

PLAYING PASSION'S GAME

by
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CHAPTER ONE

The increasingly loud shouting coming from outside finally drew Trent out from under the table where she was working.

“What the hell is going on out there?” she asked her friend Elton, who was running a length of cable behind her. When he ignored her she grabbed at his pants leg and yanked hard. He looked down blankly at her, then swept back his long hair and removed his earbud.

“Say again?”

Trent scowled up at him. “Some use you are. It sounds like World War Three is starting up outside and you’re plugged into your MP3 oblivious to it.” She connected her last lead, then scrambled out from where she’d been linking together computer cords. She headed to the front of the hall they were in and opened the large metal door to peer out. She slammed the door behind her and was more than pleased with the startled reactions from the group of boys who were causing part of the noise.

“Is there any particular reason why you’re disturbing the peace out here, boys?”

The group took a step back at her presence. Dressed all in black, towering over the boys at a solid six foot, and wearing a scowl she had perfected for just that moment, Trent was certain she was putting the fear of God into them.

As they all stepped back, the boys revealed what they had been huddled around. A little blond girl stood holding her ground, fists balled before her, ready to start swinging.

Trent growled low in her throat. “Tell me you guys weren’t bullying this girl?” She scanned the faces and found more than one she knew. One especially she was disappointed to see. “Wade? I thought you were a better man than for this kind of childish behavior.”

The boy cringed at being singled out of the group. “We were just seeing who she was.”

“By backing her into a corner and crowding round her like a pack of wolves? Some welcome committee.” Trent stepped forward and gently lowered the girl’s fists. She stood before the girl, effectively blocking her from their view. “Wade, don’t make me mention this to your brother.” She had the satisfaction of watching his face turn ashen. “Imagine how he’d feel to find out his brother consorts with *big* boys who terrorize *little* girls.” She looked around to stare down each boy. “I ought to let her pound each and every one of you.” Trent began to roll up her sleeves as if preparing her own hands for battle. “Get the hell away from this property and leave this kid alone or you’ll have me to deal with.” She took one step forward. “Understand?”

The boys tripped and tumbled in their backpedaling haste to escape Trent’s wrath.

“Kids,” Trent muttered. She looked behind her. “You okay?”

The girl puffed out a breath that blew her hair out of her eyes. “They were just being stupid.” She straightened her shoulders and tried to look composed. “Boys are like that.”

Trent looked her over. “They didn’t hurt you?”

“No, they were just crowding me even though I asked them to let me pass.” The girl watched as the boys disappeared from view. “I don’t think they’ll do it again. You scared them off.” She held out a small hand. “Thank you...?”

Trent took the offered hand and shook it solemnly. “I’m Trent Williams and you are very welcome...?” She waited and got a sweet smile in return.

“I’m Kayleigh Sullivan.” A frown creased her forehead. “You’re a girl, aren’t you?”

Trent bit back the sigh. Her masculine features, though perfect for her butch persona, often led to awkward questions. “Yes, I am.”

“I thought so. Where did you come from?”

Trent flipped a thumb over her shoulder at the Rowley Civic Center. “I was working in there when the commotion started.”

“That was me. I was kind of yelling at them. I figured if I was loud enough I would frighten them off. Boys don’t like screeching girls.”

“Good work. It was you squealing like a stuck pig that got me out here to see what all the fuss was about.” Trent turned back to the Center. Kayleigh followed after her, obviously not wanting to be left behind.

“What are you working on in there?”

“We have a big games meeting tomorrow. Me and a few guys are setting up the room for the event.”

“I play games. I have a DS Lite.”

Trent relaxed. Now this was something she could relate to. “Good gaming choice. I have one too.”

Kayleigh’s face lit up at finding someone who understood. “It’s my birthday soon. I’d like my parents to buy me a Nintendo Wii, but they have no clue what I mean when it comes to stuff like that. They’ll probably buy me something girly they hope I’ll be more interested in.” She made a face. “I won’t be, though.”

“That sucks,” Trent said. She looked up at the darkening sky. It was getting late. “What were you doing around here anyway?”

Kayleigh looked abashed. “I had to get out of the house. My folks were too busy and I was just getting in the way. I thought I’d go for a walk, but I lost my direction a few times and got all turned around.”

“How old are you?”

“Ten.”

