

## 7. LOVED TO DEATH

Cathy Brown was my friend since the first grade. I had this feeling that we would be friends forever. There was never any rivalry between us. She just seemed to look out for me in everything that we did. Even as Bill and Hazel slipped into their collective somnambulance, Cathy helped me ward off the zombies. Her parents had a milder conversion of their own so she understood what I was going through.

Since the fourth grade, Cathy and I had been in a different class. I would still see her in the hall. But we weren't as close. It was only when we got in middle school that we renewed our friendship. I was so excited to hang out with her after my terrible experiences with Ginny, Esme, and Suzie. Finally, here was a girl not taken over by the zombies

When Cathy first met John, I was supportive for her. She seemed to need a guy more than I did. Her estrangement from her parents had become more pronounced. This was just one of the curses of our Roswell neighborhood. Some kids welcomed the fervent religiosity by taking non-drinking pledges and joining Bible studies. They embraced all the trappings of the cult. They worshiped the new Moloch as long as it brought them new cars and big screen televisions, the latest cell phones and video games. They waited for the day when they could slough off the same dough from the stock market that supported their parents without blinking an eye. Cathy and I resisted the pod people with all our might. We actually wrote poetry together. And practiced French. We pretended to be an oasis within the suburban wasteland where we had been exiled.

John was our project. We deprogrammed him from the conformity of the neighborhood. He was like a newborn. He owed us his life. And he was so willing to do something to thank us. I thought that there was this natural attraction between Cathy and John. And I watched it progress on its own. As it did Cathy became a little haughty. She seemed to hold her ecstasies over me as if it showed that she was more adult than I. I ignored her comments. It wasn't as if I was jealous of her pleasures with John.

The first time that they made out, she was more than graphic with me.

"He wanted to touch my breasts. He even reached under my shirt. But I kept trying to resist him."

"Wow!"

"I wanted to be with him so much. I know that it's love. But I still don't trust him."

"What are you afraid of, Cathy? He's not going to slip back into his zombie state."

"But you know guys. Once they have the power over you, it makes them drunk. They think that they can have any other girl."

At that point, she still gave me some credit for my concern. However things did take a turn for the worse.

"He kissed my neck. I felt overcome."

"Really!" I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say. She seemed to be getting carried away. She just stretched out on my bed.

"Then it happened. I couldn't stop him. I didn't want him to stop. He had my blouse open. He was kissing the edge of my breasts. Then he just undid my bra. And he was caressing me. Then he took my breasts in his mouth."

My sympathy for her started to wane. Still, I wasn't jealous. I just found her obnoxious.  
 "I think that I'm in love."

"Sure you are." She was developing a cult of her own.

All this time, three of us stopped hanging out as a group. I'd see John at school.

"Cathy keeps monopolizing me for her own."

"Well, it's not like I can hang out with you when you're making out."

"It's not like that. We could all go to movies together."

"I think that she's protecting you for her own."

John asked me if I wanted to see a movie.

"Cathy's going to come?" I asked.

"Of course, she'll be there."

I rode my bike over to the theater. But Cathy was nowhere to be found.

"I thought that she was coming," I told John.

"Her parents are painting, and they wanted her to help."

It seemed just like old times. John got us drinks and popcorn. We sat up close and laughed. I looked over at him in the dancing reflected light. I really had no desire for him. It seemed as if nothing had changed; Cathy was just absent.

"We have to do this again," John was excited.

"Make sure that Cathy's free next time. I don't want her pissed off at me."

When I talked to Cathy the next day, she said nothing about the painting.

"What were you doing yesterday evening?"

"John told me that he had something to do with his parents. So I rented a movie and watched it on my own."

I told her, "You could have called me."

"We haven't been talking a lot lately. I just thought that you were mad at me."

I didn't feel guilty about anything. The movie had been John's idea. I just assumed that he was going to bring Cathy along.

John called me when I got home.

"Do you want to do something again?"

I didn't tell him what Cathy had said to me.

"Yeah. Just make sure that Cathy is available."

"How about this Saturday?"

We'll see."

John became really persistent. I found out that Cathy expected him to go to the beach with her.

When he called again, I was determined to say no.

"Cathy told me that you were going to the beach."

"My Dad's going to clean the garage Saturday morning. I don't think that I can go to Florida with Cathy's family.

I made some excuse for Saturday.

"I think that I have a date."

I needed to throw him off the trail.

When Cathy came back, she wanted to show off her tan. It made her look more

attractive. She began to show off more of her body.

John took the bait.

“I think that John and I are going to get together this weekend.”

