

*a dark
motorcycle
club romance*

marked

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KELSIE CALLOWAY

MARKED BY THE KINGS

A DARK MOTORCYCLE CLUB ROMANCE

FROM MANHATTAN, WITH LOVE

BOOK SIX

KELSIE CALLOWAY

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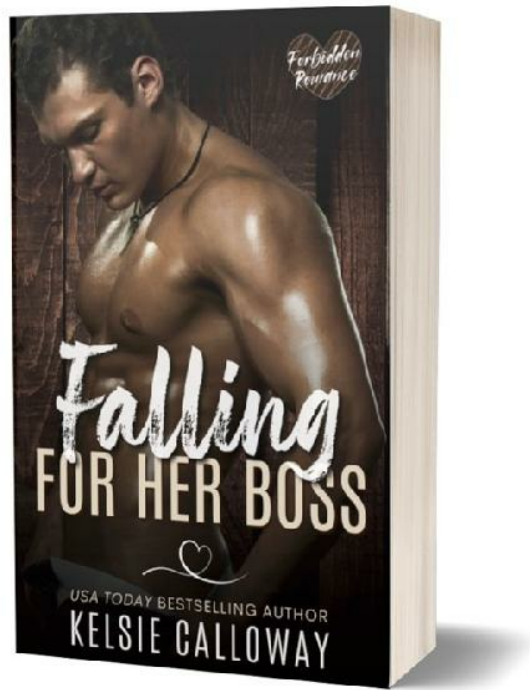
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DANIELLE



I met Mr. Pelham on the first day of my freshman year; I have fantasized about him every day since.

From the moment you turn sixteen, you start counting down the days until you turn eighteen. One is a momentous occasion that marks you with a certain air of coming adulthood. The other makes you legal.

“Happy birthday, baby.” Elliot wraps his arms around my waist and nuzzles his face into my neck. Everyone around us is going nuts with cheers and applause. The cake my father purchased sizzles, topped with special candles that look more like fireworks. “I’m dating an older woman now.”

I try not to wrinkle my nose in disgust. “You’re only two months younger than me,” I remind him quickly. “You’ll be eighteen before winter break.”

He chuckles in my ear before replying in a way that only he thinks is sexy, “Then we’ll be able to make love.”

I shake him off this time, stepping forward to blow out the sparklers dusting the top of my cake. My besties are drunk from sneaking in shooters that someone’s older brother bought for us. They giggle uncontrollably on the other side of the table, and I can hear them speaking loudly over the music and noise.

“She’s going to have sex with Elliot,” Cameron says.

Esther rolls her eyes. “He’s not ballsy enough. Her father is *right there*.”

“Fuck Daddy Fulton.” Rosemary’s eyes drift to my dad, and I swear she gives him a once-over.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Esther snickers.

Cameron smacks her arm. “Stop. Dani will kill you if she hears you talking about her dad like that.”

More like throw-up. My father has been single since my mom left when I was nine months old. He likes to say I’m the only woman he needs in his life, but I’m a school year away from leaving the nest, and he should start dating again. Not my best friend, though. I love Rosemary, but I swear she better keep her filthy paws off my father.

Marcus studiously ignores the giggling girls. He knows they’re drunk, and they aren’t exactly whispering. My father is great at tuning out teenage drivel, though; he does it every day at work. “Honey, do you want to cut the cake?” He offers me the knife, handle first.

“Dad,” I deadpan, “do you really want me to butcher this beautiful cake you got?”

A happy smile curls his lips upward, and he turns the knife around in his grasp. Now that he has hold of the handle, he goes to work cutting the three-tiered cake dripping in frosting roses. “I thought I’d offer. It’s your birthday, after all.” He shoots a look at Elliot. “Graham, go get some plates, will ya? The kitchen should have brought them out, but maybe they’re busy.”

The smile on Elliot’s face falters, and he looks to me for support. As good as my father is at ignoring the immature mutterings of my best friends, I ignore the pleading look he gives me. After a few seconds, he gives up and stomps off toward the country club’s kitchen.

“You’ve got to break things off with that boy,” Marcus announces as he cuts the cake. The knife moves swiftly through the frosting, exposing the top layer of vanilla cake and a chocolate pudding center.

I keep a weathered eye out for Elliot's return. "We aren't dating, Dad."

He gives me a pointed look meant to call me on my bullshit. "If you aren't dating, tell him to cut the lovey-dovey crap. I don't want to see him hugging up on my daughter."

My father and I have a close relationship; there is nothing that we keep from one another. I think it's a shared trauma response from being left so many years ago. My therapist thinks my father has parentified me, but that couldn't be further from the truth. I'm mature for my age because I have to be. My father works long hours and deals with dumb shit every day. He deserves to come home to a daughter that doesn't cause any trouble, who learned to cook through YouTube videos, and does her homework without being asked. I'm not parentified; I'm capable of taking care of myself. Isn't that what all parents want for their kids?

"Some kitchen guy is bringing more," Elliot announces as he walks up with a short stack of glass dessert plates. "Oh, vanilla," he frowns. "Are the other tiers different? Vanilla cake is boring."