“Then I think it’s time you went home. It’s going to get dark soon.”

Kayleigh nodded, then added sheepishly, “I’m still a little lost.”

Trent shook her head at Kayleigh’s pitiful tone. “How about I just finish up in here and then I’ll walk you home. You do know your street name, right?”

“Of course. I’m just miles away from my house, that’s all.”

“Miles, eh?” Trent hid her amusement at Kayleigh’s serious tone.

“Well, at least one. I was walking for quite a while, though.”

Trent coughed to cover her laughter. “Okay, follow me. I’ll go get my coat and we’ll start your long trek home.”

“If I had a cell phone I could call my sister. She’d come get me. She’s cool like that.”

Trent pulled her own cell phone from her pocket. “Here, use this.”

Kayleigh made a face. “I don’t know what her number is.”

Trent sighed and put the cell phone back. She opened the Center’s large door and yelled inside. “Elton? Can I leave you to clear up here?”

Kayleigh’s eyes widened as she took in Elton as he walked toward them. “Wow, he’s even taller than you are!” Kayleigh viewed Elton’s six feet five inches of lanky length, taking in his long dark hair, mustache, the long wispy beard that today was plaited in two like a Viking’s, and

the wild tattoos that decorated his arms and neck. She fixed on his ornate eyebrow ring.

“Did that hurt?” she asked, running a finger over her own eyebrow in sympathy.

“Not as much as I thought it would.”

“Is your name really Elton?” Kayleigh was obviously intrigued by Elton and his Gothic clothes.

He nodded. “My mom named me after her favorite singer.”

Kayleigh considered this. It amused Trent that Kayleigh was obviously a child who questioned everything and anything.

“It’s different, like you are. It suits you.”

Elton bowed courteously. “Thank you.” He cast a curious eye at Trent. “She with you?”

“This is Kayleigh. She was outside fending off Chris’s kid brother and his friends.”

“Actually,” Kayleigh said, “the red-haired boy that you made turn really white was the only one who wasn’t being cruel. He kept telling the others to leave me alone.”

“Maybe Wade isn’t such a little bast—” Elton hastily curbed his tongue at Trent’s warning glare toward Kayleigh. “Sorry.”

“I’m going to walk her home to make sure she’s safe.”

“No probs. We’re all done here anyway. You’ve got the servers all set and the monitors are plugged in. We’re good to go.”

Trent scanned the room and nodded. Rows of monitors were lined up ready for tomorrow’s gaming. “You’ll wait for the security guard to come?”

“I’ll make sure Todd is here to watch over the consoles and computers, and then I’ll head off home myself.” Elton flexed his hands and popped his knuckles. “Ready to wipe out the competition tomorrow?”

“Always,” Trent said and snatched up her leather jacket. “You, me, frag fest at nine a.m.”

Kayleigh waved good-bye to Elton as she was steered out of the Center.

“What’s a frag fest?”

“It means my team is going to beat the Harley Hurricanes for the third year running at a game they keep thinking they can win.”

“What’s your team called?”

Trent struck a fierce pose and growled out her reply. “We are the Baydale Reapers and we rule the consoles.” Trent looked down at the

giggling Kayleigh. "We are very good; I promise you. We have the trophies to prove it." She cast her eye down the road. The evening traffic sped by. It wasn't safe for a young girl to be out on her own. "What's your street name, Kayleigh?"

"Castleview Street."

"You *did* wander a little far from home. Good thing I know where that is. Come on. Let's get you going."

"Juliet should be there by now." Kayleigh looked at her watch. "I hope she brought pizza. Mom and Dad don't like it, but I love it. Juliet brings it for me as a treat sometimes."

"Juliet?"

"My big sister. She's twenty-seven years old so she's my really *old* big sister. How old are you?"

"Thirty-two." Trent suddenly felt even older by Kayleigh's standards.

"Are you a lesbian?"

Trent stumbled off the curb and had to quickly get back on the pavement before she was run over. "Excuse me?"

"You look like a lesbian. You're like some of the ladies I've seen at Juliet's parties. But they weren't as nice as you are. You talk to me. They couldn't be bothered to."

Trent was a little lost for words so she just stared at Kayleigh chatting away at her side.

"Juliet's a lesbian. That means she goes out with other girls on dates."

Trent began to seriously wonder what she had gotten herself into rescuing this kid.