“Fantastic.”

“No, really together.”

His parents were going away, and she was determined to take her shot. John had an older sister. But she had promised to ignore whatever went on. So John and Cathy were going to be on their own.

Cathy showed up at my place on Thursday evening. We made popcorn and sat on my bed.

“I’m a little afraid. I’ve hear all these weird stories.”

I wanted to act like her friend. I seemed genuinely happy for her. And I hoped this would stop John’s advances for good.

“I wish that you had a guy.”

“I do too.”

At this point, this was hardly my concern. I was sympathetic. But I got tired of hearing about her and John.

“He loves only me!”

“I know.”

“When you have your own guy, you’ll understand. Guys just are afraid of you. You have to be more sexy.”

“Of course I do.”

“I can help.”

I felt like a cat prowling around waiting for her mistress to help with good grooming.

She found a brush and started to brush my hair. “You have great hair,” she reminded me.

“Maybe it’s my best feature.”

“You could wear your skirts a little shorter. You have great legs.”

I wanted to change the subject, “Don’t feel pressured to do something that you don’t want to do?”

“John and I have talked about this.”

“You’re only fourteen. You have to be careful. You don’t want to get pregnant.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Be sure to have condoms.”

“I’m just worried about other things.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“If I offer to go down on him, will he think I’m slutty?”

“Cathy, don’t feel pressured to have sex if you’re not ready.”

She became defensive, “That’s easy for you to say. It’s not as if a guy wants you.”

Whatever!

“I’m trying to be a friend.”

Her haughtiness was returning. I just let her talk on. I had a fear that she would be totally unbearable after this weekend. John had become a toy for her. This was worse than a puppy. He had just traded one cult for another. And she was going to make sure that he remained in the

faith.

That Saturday, I decided to stay in and work on a geography project. I was doing my research on the internet. Any second, I expected to get a phone call from Cathy. It wasn't as if I was trying to imagine what they were doing. I had enough to occupy my mind. But there was still a nagging doubt that he would get sucked in by her charms. So much for my prescience.

I did get a call Sunday night from Cathy. But she was desperate about her geography project. She had let the weekend slip by, and the deadline was fast upon her. I sent her a link about Sri Lanka. I did everything that I could to get her started.

It seemed unusual that she didn't say anything about John. Maybe it hadn't gone well. Or worse, it had been so fantastic that she had forgotten about everything else until the last minute. This minute. I had deliberately finished my project in ample time to rest up for Monday. Now she was making her feel her panic.

"None of this is making sense. Are you sure that I got the right links?"

"I'll send it all again. If I have to I can walk you through the URL's."

What was going to be my reward for her work?

When we received our grades from our projects, I scored a few points below Cathy. I didn't want to be a stickler for grades, but I had done her work. She was the one being rewarded. I couldn't come clean to the teacher.

I thought Cathy might console. Instead she had her version things, "I guess the teacher just liked all that extra information that I included in my project."

What extra information? She was referring to a bunch of websites that I included at the bottom of the email that I sent her. And I had to show her what to click on just to find the articles. Even then, she had trouble making sense of it all.

We were all going to a movie together on Friday. Cathy got held up. It was just John and together.

"We can wait for Cathy. There's going to be another showing."

John got testy, "I'm always waiting for Cathy. I just want to go ahead on my own for once."

We went in the theater. Cathy could always find us. It was a few moments before they started the previews.

"Cathy really likes you a lot."

"I know."

"You don't seem that enthused."

"What am I supposed to do?" At first, he just sounded like all guys, a total jerk. He had got what he wanted, and now he didn't care.

"It's not like Cathy forced it on you."

"You don't know what it's like. She made me feel all this pressure. She started crying. I didn't know what to do. It wasn't right. We should have waited."

"It's going to be hard for her to wait now. She's totally in love with you."

"What does that mean? We're only fourteen. It's not like we're going to buy a house together next week.

I tried to be rational, "If that's how you really feel, maybe you should break up with her."

"She'd be crushed. Especially with what's already happened."

“You have to tell her.”

“I wish it had never been her.”

“It was!”

I wanted to be firm. I needed to take Cathy’s side.

“It wasn’t supposed to be her!”

At that moment the curtain opened, and the screen came on.

“We’ll talk about this later,” I whispered.

There was no later. Cathy arrived as the movie started. John looked over at me. She took his hand. She tried to kiss him while the movie was on. He brushed her off.

“I want to watch the movie. We’ll have time for that later!” he told her.

She looked miffed. She tried to watch the movie, but all that she could think about was John’s coldness.