Out of the corner of my eye, my father stops mid-cut and whips his head around to bark at Elliot. But to his credit, he takes a couple of deep breaths first and then affixes a tight smile to his mouth. "Yes, there's Black Forest in the middle layer, and the bottom is marble." One has a rich cherry filling, and the other has a center of chocolate cream cheese. None of this sounds appealing to Elliot, who visibly looks disgusted. "I think I'll pass on the cake, Marc."

"That's Mr. Fulton," he corrects. "Why don't you go mingle? You know some of these kids, right?" My father rented an event space at the country club to host our family and fifty of my closest friends. I invited people I knew from all grades, even a handful of incoming freshmen I met at dance boot camp over the summer.

Elliot eyes one of the fresh-faced fourteen-year-olds that just moved to Manhattan from Kansas City. "I guess I could mingle," he says with a leer that turns my stomach.

As he trots off to make small talk with the young girls, my father uses the cake-covered knife as a pointer stick, "That boy is going to wind up in jail.

Mark my words, honey, statutory—”

I cut him off before he can finish. “Elliot can mess around with whoever he wants. I don’t care if he winds up in jail, either. We aren’t dating.”

I have my eyes set on someone else.

Senior year orientation comes a few weeks after my eighteenth birthday.

I’ve been on the Manhattan High School campus so often that it feels like my second home. I arrive earlier than the rest of the student body, but the office is a madhouse.

“Oh, hey, Dani,” one of the secretaries greets me. Her hair is askew, and there’s an ink splotch on the front of her blouse; she’s frazzled. “The printers aren’t working,” she explains before I ask. “We can’t print out schedules, and everyone is supposed to start arriving in forty-five minutes.”

I’m not a big tech girl, but printers especially stress me out. My father has one in his home office, and we’ve tried to troubleshoot that thing seven ways to Sunday. After buying new ink, reinstalling it, and smacking it around a few times, it still refuses to print anything in black. “If it helps, I can just write mine down. I’ve got two working hands.” I hold them up and shake them at the secretary. “I’d try to help with your printer problem, but I’m not good with technology.”

“You and me both,” she sighs. “Check with Peggy. She’ll probably have your class list for the year.”

I head to my guidance counselor’s office. Her door is wide open, and you can hear her frantically typing from a hallway away. But when I stand in the open doorway, she doesn’t look half as unnerved as the secretary.

“Hey, Dani,” she smiles at me. “Come in.” She makes a few more keystrokes before turning away from her computer to make eye contact with me. “Do we need to shut the door?”

I shake my head. “Nah, it’s okay. I just came to write down my schedule.”

She purses her lips together, trying not to laugh. “So you’ve heard about our little printer problem.”

“There can’t be just *one* printer on this campus,” I swear every teacher has their own.

Peggy nods in agreement. “The problem is we have to print 2,000 schedules, give or take. If we start sending them to teachers in the classroom, we’re going to get them back in God knows what order. The teachers are prepping today, so who knows if they’ll have time to bring them back to the office.” It sounds like a nightmare; I’m glad I’m not a part of it. “There’s just a lot of moving parts on orientation day,” she concludes.

I bob my head, making the appropriate sounds of affirmation. “Why not just send everyone to their homeroom to get their schedule? That limits the printing for each teacher to 20, maybe 25 students. You wouldn’t have to organize much.” Usually, a handful of teachers camped outside the office searching through stacks of paper anyway. If they were given a laptop and access to the system, they could quickly point students to their homerooms, where their schedules would be waiting for them.

“That’s not a bad idea.” Peggy grabs the phone and makes a call. I’m not sure who she speaks to, but in under three minutes, a plan is in place. I can hear people in the distance rerouting to their new destinations. “It could work. Especially since I’m not sure we have any other options.” She lowers her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “I think Nance broke the machine. We’ll have to call the company to come out and fix it.”

I wince at Peggy to show her my disapproval. Maybe my therapist is right; I’m too mature for my age. But I’m eighteen now, legally an adult. I think I’m supposed to be mature. “Anyway, mind if I grab my schedule?”

Peggy clucks her tongue. “Of course,” she says with a laugh. “I can probably print that out for you. *My* printer works just fine.” The dig at Nance is apparent, and I laugh alongside my guidance counselor. She looks at my schedule; her eyebrows knit together as she examines the courses I’m taking this year. “It looks like you have a couple of free periods,” she mumbles. “Makes sense, of course.” Peggy takes her eyes off the screen to smile at me. “You’ve been completing courses over the summer. But this means you’re

really only here for a couple of morning classes and one in the afternoon.”

“I wanted to talk to you about that, actually.” I’ve been planning this for what feels like a lifetime. I’ve put in literal years worth of work to make this happen. “I want to be a TA this year. I have the space in my schedule, and it would look great on a college application.”

My guidance counselor raises her eyebrows in surprise. “Do you have an interest in teaching?”

I shrug my shoulders nonchalantly. “I think it’s an option, sure.”

Peggy swings a hand back to the keyboard and, with a couple of strokes, pulls up a new screen. “Do you have a preference for subject matter?”

“Math, preferably higher level, if any teachers are available.” I want one in particular, but I don’t want to seem too eager.

She looks at the list, squinting to study the list of teachers. “Alright. It looks like Mrs. Whiteside in calculus is available and Mr. Pelham in stats.”

