcher seems appealing to me.

This is, of course, a huge change from last year, when I practically ran away at any hint of a serious relationship. Fletcher really tried to win me over, too; we had a romantic dinner, he called when he said he would, he even sang karaoke, but I messed it up. I guess I was scared. After a terrifying moment where I was forced to wear an Indian sari and sing in front of an audience, Fletcher sang too, saving me from abject humiliation. We patched things up, and he gave me a beautiful silver bracelet inscribed with the title of our song, *Always Something There to Remind Me*, and things worked out great. Why not celebrate? And nothing says “celebration” like a few sexy yards of copper satin and cheaply made crab cakes.

Obviously, Becca has other ideas on this. “Prom is like Valentine’s Day. It’s just something someone made up so they could make a lot of money selling dresses and tuxes and corsages and stuff.”

“It’s tradition!” Carl rumbles. “People have been going to proms since...since the fifties!”

Becca replies snidely, “People in the fifties also ate live goldfish and crammed themselves into telephone booths for fun. And don’t *even* ask me to wear a poodle skirt. Not gonna happen.”

Fletcher senses defeat and grabs Carl by the collar. “Let’s go. I think they want to be left alone.” To me, he says, “Anyway, could you just think about it?” Becca snorts as if

that's the last thing she'll do. "I'll call you later," Fletcher says as the two scramble out the door.

"That went well," I sigh, scraping the last of the sticky sweetness from my dish.

"See, that's what I'm talking about." She throws her spoon on to the table. "They want us to go to this stupid prom because they want to look 'normal.' We could all have a much better time playing video games or watching a movie. Why would we want to spend a lot of money on something so obviously lame?" Then suddenly her eyes sparkle with something I've seen before: the signature of an off-the-wall idea that will bring me nothing but misery, pain, and probably a major time commitment. Jumping up from the table, she exclaims, "I have an idea!"

"I was afraid you'd say that," I mumble as I follow her out of the store to find my chauffeur, dear old dad.

Even though I turned sixteen in January, I can't drive yet. This is grossly unfair, but my dad insists that my frontal lobe is not developed enough for a stick shift. Instead, at my sixteenth birthday party (which was held at a bowling alley and featured a cake in the shape of an actual bowling ball), Dad gave me a little Hot Wheels Corvette, blue to match my eyes. He's such a sentimental guy. I wanted to kill him.

Becca's birthday is also in January, so she also turned sixteen, and she also cannot drive because her flaky mother, Thea, says her natal chart advises against it. That's astrology stuff. What I say is that if Thea's natal chart tells her she *should* drive, that's proof right there that the whole thing is a lot of crap. Thea is possibly the worst driver on the planet. Oh, and for her birthday, Becca got a zebra-patterned Hot Wheels Jeep. Our

parents thought that was hilarious and wanted us to race our cars to see which one was fastest. Psychos.

The two of them are pretty good about transporting us to various places, though. Dad usually drops us off at the mall and then cruises through the electronics and computer stores, looking for cheap deals he can buy and turn into something superior; he's a true electronics and robotics genius. Today he's waiting in the parking lot, frowning over some technical manual. For him, that's light reading.

"Hey Dad," I say as I yank open the door of the Volvo wagon. He jumps a bit, obviously not expecting anyone to ruin the page-turning suspense of *Robotic Circuitry: New Frontiers*.

"Back already?" He runs a hand through his wild salt-and-pepper hair, pushes his glasses up (he reads through them like a blind librarian, with the frames perched on the very tip of his nose), and he grabs his seatbelt. "How was the movie?"

"We didn't watch anything." Becca straps herself in, but doesn't even tell my dad about her fantastic battle with the movie theater manager. That means she's definitely snagged some idea that has her totally occupied.

"I thought I saw Fletcher and Carl," he says as he maneuvers out of the parking lot.

"Yeah, they came by to harass us about going to prom." I look over at Becca to see what kind of reaction she has to that. It's probably only my imagination, but it seems to me that little tiny devil horns poke out amongst the blond spikes. She says nothing.

We get to my house without much conversation; she's clearly deep in the plotting stage of something. When Dad pulls into the driveway, she has her seatbelt off and she's bolted out of the car before he even has it in Park.

"Wow," Dad comments. "She's on fire about something."

Inside, I track her to my room, where she already has my robot, Euphoria, engaged in conversation. Euphoria is sort of my electronic nanny and sound system; my dad built her after my mom died a few years ago (I told you he was a genius). She helps around the house with chores, like doing dishes, vacuuming, and reprogramming our satellite dish when necessary. She's also intrigued by human behavior, so any time she can be in on one of our schemes, she's ecstatic.

"Shelby, quick! Close the door!" Becca commands "Euphoria is going to help us."

"Help us do what?"

Euphoria, who bears a striking resemblance to Rosie the Robot maid in the *Jetsons*, beeps excitedly, and says in her pseudo-Southern accent, "Becca was just telling me about her idea." She swivels on her wheels a bit and shakes her claws, looking for all the world like a mechanized Elvis. Well, if Elvis had worn an apron and had blinking electrode terminals. "I want to be part of your special night!"

"What special night?"

"Here's the beauty idea. Brace yourself." Becca puts her hands in front of her, as if to calm the excited masses, which don't exist at the moment. "Geek Prom."

"Okay."

"Shelby! Aren't you amazed? Isn't this like divine inspiration?"

“Well, if you’ll explain what you’re talking about, I’ll let you know.” My stomach sort of flips over; I’ve had this feeling before. I usually get it when Becca comes up with a crazy scheme that is going to put us in the spotlight and cause a lot of work, and possibly force us to wear weird costumes. I’m sure that doesn’t sound likely, but trust me, it’s happened several times since I’ve met her.

“Okay. Picture this.” She drags me down to sit on the bed next to her.

“I can see it!” Euphoria bleeps enthusiastically.

“You can’t see anything yet, Euphoria. She hasn’t even started to describe it.” I hate to rain on everybody’s parade all the time, but I have to be the voice of reason. It’s not a fun job, but somebody’s got to do it.

They both ignore me. “The popular kids do their whole prom thing. They advertise some trite theme, sell their stupid bids, buy their over-priced poofy dresses, hire a crappy DJ, and rent their useless limos. Why do people go to this obviously sub-standard event? Why, Shelby?” She stares at me expectantly.

“Because...they want to?”

“No!” She screeches. “Because they have no other options!”

Euphoria pipes up, “Because they’re all a bunch of lemurs!”

“I think you mean lemmings,” I point out. Euphoria still has some trouble with slang and sayings and such.

“So.” Becca stands, and starts to pace my room like a general mapping out a plan of attack. “We give them an option.”

“Okay. And what is that option?”

“As I said,” she takes a deep breath, “Geek Prom”

“As I said, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Geez, do I have to spell it out for you?”

“Apparently, yes.”

Becca beams at me. “I don’t have all the details worked out yet, obviously, but here’s my vision: we find an alternative location, we advertise to the whole school, and we make our prom way cooler, and cheaper, than the other one. Then we’ll lure the kids to ours instead of the big, fat expensive prom.”

“And how would ours be different?”

She licks her lips. “I don’t know yet. But it will be geek formal. We’ll wear formal dresses and all, but with our tennies, and instead of corsages, we’ll all carry...I don’t know...”

“Laser tag equipment!” Euphoria squeaks.

I put my head in my hands. See? Weird costumes. I knew it.