"Do you go out with girls?" Kayleigh asked.

Trent nodded dumbly.

"I thought so. And you beat boys at games. You are so cool!" Kayleigh took a breath. "Maybe you could tell my parents I want a Wii. They'd probably listen to you."

Trent listened to Kayleigh's endless chatter all the way back to her street. Once past the minefield of the lesbian queries, Trent and Kayleigh discussed favorite games, what kind they liked to play best, and what they were good at.

"Yes! Juliet's here! That's her car." Kayleigh pointed to a small red Honda parked against the curb. From the line of houses a front door opened and Trent looked up as Kayleigh's name was called.

The woman standing at the door was tall and slender. Her long

blond hair was held back by a loose tie, but tendrils escaped to frame a face that instantly captured Trent's attention. She couldn't help but stare at this woman whose beauty was undeniably unique. With a self-conscious act, Juliet pushed her hair back behind her ear when she caught sight of someone with Kayleigh. It was only Kayleigh's shouting that brought Trent back to her senses.

"Jules, come meet Trent." Kayleigh raced ahead, and her sudden departure broke the spell that Trent had woven around her. She shook herself slightly as Kayleigh hugged her sister. Hanging back at the gate, Trent was entranced by the way the much older sister gave her full attention to the younger. Kayleigh led Juliet down the steps to where Trent stood waiting. Her breath stuck in her chest as bright blue eyes singled her out and seemed to pierce through to Trent's very soul.

"I understand you have been Kayleigh's knight in shining armor, and not only have you rescued her from a gang of boys but walked her all the way home too."

Trent looked at Kayleigh. "You tell her all that in one breath, kid?" She shrugged at Juliet. "It sounds more exciting than it was, believe me."

Juliet ruffled Kayleigh's hair affectionately. "I've got pizza warming in the oven. Go wash up and then you and I will talk about you not just leaving the house as and when you want to."

Kayleigh nodded quietly at the censure in Juliet's voice. "Thank you, Trent, for walking me home."

"You're welcome." Trent waved as Kayleigh ran inside the house.

"See you tomorrow for the frag fest!" With that tossed over her shoulder, Kayleigh disappeared inside.

Juliet faced Trent. "*Frag fest?*"

"I help run a gaming club at the Rowley Civic Center, and tomorrow we are in competition against other local teams."

"And you invited my sister?"

"Actually, no. She's too young to watch the competitions I'll be taking part in, but she's more than welcome to come and try out in the kids' competitions we run." Trent withdrew a flyer from her inside pocket and handed it over. "She seems very interested in her games. I think she'd enjoy playing with the other kids."

Juliet looked at the flyer. "She hasn't made any friends here yet. This might be good for her. I'll see if I'm free tomorrow to bring her."

Trent couldn't hide the delighted grin that escaped at the thought

of seeing Juliet again. She stifled the feeling down just as quickly. *Look at her, Trent, you stand no chance there.* “I’ll look forward to seeing you both tomorrow, then.”

“Thank you for bringing her home safe.” Juliet reached out and touched Trent’s hand. The slight pressure sent tingles of pleasure through Trent’s body.

“It was no problem. She’s a great kid.” Trent hastily pulled herself away from the gate. Part of her could have stayed there all night, just staring at the shifting shades of blond that streaked through Juliet’s hair. She didn’t usually react so strongly to a woman she’d only just met, but there was something about Juliet that seemed to call to the place that had lain long dormant inside her. Feeling unusually edgy, she decided to beat a hasty retreat before she embarrassed herself. “You’d better go inside before she eats all your pizza.”

“Good night, Trent.”

“Be seeing you, Juliet.” Trent took a step then stopped. “Do me a favor?” She liked the way Juliet’s eyebrow rose as she waited for Trent to continue. “Talk to your sister about Stranger Danger. I promise she’ll always be safe with me, but not everyone on the street is as understanding when they find a kid alone. Please stress that to her.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make damned sure she never wanders off again,” Juliet said with a steely edge to her tone.

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Juliet remained at the gate, watching the retreating figure of the woman who had brought her sister back home. She tore her gaze away from the edge of the woman’s jacket where the tight fit of jeans accentuated a trim rear end. *Goodness, but she’s handsome.* Juliet knew she shouldn’t be hanging outside admiring the lean form of Trent as she walked away, but she didn’t really want to have to go inside and have *that* talk with Kayleigh. Knowing she couldn’t put it off any longer, Juliet closed the front door and went to find Kayleigh in the kitchen.