I force my brows into a concentrated look before asking, “Do you mind if I speak to both first?” My heart pounds against my chest, beating rapidly out of control. “I took calc with Mrs. Whiteside last year and a stats course online over the summer, but sometimes working with someone is all about the vibes. You know?”

Peggy nods as if she knows what I’m talking about. “Of course. I can print out your schedule for you, and you can meet your teachers and speak to Whiteside and Pelham. Just get back to me before school starts next week, and I can get you a TA gig.”

I’m practically *giddy*. It’s tough to keep my face straight as I wait for that little white sheet to print out.

It’s all coming together.

DANIELLE



I know where my classes are located; I've been coming to MHS for years. I skip homeroom. I skip my AP Literature and Composition class. I skip Comparative Government and Politics. I skip Physics C: Electricity and Magnetism. I head straight for Mr. Pelham's classroom on the third floor.

After wasting fifteen minutes before the onslaught of students begin to arrive, my time is limited. I enter Mr. Pelham's class with a hope and a prayer.

He looks just as I remember from the last day of school. His broad shoulders fill out the white polo he wears, stretching the fabric thin. The undershirt beneath hides the tattoos that crawl from his wrist to his neck. Though I can see the dark ink staining his forearms and biceps, the image disappears beneath the shirt emblazoned with the school's name. His beard is well-groomed, and his brunette locks are shorn close to the scalp. If you look closely enough, you can see the tattoo on his head. "Mr. Pelham." Just saying his name makes me breathless.

In his khakis and sensible shoes, he's hardly the man I remember riding around Manhattan dressed in leather. He looks up from the paperwork on his desk, and I can see his Adam's apple bob when he swallows the hard lump that's formed in his throat. "Ms. Fulton. I didn't think you were in any of my classes this year."

With his burly chest and the dangerous vibe he gives off, I know that I've made the right choice. I've spent four years saving myself for Holy Pelham; it's time all that waiting paid off. "I'm not. I'm actually here to speak to you

about your open TA position. My last couple of periods are empty, and since I'm considering teaching after college, I thought I'd learn the ropes from someone who's been around for a while."

He's significantly older than me, the kind of older that would have gotten him thrown in prison if I had approached him a year ago. I waited. I bided my time until I came of age. Now that I'm eighteen, nothing can stop me.

"I didn't realize I had a TA position available." Beneath his lips, I watch as he runs his tongue over his teeth. Holy is careful; I love that about him.

I take a few more steps into the classroom. His room overlooks the campus courtyard, and more of the greenery comes into view as I get closer to the windows. "My guidance counselor, Mrs. Vickers, said I could pick between you and the calc teacher."

Mr. Pelham clears his throat and steps behind his desk, putting a few more inches of distance between us. "You don't want to work with Mrs. Whiteside? She's a phenomenal calc teacher. She teaches me something new all the time."

I avoid going toward his desk completely. Instead, I approach the window and press my hand against the black metal sill. "I don't want to learn calculus, Mr. Pelham; I want to learn how to be a good teacher. Everybody loves you."

His eyebrows raise in surprise. "Really?"

I see a couple of teachers gathering around the water fountain in the center of the courtyard. I can't tell who they are, but I see their fingers brush against one another. It's touching. "Everyone says you make math fun, which I have to say, is hard to do." I turn my head slowly and make eye contact, my body still facing the glass. "I want to have fun, Mr. Pelham. It's my senior year. I want to have the time of my life."

He balls his hands into fists and then crushes them against the hardwood desk. "I don't know if that's such a good idea, Ms. Fulton."

"Dani," I smile. "Everyone calls me Dani."

His chest rises and stretches the fabric of the polo. I pretend not to notice

when his eyes drift from my face to my thighs. The hem of my dress meets the school dress code of fingertip length, but Holy's eyes are certainly trying to go higher. His thick, pink tongue sweeps across his lips as he turns away from me. "It's a lot of work being a teacher's assistant, Dani. A lot of students don't have what it takes. It requires helping students with subject matter that might be beyond their comprehension. It means grading papers, including your peers. I need to know that I can trust you not to go easier on your friends or boyfriend."

I twist my body to face forward, sitting on the edge of the windowsill. "I don't have a boyfriend, Mr. Pelham."

He clears his throat. "Still," he insists, "it's a tough job, and not everyone can handle it. You're a popular girl, and you have a lot of friends. Perhaps this isn't—"

"I can do the job. I *want* to do the job."

Holy lingers in silence for a few seconds before agreeing. "Fine," he grumbles, "but if you start slacking, I'll be speaking to Mrs. Vickers about a replacement."

I push off the windowsill with a triumphant smile. "Trust me, Mr. Pelham; you won't regret this." Especially when he finds out the perks of being my new boss.

"I hope I don't," he mumbles as I leave the classroom.

I'm treading dangerous waters. I know that one wrong move could wind up with me in the Principal's office and Holy Pelham leaving Manhattan High School. But I've seen the way Mr. Pelham looks at me. I know that my crush started years ago, but he only *saw* me for the first time at the end of the last school year. I could tell that he looked at me the way I spent years looking at him: with lust and a hint of rebellion.

