

marvelous tantrum, and effective in that it resulted in the now-famous ironclad No Kissing Contract, which I have since, for my part, dissolved but to which they adhere as if it were the *Kama Sutra* itself. You will not hear the smacking, sucking, reverberations of lips parting in passion from lips in either of *my* happy homes.

"The cummerbund is good," Dad says. "It changes your lines, acts almost as a girdle. Don't keep the jacket buttoned for long; unbutton it early in the name of being casual. That way it won't pull tight where you bulge." Dad is the person most responsible for teaching me to dress a body ignored by the sensibilities of the world's clothiers. It was he who taught me to buy pants with a high waist and to go ahead through the embarrassment of giving the salesman my full waist size—instead of cheating a few inches to save face—so I could always get *all* of myself into my pants and leave nothing hanging over. He also drilled into me that it is a mortal sin for a fat man to buy a shirt that tucks in. In short, my father is most responsible for teaching me to dress like a big top.

As he stands staring at the tuxedo, his brain grinding out camouflage intelligence, I read his mind.

"Don't worry, Dad," I say. "I can handle this."

"You've had this girl on your mind a long time," he

says sadly. "I don't want you to be hurt."

I say, "I'm not going to be hurt, Dad," thinking: Please don't make me take care of you, too.

Alexander, my stepdad, walks through the bedroom door, places a hand on Dad's shoulder, and guides him out of the room. He reappears in seconds. "Your father's a pain in the butt sometimes, huh," he says, "worrying about things you wouldn't even think about."

I say, "Yeah, he is. Only this time I'm thinking of them. How am I going to get through this night without looking like Moby Melon with a stick in his butt?"

Alexander nods and looks at my near-naked carcass. He is like an arrow, sleek and angular, the antithesis of my father. It is as if minor gods were given exactly enough clay to make two human forms but divided it up in a remedial math class. Alexander is also sensible—though somewhat obscure—where my father is a romantic. "Superman's not brave," he says.

I look up. "What?"

"Superman. He's not brave."

"I'll send him a card."

Alexander smiles. "You don't understand. Superman's not brave. He's smart. He's handsome. He's even decent. But he's not brave."

I look at the tux, spread beside me, waiting. "Alexander, have I ever said it's hard to follow you sometimes?"

"He's indestructible," Alexander says. "You can't be brave when you're indestructible. It's guys like you and me that are brave, Angus. Guys who are different and can be crushed—and know it—but go out there anyway."

I looked at the tux. "I guess he wouldn't wear such an outrageous suit if he knew he looked like a blue and red Oldsmobile in it, would he?"

Alexander put his hand on my shoulder. "The tux looks fine, Angus." He left.

So now I stand at the door to the gym. The temperature is near zero, but I wear no coat because once inside, I want to stay cool as long as possible, to reduce the risk of the dike-bursting perspiration that has become my trademark. No pun intended. Melissa—along with almost everyone, I would guess—is inside, waiting to be crowned Queen of the Winter Ball before suffering the humiliation of being jerked across the dance floor by an escort who should have "GOODYEAR" tattooed the length of both sides. My fear is nearly paralyzing, to tell the truth, but I've faced down this mon-

ster before—though, admittedly, he gets more fierce each time—and I'll face him down again. When he beats me, I'm done.

Heads turn as I move through the door. I simulate drying my butt with a towel, hoping for a casual twist-and-shout move. Your king is here. Rejoice. Marsha Starwick strands behind the ticket table, and I casually hand her mine, eyes straight ahead on the band, walking lightly on the balls of my feet, like Raymond Burr through a field of dog poop sundaes. I pause to let my eyes adjust, hoping to God an empty table will appear, allowing me to drop out of the collective line of sight. Miraculously one does, and I squat, eyes still glued to the band, looking for all the world like the rock and roll critic from the *Trib*. If my fans are watching, they're seeing a man who *cares* about music. I lightly tap my fingers to what I perceive to be the beat, blowing my cover to smithereens. I see Melissa on the dance floor with her boyfriend—a real jerk in my book, Rick Sanford—and my heart bursts against the walls of my chest, like in *Alien*. I order it back. A sophomore server leaves a glass of punch on the table, and I sip it slowly through the next song, after which the lead singer announces that the "royal couple" and their court are due behind the stage curtain in five minutes.

Inburaries of perspiration join at my rib cage to form a raging torrent of sweat rushing toward my shoes as I silently hyperventilate, listening for my grandfather's voice, telling me to screw 'em, telling me once again I can do anything I want. I want my moment.

I rise to head for the stage and look up to see Melissa on her boyfriend's arm, coming toward me through the crowd parting on the dance floor. Sanford wears that cocky look, the one I remember from football, the one he wore continually until the day I wiped it off his face on the sideline during our first full-pad scrimmage. Golden Rick Sanford—Rick Running Back—danced his famous jig around end and turned upfield, thought he could juke me with a couple of cheap high school hip fakes, not realizing that *this* blimp was equipped with tracking radar. It took him almost fifteen seconds to get his wind back. Hacked him off big time, me being so fat and ugly. But now the look is back; we're in his element. He's country club; I'm country, a part of his crowd on the field only.

As they approach, I panic. The king has no clothes. I want to run. What am I doing here? What was I thinking of? Suddenly I'd give up my moment in a heartbeat for the right to disappear. What a fool, even to think . . .

They stand before me. "Angus, my man," Rick slurs,

and I realize it's not a change of underwear he's carrying in that paper bag. "I'm turning this lovely thing over to you for a while. Give her a chance to make a comparison. You know, be a bit more humble."

Melissa drops his arm and smiles. She says, "Hi. Don't pay any attention to him. He's drunk. And even without that, he's rude."

I smile and nod, any words far, far from my throat. Melissa says, "Why don't we go on up?" and she takes my arm, leaving Rick's to hang limply at his side.

"Yeah," he says, squinting down at the paper sack in his hand, "why don't you go on up? You go right on up behind that curtain with my girl, snowball king."

Melissa drops my arm and grips his elbow. "Shut up," she whispers between her clenched teeth. "I'm warning you, Rick. Shut up."

Rick tears his arm away. "Enjoy yourself," he says to me, ignoring her. "Your campaign cost me a lot of money, probably close to two bucks a pound." He looks me up and down as couples at the nearest tables turn to stare. The heat of humiliation floods up through my collar, and I fear the worst will follow. I fear I'll cry. If I do, Rick's in danger because it's a Bethunian law that rage follows my tears as surely as baby chicks trail after their mama. "Don't you go be puttin' your puffy