After the movie, John wanted all of us to go somewhere and talk about the film.

“John, there’s something that we need to talk about.”

Cathy was right. I did everything that I could to get away.

She called me Saturday at ten.

“I snuck us into my parents car. It was in the garage. You know how the seats recline. You can guess the rest. I feel so good. It felt much better this time. I just love him so much.”

I knew how she felt. But I couldn’t get over how John was acting. Part of me wished that it wouldn’t work out. I tried to ignore my feelings.

“I’d love to tell you more. But some of this is private,” Cathy was being very possessive about her experiences.

Cathy had flute lessons after class on Monday. She rushed over to her lessons. I saw John at the bike rack.

“I wanted you.”

I looked at him, “What are you talking about?”

“Cathy and I did some things together. But I wasn’t thinking about her. I was thinking about you.”

“Don’t say that?”

“You’re just so beautiful.”

I corrected him, “Cathy is the beautiful one with her flowing blonde hair.”

“I just find you more natural. She tries so hard to impress me.”

We hopped on the bikes. “You’re with Cathy.”

We rode up to the point where he would normally turn off. “What are you doing?”

I told him, “I have to get home to get dinner ready and do my homework.”

“We hardly have any work. And it’s only three o’clock.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m going to follow you home?”

“You can ride to my place. But I have to go in when we get there.”

“Are your parents home? I could come in with you.”

“Bill and Hazel are at work. I just don’t think that it would be a good idea for you to come in with me.”

He was so persistent when he got to my place that I agreed to give him a drink.

“Get me some apple juice.”

He was sitting in front of the big screen in the living room.

“Let’s watch something.”

“I have to do my work.”

“You have time.”

We sat on the couch and flipped on a movie. It was a romantic comedy.”

“You’re a guy. I thought that you liked action movies.”

“I’ve got a soft heart. You know that my parents won’t let me watch R-rated movies.”

“You can live an X-rated life, but you can’t watch a little teasing on TV.”

“I guess that they’re afraid that I’m going to become some kind of mutant.”

I am laughing, “What would that entail, two dicks.”

“Yeah, one for you and one for Cathy.”

I quickly looked away. “Let me get some popcorn.”

“I can help.”

“No, I’ve got it.” I needed some time alone to collect my thoughts. He was coming on strong. I was the devil. I had let him in.”

I strategically put the popcorn bowl between us. At one point, I put my hand inside, and he grabbed it.

He held on tight, “You want it back.”

I stared in his eyes. He tried to pull me over, but I pushed him back. Then my cell phone rang.

“Have you seen John?”

“He rode home with me.” It was Cathy. I could tell her that we were watching a movie together.

“Where is he now?”

I didn’t say a thing about him. “He told me that there was something that he wanted to do.” I didn’t tell her that he wanted to come in my house. And she didn’t ask me if he was here with me. So it wasn’t a total lie.

“Who was that?” John asked.

“You know who that was. That was Cathy! You better get home.”

“The movie’s not over.”

“I have it on tape. You can borrow it.”

“It’s not the same watching it with you.”

“You better go.”

He fought hard for his right to stay. I wanted him to be gone before Bill and Hazel came home. It was enough that Cathy was wondering about his whereabouts. I didn’t want Bill and Hazel as witnesses to my mischief.

At the door, he tried to grab my hand.

“We can’t keep acting like this.”

“I need to tell Cathy that it’s over.”

“Why is it over? She cares for you. You’re blaming her for something that you both did together.”

“I didn’t marry her. It was only sex!”

“You’re a dick!”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I just didn’t know what I was doing. This is all too new for me.”

“It’s new for me too. Lying to my friend. I don’t want to be like this.”

We kept talking in the open door way. I used the door as a safety valve. It made sure that things wouldn’t heat up again.

When I closed the door, I took a deep breath. I wanted him so badly. I wanted to be like Cathy. But I knew that I wasn’t ready. I only needed to look at John to see that this was all wrong.

Cathy got all frantic that night.

“After I called you, John stopped by. I tried to hug him, but he pushed me away.”

“I think that he’s having problems with his dad.”

“This is not about his dad. He used me to have sex. He pretended that he was in love with me.”

None of this made sense. Both of them were only fourteen years old. I couldn’t keep up. She carried on, “He said that things have been moving too fast. He wants to be my friend. But he told me that he needs some time. How much time should I give him?”

“Work on your school work. Don’t think about him for a few days.”

“I see him every day in class.”

“Just ignore him. When he realizes what he’s missing, he’ll come running for you.”