I have to show Holy that there's nothing to worry about. Being with me isn't going to ruin his career or stain his reputation. I'm not his student. I'm not a minor. I am just a woman in love for the very first time.

HOLY



Danielle Fulton is a walking felony. Or she was... forty-two days ago. Now she's my personal tormentor.

I should have told her no. I put in a request for a teacher's aide three months ago when school ended, thinking it'd help to have someone around to grade papers and free up some of my evening time. I didn't know Danielle would walk through the door in a dress that clung to her curves and offer herself to me like a prized cow at the county fair.

I've found students attractive before, but never like this. I've always kept it in my pants and kept my thoughts pure, but Danielle Fulton is no ordinary student.

I have to suffer through four hours of kids coming through my door and introducing themselves. I won't remember any of their names when the first day of school comes around next week, but I feign interest. Some come with their parents, and I am regaled with stories from their summer break. I know so many of these people; I went to school with them years ago. I don't envy the ones more well-off than me or better dressed; I envy the ones that come through with their partner. They look happy and in love, which makes me feel like shit because I'm alone.

But when all the students are gone, and I can finally lock my doors and go home, I nearly sprint to the parking lot.

It's a tough ten-minute drive home. My dick has a limited amount of space and makes an impressive outline in the khakis I wore today. I swear I see

someone staring at me at a stoplight, and I look between my legs draped over the sides of my motorcycle and try to judge if they notice I'm semi-hard. The woman in the car wrinkles her nose in disgust, but her eyes are focused on my arms. She doesn't like my tattoos; she doesn't even notice my dick popping up between my thighs. Thank God.

It's only a couple of blocks later that I remember to be offended by her stare. She might not have been upset by the tent formed in my pants, but she was disgusted by my tattoos. Too bad she's already turned off into the Casement neighborhood, or I'd give her a piece of my mind.

It takes me another couple of minutes to make it to my place in the Valleywood neighborhood near the lake. I slow down as I pull into the three-street cul-de-sac that makes up our small community. There are a lot of children, and I don't want to be responsible for hitting one with my motorcycle.

None of the homes in Valleywood are particularly large. Mine is on the smaller side with three bedrooms and one and a half baths, a modest 1200 square feet. Most of the homes in the neighborhood are an additional 200-400 square feet larger, but I don't need all that space. When the Kings come to my place, it's the right amount of space for a meeting.

I park my bike in the overly crowded garage and slam the door shut behind me as I race inside. The throbbing in my khakis is almost more than I can bear. My bedroom is on the second floor, but I'm not going to make it. I burst into the kitchen, five feet from the garage door, and lean against the counter as I unbuckle and unbutton. I fumble with my pants until my dick is in my hand, and all I can see behind my closed eyes are Danielle Fulton's beautifully shaped legs.

This is wrong. You're sick for this, the little voice in my head tells me. But I pump my cock and imagine I'm inside the beautiful brunette. We'd make pretty babies, her and I. They'd have her blue eyes and athletic build. They'd all look like her, if I'm being honest. There's nothing beautiful about me. I'm an ugly thug; just ask the woman that was disgusted by my tattoos on the road.

With my ass pressed against the countertop, I rub one out. I can feel my

climax building as I recreate the image of Danielle in my mind, from her perfect, delicate features to the fit of her dress. She was so insistent on being my assistant. I couldn't turn her down.

That's just what you're telling yourself; my conscience reminds me. Just think about what you're getting yourself into.

I'm already in too deep. I wouldn't be spewing my load all over the kitchen floor if I wasn't in too deep. I curse because now I have to clean this shit up.

I've known Danielle Fulton for four years now. I don't know if she remembers, but her father introduced us when she was fourteen. I knew back then that she was going to be trouble, but I figured I'd probably never see her anyway. No one ever takes statistics unless they want to go into a mathematics field or engineering. She never struck me as the type.

But then, as the years passed, I kept hearing through the grapevine that Danielle was the epitome of the perfect student. She took AP classes, she always did her homework, and she managed to juggle extracurriculars in the mix, too. All of us were terrified when Danielle showed up, but she proved us wrong. Being the Principal's daughter didn't automatically make her a rebellious troublemaker. If anything, she worked her ass off to prove otherwise.

That's precisely why I need to leave her alone. I need to call the secretary tomorrow and tell her in no uncertain terms that Danielle Fulton cannot be placed with me. I don't care how good of a teacher's assistant she is; if she's in my classroom every afternoon, something bad is going to happen.

I clean up my mess and repeat over and over to myself that I'm making the right choice; I'm doing the right thing. I'm a teacher. Hell, I'm forty years old. I have no business fooling around with a high school girl. "Oh, Christ," I swear. Did I just masturbate to the image of a minor?

I chuck the soiled paper towels in the trash and grab my laptop. It doesn't take long to find Danielle on social media. All of her accounts are wide open; she wants to be seen.

Her Facebook feed is full of pool parties and trips to the lake. In one photo, she's dressed in a barely there bikini, and it makes me hard again. Her perfect

little body is on display, and it's like I'm looking at porn.

"Get out of here," I mumble to myself. "Click away."

