

## Taking the Flame

*Jenny L. Maxey*

“Caden, you need to come out of your room sometime! It’s Saturday. Maybe you can go to the mall with some friends?” My mom says from the other side of my bedroom door. I don’t reply. “Honey, you really should try,” she says before her muffled footsteps grow soft.

But, if you were me, you wouldn’t come out either. I’m not your average teen in a hormone infused meltdown or feuding with my parents. I’m hiding here because I’m hideous. Seriously. I look like a monster from the Walking Dead. Sure, every teenager goes through a “phase”—acne, bad haircuts, braces—whatever, you name it. But, that’s not it—honest. I’m truly revolting!

A few months ago I was in a fire and I melted like a Ken doll in a microwave. It happened at a house party. The party was at Margaret Weber’s house—the hottest girl in school. With a name like Margaret you may not expect it, but she has it all going on. Long brown hair with golden highlights, great tits, and legs you just want to climb up and hump like a dog. I guess she has a good personality and brains and all that other shit you’re supposed to “notice” first, but you get my point. The whispers in the hall claimed Margaret’s eye was on me. So naturally I couldn’t wait to get to that party. Just call me Rover and send me over—woof!

I remember looking in the mirror before I left. My dark hair was perfectly styled into one of those faux hawk things. Honey brown eyes stared back at me as I examined my skin for any rogue zits. None. My face should've been an "after" shot for a Proactive commercial. I had a good 5 o'clock shadow going—one of the only kids in my grade to have one that wasn't patchy. As a swimmer, I had a lean, hairless body. I had just gotten my driver's license a week before, and this was the first time I was allowed to drive with friends. I was on top, unstoppable.

My buddies Grant and Chad walked with me into Margaret's house. We made our rounds as we headed to the back patio for our red badge of courage—red Solo cups and a few pumps from the keg. I'm not a big drinker. I mostly fill the cup for show and sloppily slosh the beer over the rim of the cup to get rid of it so it looks like I'm drinking more than I actually am. What? Don't judge. I'm supposed to be driving, remember?

Anyway, Grant, Chad and I had circled the party for about thirty minutes, but I hadn't seen Margaret anywhere. I was working with a slight buzz and felt like a hawk searching for its prey. Then, I saw her best friend Lola pass by. I reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Hey, Lola!" I said with probably too much enthusiasm.

“Oh hey, Caden.”

“Have you seen Margaret anywhere?”

Lola smiles coyly and her eyes sparkle. “Yeah, why you wanna know?”

“I think you already know.” I could play this game.

“Well, the last time I saw her she was in that room right over there.” She made a small giggle and flitted away, yelling for some other guy near the keg.

I spotted an abandoned bottle of whiskey on the kitchen counter, beckoning me to come to it. I wondered if I should take a swig just to calm my nerves. I poured a little into my cup. The smell burned my nose. I tilted my cup back and took in a mouthful, which I immediately sprayed out of my mouth. Yuck! How do people drink that stuff? It had gotten all over my shirt and the liquid dripped from the cup to my pant leg and the floor. Maybe she’ll like the smell, I rationalized. I took in a deep breath and walked towards the room like a gladiator about to enter the Coliseum. Was I going to be the victor or was the lion about to eat me alive? Either outcome was a win, I just needed to keep it cool. I pushed open the door and Margaret was in the room ... alone.

The room was dimly lit by a few candles. The flickering light made the highlights in her hair glow. She was wearing a jungle green top with a scoop neck just low enough to show some cleavage and her skinny jeans outlined her long legs. My palms were instantly wet with sweat.

“Hi, Caden.”

*Play it cool. Play it cool.* “Hey, Margaret.”

“Can you pronounce it Mar-ga-reet instead? I think it sounds better than Margaret.”

“Yea, way better. More exotic.”

“So.” She said as she walked from one side of the bed to the other dragging her pointer finger along the comforter and casting a glance from the corner of her eye every so often.

“So,” I said back. I stepped further into the room, closing the door behind me. She sat softly on the edge of the bed and patted next to her. *Yea boy! This is it!*—

“Caden honey, who are you talking to in there? Please come out of your room.”

“Mom! I’m doing something! I told you I’m not coming out of here. Leave me alone!”

Sorry. Anyway, where was I? That’s right. Margaret motioned me to sit on the bed. I walked over to her and placed my cup on the nightstand. I sat down next to her so closely I nearly sat on her lap. There might have been just enough space between us to slide a piece of paper through.

“I’ve been eyeing you at school,” I said.

“I know,” she said matter-of-factly. “I like you, Caden, but I’m not a slut. We can make out, maybe you can hit second base if you’re a good kisser, but that’s it. Okay?”

I tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and pulled her face toward mine—it’s my back pocket move. Our lips met and it was like we had been doing this forever. Our arms ran over each other’s shoulders and arms. Our tongues slipped around one another like two eels battling for a tunnel. I decided I must be good enough for second base, so I slipped my hands up the back of her shirt and started snapping at the bra hooks. Just as the hooks gave up their guard, Margaret pushed me away and jumped back.

“What? Am I a bad kisser?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Then, what is it?”

“I don’t know. I really like you, but I—I don’t know. Maybe this is too fast? We hardly know each other.”

Trying to hide my agitation, I politely agreed.

“I need some air. Just stay right there. I’ll be back,” she said and then nearly ran out of the room, throwing the door closed behind her.