For Cathy’s sake, my advice backfired.

I saw John at the bike racks.

“I think my strategy worked. I told her that we needed to cool it. And she hasn’t even called me.

We started to ride home.

“I told her not to call. She wants you so badly.”

“But it’s been more than a week. I feel that it’s over for good.”

“You can’t say that.”

John probably suspected that I had deliberately misled Cathy. But it didn’t make any difference to him. He was over her.

“John, why didn’t you turn at your street?”

“I’m riding over to your place.”

“You can’t come over. Hazel is coming home early.”

“I can leave when she gets there.”

When I got home, I ran inside and closed the door behind me. He kept knocking on the door.

“I’m not going to leave!”

He sat on the stoop in front of our house. This was his little protest. He stayed there for a while. I refused to let him in. He’d get up and knock for a while, then go back to sitting.

When Hazel started to pull in, I saw him get on his bike and ride away.

“Who was that weird boy in front of our place?”

“Just a friend of mine.”

“What was he doing here?”

“We were playing hide and seek. And he lost.”

The next day Cathy pulled me over at lunch.

“I don’t know what happened. John came over about six. And we hung out together all night. We’re back together again.”

I again saw John after class. We rode home together.

“You’re going to have to turn up your street when we get there.”

“You can’t order me around.”

“Cathy told me that you’re back together again.”

“I went over to her house because she called me. She started crying. I hugged her. She tried to kiss me. I resisted her. But then things just happened.”

“If you and I did something together, would you tell her that things just happened?”

“It’s not the same.”

We got to the crossroads. We stopped our bikes.

“I like to ride with you,” he told me. The traffic’s not as heavy on your street. Then I can turn over to my place.”

“John, I don’t want you riding any further with me. You can’t come to my place. You’re with Cathy. I’m not going to play this game. If you can’t tell her that you want to break up, you need to stay with her. I’m not going to listen to any more of this.”

He rode off. When I got home, I watched a movie while I did my homework. I tried to put him out of my mind. A quick nap before work did the trick.

At dinner, Hazel asked me, “What about that strange boy that was here yesterday?”

“We solved our problem.”

Cathy seemed more elated than ever. She had no idea of John’s misgivings. I wanted to keep it that way.

“John is coming with my family to the ocean. We are going to sneak away to the beach at night.”

John knew that there would be no turning back after this trip. He didn’t want to go. But he had promised Cathy.

I only later heard the full story. John and Cathy had planned to sneak off when everyone was asleep. They were staying in a cabin with three bed-rooms. Cathy shared a room with her younger sister. John had a room by himself. And the parents were in the other room.

When the parents were fast asleep, Cathy went to get John. As they were leaving the cabin, he went back to get something. Almost deliberately, he left the light on in his room. Cathy’s father heard noises and woke up. He thought about getting up, but he was too tired. His stomach was acting up so he couldn’t get back to sleep. So he got up for some Alka-Seltzer. When he saw John’s light on, he started to explore. He could find John anywhere. He peeked in on Cathy, and she was gone too. He finally caught them down at the beach. Cathy had her swimming suit top off. It was only a matter of time.

Cathy’s dad went crazy.

“You’re supposed to be a church-going boy. I’m going to call your parents.”

They cut short their stay at the ocean and drove straight back to Roswell. Cathy already knew her parents were zombies. So she wasn’t going to let it get to them. But it seemed to throw a damper on her relationship with John.



His parents listened to Cathy's father. They were even more strict than Cathy's dad, but in this case, they were angry with the tone of Cathy's father. They naturally came to the defense of their son. John used it all as an excuse to distance himself from Cathy.

"We haven't broken up. But I don't think that we're going to be handing out for a while."

Cathy wanted to pretend that this was going to make their love grow stronger.

"If he truly loves me, we'll survive this."

That Monday, John rode me back to my place. For once, I decided to let him in because I hadn't heard all the details of the story.

"I hadn't even touched her."

"You left you light on purposively."

He smiled, "Why did you say that?"

After I heard the story, I told him that I have to go.

"I'm not with Cathy anymore. Why are you throwing me out?"

"Cathy's my friend. You have to know that."

He pushed me against the door and held me. I had been waiting for this moment. It seemed like a lifetime. It seemed so right!

I kissed him passionately and deeply. He tried to slide his hand down my pants. I stopped him and held it against my thigh with a strength beyond my years. It was an affection that sprung from some time in my future and invigorated my present. It was an embrace that was sprinkled with eternity.