But then I see it, my get-out-of-jail-free card. Just over a month ago, she turned eighteen. There's an entire album dedicated to her birthday party, complete with a beautiful tiered cake and dozens of pictures of her with friends. I breathe a sigh of relief because it's one thing to have an image of someone in your head that's eighteen; it's something completely different when they're younger. I've done some fucked up shit in my day, but I have standards. I would never touch a minor.

Does that mean you'll touch Dani now that she's eighteen? "No," I respond aloud to myself. "I want nothing to do with Danielle."

I'm lying to myself. Because I can't even keep my hands out of my pants. With the laptop on the pillow beside me, I scroll through her photos and stop on the bikini shot. With Danielle's smiling face staring at me, I jerk off again. This time I spill my seed all over my work pants. "Damn it." I'd throw the laptop across the room if I didn't need it so badly.

I leave the screen open on Danielle's picture as I head upstairs and start the cleanup process. After a quick shower, I feel better, as if I've been baptized by God himself. I am pure now; I am not remotely interested in a woman half my age. In fact, I don't know what came over me.

But when I come back to the laptop to block Danielle's profile and pretend none of this ever happened, I see that she's updated her status.

Starting now: the best year ever.

I t's an innocuous post, hardly worth mentioning, but a picture of her schedule is attached. Her last three hours have a block that's labeled *TA—Pelham*. It probably means nothing to the hundreds of friends she has rapidly liking her status, but to me, it means I'm too late. Danielle's already changed

her schedule. She spoke to her guidance counselor and got herself placed in my classroom for half the day.

Just then, a comment pops up. Football player Elliot Graham says *I can't wait to have the best year ever with my favorite girl.*

I don't feel the urge to whip out my dick and massage it until I come again. Instead, I feel like going to Elliot's house and beating the shit out of him. Some would say it's jealousy.

I slam the laptop closed and swear I'll never touch Danielle Fulton. Whatever I felt or did today was a one-time slip-up. I'm a teacher. I'm a professional. I can ignore a pretty girl, especially when she's the Principal's daughter.

DANIELLE



I have to break things off with Elliot; his possessive nature is wearing me down. He can flirt with every fourteen-year-old he meets, but God forbid I smile at another man. We aren't dating, though, so I'm not sure how to tell him that whatever this is, needs to end.

I text him the night before school starts to ask if he's interested in seeing other people this year. Three dots appear in a bubble, and I know he's typing, but it takes a while for the text to come through.

You mean we'll see each other, but we can fool around with other people?

I'm not even sure why Elliot likes me if I'm being honest. I've been nothing but a bitch to him since we met. Cameron thinks he's into me because girls typically throw themselves at his feet, and he's turned on by me being the only girl that won't give him what he wants.

You can definitely hook up with other people.

I don't want to keep seeing him, but also, I never agreed to see him in the first place. Maybe if I ignore that part of the question, he'll get the hint.

God, you're the coolest chick ever.

That's me. Mrs. Cool. I chuck my phone on my side table and resolve to forget about Elliot. It was nice to fool around with him this summer. We made out a lot, and he was really into feeling me up, but that's where I drew the line. Elliot's cute, but he's no Mr. Pelham. And I resolved years ago to save myself for a man that was worth it.

I'm not ashamed that I haven't had sex yet. I know a lot of people in my graduating class that have done the deed, but their experience doesn't shape mine. I have friends that regret their first time, and I have friends that think sex is the best thing that has ever happened to them. I appreciate all the perspectives in my life; I just know that my first time will be with Holy Pelham.

“Girl, who are you dressing like that for?” I picked Rosemary up for school a few minutes ago, but it isn't until we get out of the car that she sees my whole outfit. “You look like a sexy angel. Is it already Halloween?”

I roll my eyes. “It's not like I've got wings on.” The rest of her assessment might be true, though. The all-white, almost sheer dress fits like it was painted on. It's barely school appropriate. While it's long enough to pass the fingertip test, the straps are nearly nonexistent. They are razor-thin, and the only way I was allowed out of the house this morning was by throwing on a jean jacket. Even then, my father wasn't pleased.

“You don't have to do all this for Elliot, you know.” Rosemary shuts the front door of my Jeep and goes into the backseat to grab her bag. “He's not a very high-maintenance boyfriend.”

It makes me shudder when people refer to him as my significant other. “We’re not dating, Rose.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, okay. Whatever you say. Hooking up.”

I give her a pointed look, and her teeth snap together quickly. “We aren’t *hooking up*, either. You know that.”

Rosemary and I have been best friends since we were twelve. She moved to Kansas from Montana and transferred into my dance class over the summer. We hit it off quickly, and soon we were having sleepovers, doing each other’s nails, and talking about our crushes. She fit into my life like she was born to be there and vice versa. She knows everything about me, including my prohibition against sex with men that aren’t Mr. Pelham.

“Relax.” Rosemary comes around the back of the car and meets me. “I know you’ve got some master plan to seduce *a teacher*,” she says in a conspiratorial whisper.

I look around to see if anyone heard her. “Shush, nobody needs to know about that.” I love Cameron and Esther, and I’m sure they wouldn’t tell a soul if I told them about my crush on Holy. But small-town secrets are rarely kept secret for long. The more people that know about something, the more people wind up knowing.