What the hell, right? So, I was sitting there on the bed. I fluffed the pillows. I swirled my whiskey into a tiny whirlpool inside the cup. I searched for porn under the bed. I rifled through her underwear drawer—God, I hope it was her underwear drawer and not her mother’s!—snagging a frilly pair of thongs as a little keepsake. Basically, I waited for what seemed like forever for Margaret to come back. When she didn’t return, I decided she might be setting me up or something. I went to the door and the brass knob scalded my hand. I had pulled on the knob enough that the door became slightly ajar. I opened it further with the toe of my shoe. On the other side was a wall of fire. Its flames licked at me and that was all it took.

Before I could turn to escape through the bedroom window, the flames had mingled with the whiskey on my shirt and pants, turning me into a blazing ball of fire. I was thrashing around. My voice let out distant cries that couldn't have been my own. I could smell my clothes, hair and skin burning. I dropped to the ground and rolled, attempting to put out the flames, but it wasn't working. I was shaking with pain and then I passed out.

I was later told that Grant broke through the window and wrapped the bed's comforter around me to smother out the flames. He pulled me through the window with the help of a few others barely escaping the fire himself as the flames traveled into the room. I woke up in the burn unit wrapped up like a mummy. My chest, arms and face were badly burned.

A few skin grafts on my face and a few months later, here I am—broadcasting my story over the web. A Halloween mask hides my face, while you eagerly await the big reveal. I know your parents probably told you not to stare or make fun or even ask me about what happened. So, there it is. There's my story. You can gawk and laugh and whatever; just get it out of the way. Erase the pity faces and your guilty offerings of friendship. I just want things to go back to normal. If you can handle what I look like, then contact me and maybe I will leave my monster cave. So, here is the moment you all have been waiting for...

I push up the sleeves of my shirt to reveal the shiny, pink patches like already chewed gum stretching along my arms. The skin is twisted and gnarled where the doctors have yet to make any corrections. I peel the mask away from my head and can almost hear the audience's gasp through the computer. I look at the image on my screen. The brow of my right eye is slightly higher than the other. Lines weave around my face like shoddy patchwork where new skin has been sewn. My hair is growing back in clumps. The right side of my face is so red that it looks like it may still be burning. I stare at my image a few seconds longer and then sign off. Suddenly, my cell phone starts blowing up.

Chad: Hey, man. U really almost got to 2nd base w/ Margaret?

Grant: Dude, U gotta hold ur nose when U take a shot of whiskey. Helps it go down easier.

Those guys are awesome. Maybe this will be simpler than I thought!

Lola: Ew, gross. Keep the mask on!

Then again, maybe not. Suddenly, a weird text popped up.



Blocked: I'm sorry.

Me: Who's this?

Blocked: I'm so so so sorry.

Me: Tell me who this is!

Blocked: It was all my fault.

Me: What was ur fault?

Blocked: I was flipping out. It's just u were so hot, & I couldn't believe it was finally happening...

Me: Margaret?

Blocked: Me & Lola were in the kitchen. I was telling her about us. I got excited & I guess my arm gestured something & I knocked over a candle on the kitchen counter. There was that whiskey in there &...

Me: & it was all over the floor bc of me.

Blocked: The flames came from nowhere & it was spreading so fast! I didn't know what to do!

Blocked: I told Grant u were inside.

Me: Thx 4 that.

Blocked: I can't tell anyone it's me who did it. I'll be in so much trouble!

Me: Then why tell me??

Blocked: I'm sorry.

Me: I'll forgive U if we can make out again : )

Me: I think we had quite the flame for each other. U might even say we were on fire! J/K...LOL

Me: Margaret?

No response. Of course she wouldn't want me again. I scroll through the texts. "U *were* so hot," she wrote. *Were*. I yank my sleeves back down and tug the Halloween mask back over my head. The outfit has become a staple. I can't even stand to look at myself, how could anyone else?

"Caden, dinner is ready. Come out of your room, please."

I guess even a monster needs to eat. "Coming, mom!" I slowly walk down the stairs inhaling the plastic fumes from the mask. They aren't as strong as when I first put the mask on. It's sort of becoming a part of me. I hear the doorbell ring and hear my mom answer. There's a tiny voice that sounds familiar.

"Caden, someone is here to see you!" My mom calls as she walks into the kitchen.

To see me? I'm not ready for this. I thought the web cast would buy me some time. Well, I have my mask on so maybe it will be okay. As I round the staircase, I see her. Margaret stands in the frame of the door. Her attention is split between studying her shoes and looking in my direction. She picks glittery purple nail polish off of her thumbnail.

"Margaret? What are you doing here? I texted you and you didn't respond."

"I'm sorry."

"I know. You've said that like a thousand times."

"No, for not responding to your text. I'm not sure what to say."

“You don’t have to say anything. I already know you’re not interested in me anymore.”

She looks at me. Her brows scrunch together and she cocks her head from side to side, like she’s searching for something. She reaches out and grasps the edge of the mask. I grab her wrists to stop her.

“Just let me,” she says.

I drop my hands to my sides in surrender. Margaret slowly and gently removes the mask from my face. I clench my eyes (or left eye actually) shut. I don’t want to see her reaction. I feel the warmth of her palms as she rests them on each side of my face.

“Open your eyes,” she whispers.

I do. Her face is maybe an inch or two away from mine.

“Why don’t we go upstairs and chat.” Margaret wiggles her eyebrows.

Didn’t I tell you she had a good personality? Luckily, the fire didn’t melt my lips—I’ll let Margaret take care of that!

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