“I thought you knew better than to leave the house without telling anyone where you were going.” Juliet busied herself at the table laying out the plates. She sat on a stool by the counter and waited for an explanation. When Kayleigh was quiet for too long Juliet asked softly, “Would you like to explain to me why you were out walking alone and had to be brought back home by a total stranger?”

“Everywhere I went in this house to escape I was in the way, Jules,

so I thought I'd just get out before I got yelled at again." Kayleigh diligently washed her hands at the sink. "I was safe. I promise."

"But you weren't. You had to be rescued from a gang of boys. They could have hurt you." Juliet's blood ran cold at the mere thought of what could have happened to her sister.

"But they didn't and Trent saved me so it's all okay."

Juliet was annoyed at her happy logic. "Trent is a total stranger."

Kayleigh shook her head. "No, Trent is the next step up from a stranger and one step down from being a friend."

"She could have been worse than the boys were. Not all adults are safe to be around either."

"I know that. I'm not a baby," Kayleigh said. "But Trent isn't a bad guy. She's a bad *ass*."

"What?"

"That's what one of the boys called her," Kayleigh said matter-of-factly.

"Kayleigh, that isn't a compliment about someone."

Kayleigh dragged herself up onto a stool beside the kitchen counter. She leaned on her elbow, unconsciously mirroring Juliet's pose. "She was nice to me. She listened to me and talked to me. And not like I was a dumb kid either. She was setting up the equipment at the Center for the competition tomorrow," Kayleigh said as if this explained everything.

"Sweetie, you didn't even know that center existed until today."

Kayleigh shrugged. "She's a good guy. She's gay like you."

Juliet let out a sigh. "That doesn't make her any safer." She reached out to brush the hair out of Kayleigh's eyes. "And how exactly do you know she's gay?"

"I asked her. I told her you were too."

"I wish you'd stop outing me to anyone and everyone you meet," Juliet muttered.

"You said you didn't care who knew. It's just who you are," Kayleigh said.

"Yes, it is, but you can't tell just anyone. It may be who I am, but it's still private. Do you understand?"

Kayleigh nodded reluctantly. "I guess, but Trent goes on dates with girls too so I don't see what the problem is."

Juliet closed her eyes and counted to ten very slowly before she opened them again. "Enough about Trent. You know it was wrong to leave the house without a word, don't you?"

"I guess," Kayleigh mumbled.

"Mom and Dad are trying so hard to get this new house all set for you all, sometimes I think they forget that you could help too. You're a big girl now. You shouldn't have to be excluded."

"Did they go out tonight as usual?"

Juliet nodded. "I lied and told them I knew where you were. Otherwise we'd have had the police on our doorstep."

"So you got to tell me off instead of them?" Kayleigh asked hopefully.

Juliet graced her with an all too knowing look. "No, I'm sure you'll get all this replayed tomorrow over breakfast."

Kayleigh's face fell. "Lucky me."

Juliet ran her hand gently through Kayleigh's blond hair. "How about you and I see if there are any after-school classes that you could attend to keep you occupied?"

"I'd like to go to Trent's competition tomorrow."

"You and your games. You need to get out more, be with people."

"Jules, we've just moved here. I'm still the odd kid out at school. And besides, I've just been 'out' and you're mad at me!"

"I'm not mad. I just don't want you getting hurt. Those boys could have been worse than they were."

"Trent chased them away."

"She won't always be there. You were lucky this time."

Kayleigh nodded. "I won't do it again."

Juliet reached for the oven mitt. "Are you ready to eat?"

"I'm always ready for pizza."

Juliet placed the pizza on the table and began cutting it into manageable slices. She caught sight of the brightly colored flyer that Trent had left with her. "So this competition tomorrow? What time am I picking you up?" Kayleigh cheered around a mouthful of cheese and pepperoni. "Try not to choke yourself. We'll go see what these gamers have that draws you to them, eh?"

"Trent is gonna win," Kayleigh said. "She always wins."

"Does she now?" Juliet couldn't help but wonder at the power this mysterious woman had to draw her usually quiet sister out and bring a light to her eyes. She figured she'd get another chance tomorrow to see for herself.