Rosemary waves me off as we walk toward the building. “How are you going to seduce him, anyway? You heard last year that one of the junior high teachers lost their job because they were dating a high school student. It wasn’t even their student, but they were still underage.”

“I’m not underage,” I tell her simply. “It’s frowned upon when the student is eighteen. And sure, my father would probably fire him. But the point is, it’s just a moral injustice at this point instead of a legal one.”

She looks at me as if she isn’t sure whether I’m telling her the truth. Then, eventually, she decides that she doesn’t care. “The question still stands. What are you going to do to convince Mr. Pelham of this?”

I’ve been putting together a plan for years. “Let me handle that.”

I'm not clumsy by nature, but the best way to get a man to stare at your ass is to bend over. So I make sure to drop papers, knock over a water bottle on someone's desk, and tidy up Mr. Pelham's organizers by bending at the waist. He isn't the only one who stares, but I don't care about the teenage boys ready to line up and ask for my phone number.

Holy didn't say much when I came into class after lunch. "It's the first day," he told me, "so we probably won't do much." Then he made every effort to ignore me.

As someone actively ignoring a boy with a crush on me, I could tell the difference between someone who wasn't interested, someone playing hard to get, and someone that was trying to pretend their feelings didn't exist. Holy is the latter.

I suspect he's withholding his lustful gaze because I'm a student. I appreciate that because it means he isn't easily swayed by a pretty girl. But it's also a pain in the ass to deal with from a pursuer's perspective.

With my first day in the books, I'm more frustrated than anything. I thought I saw something in Holy when we spoke last week. The way he stared at my legs made me think this pursuit would be easier. But he stays at the front of the class and avoids me like the plague, even when I squeeze past him to hand out papers. He backs up until the whiteboard to stay away from me.

"Ms. Fulton," Holy clears his throat as the last class of the day gets up to leave. "You're very clumsy."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "Sorry about that," I reply with a mumble. I'm already feeling defeated and thinking about what my next game move will be.

He grabs the extra syllabus papers and taps them against the desk, straightening them into a perfect stack. "Aren't you a dancer or something? Shouldn't you be light on your feet and graceful?"

The hair on the back of my neck stands up as I realize that Mr. Pelham has been watching me. That or he's simply looked into my schedule and discovered that I'm on the dance team. Either way, he knows I'm a dancer,

which isn't information I volunteered. "It's probably just first day of school jitters."

Holy sets the stack of papers on his desk and meets my gaze for the first time. His brown eyes are beautiful. I know people often say that they're boring, but his have depth. His make me long for him. "Then I'm sure you'll be better tomorrow," he says reassuringly.

There's something in his tone. I think it's the way his lip twitches into a half-smile at the end of his sentence. It makes me realize that everything I thought during the last three hours was wrong. Holy Pelham is interested in me, after all; he's just very good at hiding it when we're in front of the students. "I'll do my best, sir."

That last word causes his eyes to dilate with lust. I see his pupils enlarge, and he shifts away from me. "Yeah, uh, see you tomorrow. Close the door on your way out," he grumbles.

There's suddenly tension in the room created by his quick personality change. But then I see him imperceptibly adjusting himself, and I know that's a good sign. I've made him hot and bothered.

"Have a good day, Mr. Pelham." I leave before he becomes so uncomfortable that he requests a different TA. This is a balancing act for both of us. Someone has to make the first move and run the risk of getting rejected; I think it has to be me.

HOLY



“No. Let me see if I get this straight.” Saint grips the neck of his Corona and brings it to his lips. He drinks half of it in a single swig. “You’re telling me you got a perfectly legal, hot as fuck eighteen-year-old throwing herself at you, and you’re *mad*?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You know that isn’t what I said.”

Havoc snorts before kicking his legs up on the table. There’s something suspicious on the bottom of his shoe, and I swear to God, if it’s shit, I’m going to lose it. “What you said was some nubile co-ed is offering herself up to you on a silver platter, and you’re turning her down.”

“If you don’t want her, I’ll take her off your hands,” Razor offers with a shrug. “I can show her a good time.”

His words sting. I don’t know why, exactly, but he strums a chord of jealousy in my chest, and it tugs on my hands. I ball them up into fists, and I can see the next few moments play out across the screen of my mind. I leap across the table, diving my fists repeatedly into his self-righteous face until there’s blood splayed on the ground and Saint and Havoc are trying to pull me off of him.

But instead of letting that moment play out, I unclench my fist and wrap it around a glass. Dark amber whiskey and a splash of coke cool my temper but inflate my sense of frustration. “If you people don’t fucking listen to me,” I start.

Saint rolls his eyes and tells me to cool it. “We get it. She’s your student or whatever.”

“Teacher’s aide,” I mumble under my breath.

“Whatever,” Saint repeats, “we’re just busting your balls, Holy.”

My stomach sours under the weight of his words. I love my guys, but sometimes they make matters worse. They aren’t always the most sympathetic bunch; I should have talked to my sister. “I should ask the office for a new TA,” I grumble. “Someone that isn’t bending over and teasing me with an ass that doesn’t quit.”

“I got girls like that for you.” Havoc sits up straighter.