I enjoyed the kiss even more because I felt the sting of betrayal. I held him in spite of what had happened with Cathy. This showed that I was greater than her, more powerful than her haughtiness. I felt even more vain than I could imagine.

I wanted more. I lived this present as it came to me. And I cherished for what it was.

"You better leave. Hazel is coming home!"

After he left, I knew that I would have to tell Cathy. I couldn't hide it anymore. It would hurt her. But this was the right way.

Cathy did me the service by calling me herself. I could tell that she was in tears. Maybe John had already broke the new to her.

"Did you hear what happened?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I got a call from John's parents. But it was in the new too. He got hit by a car. He got knocked off of his bicycle and it sent him flying in the air. He helmet got knocked off, and he hit a tree. He just lay there. He was dead."

I felt the earth move beneath my feet. The blood rushed to my head. I became dizzy.

"You're kidding."

I could hardly speak.

"John's dead, John's dead, John's dead. God took away the only person that I really ever loved!"

She kept on sobbing and screaming. I said nothing. I couldn't. The world just went black before my eyes. I was feeling as if I had a fever. I just collapsed on the couch.

Hazel found me an hour later.

"You look terrible."

“My friend was in a car accident.”

“Oh that’s awful.”

She listened for a little while, then she started going off about some patient at the hospital.

“I don’t feel like dinner. I already had something to eat.”

I lay down on my bed, and stared at the ceiling. I couldn’t read. I couldn’t do my homework. I had never felt death like this before. I had a grandmother die when I was six. But nothing like this.

John had died with his secret. He never really loved Cathy. But she did everything that she could to remind me of how great their love was.

“You’ll be lucky if you ever feel anything half as good.”

I listened to her, and I didn’t say a thing. She hardly understood how mortified I was. I felt that it wouldn’t have happened if he had just gone home. But I allowed him to follow me home. He had lingered there for that kiss. It was the kiss of death.

Cathy and I should have consoled each other. But I felt that there was little that we shared. All the activities that we did together were only memories. For me the only thing that was real was the kiss.

A lot of kids from our school went to the funeral. We even had an assembly to talk about death. Some kids are around violence all the time. They see death up close. Now I knew how it felt. How could they survive?

Part of me felt that we were being punished for trying to cheat Cathy. John’s real love was for me. Sure, I was fourteen, but something had welled up in me that was ancient. I felt that my soul reached deep into these rocks and let loose a mystical power.

I had just got over my hypochondria. Now I was facing a real depression. It separated me more from Hazel and Bill. They could watch this kind of thing happen to people on TV and figure it was OK. When the U.S. killed civilians, they’d count it as a good terrorist kill.

Somebody had taken away my best friend. I could see no reason to excuse it. I had married the darkness, and I wanted to be faithful to my master.

“Why are you wearing black all the time?”

“Cathy, I don’t wear black. My shirt is red.”

“It’s hot out, you’re all in black.”

It had been a few months since John’s death. Cathy had already found another Romeo. This love seemed more dashing than the last.

“We were not meant to be.”

Cathy’s nonchalance had been her only way to deal with the immensity of feeling. I refused to give in so easily.

She was philosophical, “If you mourn, the dead too long, you surrender your spirit to Hades. You know the story of Prosperine.”

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

Cathy was trying to make use of a tidbit of knowledge. It offered a tidy end to her dilemma.

I wanted to tell her, “Just make sure that your dad doesn’t catch you with your new lover.” I wisely held my tongue.

That Monday, I hopped on my bike. There was no one to ride with. I took my time. I was extra careful. It had been a couple of months, but the dark pale remained.

Tomorrow, I would wear a colorful skirt. If I kept on like this, Cathy would eventually ask me too many questions. She already wondered why I wasn't with a guy.

"Love is a powerful thing, Haley. It helps us forget our pain and exile it permanently in the past."

"I am glad that you sound like such a poet."

"It easier than you know. I thought that I would never get over John. He was my first love. But I will have others."

I was glad that she seemed so mature. I was just waiting for the dam to burst. Nothing is that easy.

Every time that I took a really deep breath, I would think about John. I felt that this was meant to be. All my life, I had been pursued by a demon, and he had finally caught up with me. Maybe I could never really be close to me. I really had loved John. I wish that I hadn't resisted him so long.

The only reason that he ever went for Cathy was the fact that I had reject him. I was living in my head. I needed to get out of myself.

Cathy was only reminder of everything that had happened. She was too safe. I craved a little danger. I needed some new boys to become interested in me. But if I was going to change, I needed to take some risks. That was all part of my wedding with the night!