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh, yeah?” But I can’t get the image of Danielle’s smiling face out of my head. Her long, brunette locks that bounce when she walks—but not quite as bouncy as the rest of her assets. Her blue eyes always look a little mischievous when she makes eye contact with me. I need a palette cleanser.

Havoc nods in excitement. “I hear there’s been some drama at Mustangs,” he whispers conspiratorially.

Mustangs is a strip club in the town over, Junction City. It’s run by the Calvino family. It doesn’t always attract the best clientele or even the best dancers, but it’s the only strip club we’ve got. “What does Mustangs’ drama have to do with me?” In other words, I thought you wanted to take me somewhere to get laid and get Danielle off my mind.

“I guess some hotshot from Lawrence or Kansas City or something took one of Calvino’s girls. He fucked her in the backroom or something, I don’t know. Anyway, I hear we’re allowed to touch the girls now.” Havoc’s excited, and I don’t know why. It isn’t like touching a bunch of strippers will boost my mood. And I bet we’ll have to pay for whatever we touch, which isn’t my cup of tea.

I’m a man of limited means. Being a teacher doesn’t exactly pay strip club money if you know what I mean. And sure, I do some jobs on the side for the motorcycle club, but I’m not rolling in cash. “Let’s just stay here and drink.”

But Havoc is already on his feet, and Razor is following his lead. “Nah, let’s go.”

I drown the rest of my whiskey coke. “Alright, but you’re paying my cover charge.”

Havoc doesn’t even bat an eyelash. “Done,” he says with a grin. He works in construction during the week and has been known to take on a few bodyguard jobs at night. He keeps saying he can get me good work being an enforcer, but I know what guys like that do, and I’m not ready to sell my soul to the Devil for a few extra pennies in my bank account each week.

We grab an Uber because none of us are sober enough to drive to Junction City. It might only be twenty minutes from here to the strip club, but there’s no way any of us want to risk a DUI. The Uber comes at a cost, though, paid for by Havoc. “Y’all are going to be thanking me once you see the new crop of women Nicholas flew in.”

I sit in the front seat of the Uber while the guys pile into the back. They’re chatting about something that happened at the last club meeting I couldn’t attend because of a coworker bonding event someone set up. While I was busy playing Jenga at Yard Bar with my fellow teachers, they were discussing the Calvino family linking up with the Valentis.

The driver tries to make small talk, but I don’t care about his day. Instead, I reflect on my own. And the entire fucked up week I’ve been having.

Danielle has been driving me nuts. Ever since she skipped out of my classroom on that first day when we discussed her clumsy nature, I’ll admit, hearing her call me ‘sir’ made me feel something in my belly. My dick hardened, and I was scared she was going to see it and report me to the Principal. But she didn’t. She came back the next afternoon and acted as though nothing happened.

But Danielle knew what she did. I know she did. Because she dropped the Mr. Pelhams and replaced them with Sirs. And I’ve been struggling through every afternoon since.

It’s been a while since a schoolgirl had a crush on me. I know it happens, but for the most part, they keep it to themselves. I never find out about it, or I

hear rumors from other teachers about what they've overheard. It's been a few years since a high school girl was so brazen about how she felt. And frankly, I don't know how to handle it.

Everything inside me wants to bend her clumsy ass over my desk and fuck her hard. I want to see her tits pressed against the fake, plastic wood desk we're provided with. I want to see her nipples strain against those cute little summer dresses she wears to class every day. I want to act on my urges like the other Kings, but I don't have it in me.

The girl is eighteen, sure, but she's still in high school. There certainly have to be some laws about that. Like, don't date high school girls because that's just asking for a lawsuit. If that isn't bad enough, her father is the school's Principal. He signs my paychecks. If this isn't dipping my pen in the company ink, I don't know what is. I'm just asking to get fired if I act on my urges.

"Damn. It's packed tonight," Razor swears as the Uber driver pulls up to the strip club.

The location and the chatter pull me out of my funk. I'm forced to get out of the car and act excited when a petite, pretty young thing greets us at the door in an alluring outfit and demands \$20 from each of us. Havoc digs his wallet out and pays the cover fee with a hundred-dollar bill. "Can I get my change in 1s, sweetheart?" He flashes her a smile.

She quickly obliges, handing back twenty dollars in singles to appease the guest. "Enjoy yourselves."

"We will," Havoc says with a wink.

Saint smacks him on the shoulder. "Keep moving, buddy. She's not interested in you."

The host's smile grows a couple of centimeters as we walk past her. In no time at all, she's transitioned from us to the next group of people.

The weekends keep Mustangs packed with customers. There are groups of people huddled around the stage, so we're forced to find a table a little ways away from the action. There's a pole right in the center, and Razor is quick to announce he's going to get some drinks and a stripper to dance while we

enjoy them. Havoc follows him. “Can’t carry four drinks with two hands,” he says, but I think he just wants to help pick the girl.

“You good?” Saint asks when the two of them leave. “You’re a little morose tonight.”

Morose—a synonym for gloomy. I don’t feel gloomy; I feel like I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place. “I’m just into my feelings about this girl.”

Saint nods his head sagely. “I figured as much. You gotta let her go. Her father can cause a lot of grief. People already think the Kings are a gang; we don’t need any more bad press.”

If this were a simple choice between right and wrong, I would know what the easy answer was. “What if I don’t generate any bad press?” Now I’m just talking crazy.

“You like this girl?” Saint asks.

To be honest, I don’t know her that well. We’ve had a few conversations here and there, but they were all strictly professional.

My nonresponse is all Saint needs to know. “If it’s about getting your rocks off with a pretty girl, pick another one,” he advises. “Get her to dress up like your little teacher’s aide and fuck her until your cock falls off. But don’t put the Kings at risk for a girl that you don’t even like.”

“I *do* like her,” I reply quickly. “I just don’t know much about her.”

“What’s the difference?” Saint frowns.

The world.

Danielle is smart. Not just smart for her age, but genuinely intelligent. I’ve asked around, and all of her teachers adore her. She goes above and beyond, but not in an ass-kissing sort of way. Danielle Fulton endears herself to people, makes herself indispensable, and is a joy to be around. I don’t know her middle name or her favorite color or anything like that, but I know what I’ve heard. And I like all of it.

When I don’t respond, Saint sighs heavily and shakes his head. “You do whatever you gotta do, okay? But don’t involve the Kings. And for the love

of God, don't go to jail over this girl. I'll never forgive you if I have to bail you out because you got in over your head with a teenager."

That would never happen, I tell myself. Because I'm not going to do anything with Danielle. I don't care how many signals she sends me or how often she bends over so I can get a full view of her ass. I'm looking out for my brothers and myself. I'm a good man. I am honorable.

But greater men than me have broken under the whims of a beautiful woman. So just in case, I should request a new teacher's aide. Yeah, that's exactly what I need.

DANIELLE



The first week of school could have gone better, but it also could have gone worse. I swear Mr. Pelham is ignoring me. Every damn day he skirts around me like I'm carrying the plague. He never makes eye contact with me. And I know it isn't because he doesn't like me because I catch him staring sometimes. Like when I'm bent over a desk helping a student. I don't tell Holy that sometimes we're just chatting about something that happened to a friend of ours; he doesn't need to know everything. I just need his eyes on me, and that's easy to accomplish when the back of my dress rides up my thighs.

But I have a new plan, courtesy of Rosemary. She's the one that was helping out at her father's bar this weekend. She's the one that overheard a group of leather-clad motorcyclists talking about a certain someone's TA. She's the one that called me from the back of the kitchen to excitedly tell me that I've got Holy on the ropes.

There's a special joy that a woman gets when she knows that a man is attracted to her. Maybe it's only physical for Holy right now, but physical is the step in the door I need. Once he gets to know me, he'll love me. I just know it.

"Good morning, Mr. Pelham." I greet as I breeze through the door.

Holy frowns and brings his wrist up, checking his watch. "It's noon," he deadpans.

I set my things down on the desk provided for me. It's a few feet away from

his and significantly smaller. “Is it? Today has passed in a blur.” It’s a Monday. The day has, in fact, crept by. Every minute felt like an hour, and every hour felt like an eternity. It was torturous waiting to get here today.

“You’re early.” Maybe it’s me, but it looks like he’s pouting. His thick bottom lip juts out just a smidge. I want to walk over to him and claim it with my own.

I look up at the analog clock on the wall and see that it says 12:22. The lunch break ends in eight minutes, and with it starts my afternoon gig of grading papers, gathering homework, and chatting with friends when Mr. Pelham isn’t looking. “Oh, hey, it is.”

He looks away. He’s always averting his eyes; it’s beginning to make me self-conscious. “Listen, Danielle,” he starts.

“Dani,” I correct. “Hey, I think I saw you this weekend.”

Holy’s in the middle of opening his mouth to finish what he was saying when I interrupt his thoughts. “Wait. What?” He places a hand on the desk for stability. “When?”

“Saturday afternoon?” I frown as I pretend to struggle with remembering where I saw him. “Maybe Sunday. I’m not sure. You were riding around town, though.” That part is true. Cameron, Esther, and I were eating at Tallgrass Taphouse when a few bikers rode down Poyntz. The patio overlooked the street, and I had a fresh view of Holy Pelham dripping in tight-fitting leather.

Mr. Pelham’s eyebrows raise, and for the first time in days, he makes intentional eye contact. “Yeah. Huh. I guess I never thought about students seeing me out and about.”

I shrug nonchalantly as I slowly place my bag beside my desk. “Who were those guys?”

He’s reluctant to tell me. I can see by the way he suddenly takes a deep breath and looks at his desk. He gathers a pile of papers and starts to straighten them, clearing his throat in the process. “Dani, I don’t think—”

“Sorry if I sound a little nosy,” I apologize quickly, rushing to cut him off. “I

just noticed you were all wearing the same patch on your jackets. Which,” I try to regain eye contact, but he’s staring at my throat, “it seemed a little warm out for leather jackets.”

This draws his attention once more, and his shoulders relax. “We wear our jackets so we’re safe on the road. You never know on the highway when someone might cut into your lane or if you’ll hit a patch of bad road that knocks you off your balance. The jackets won’t protect us from a broken bone or anything, but they help against road rash.”

That strikes a chord inside me, and suddenly all I can imagine is Holy’s body sliding hard and fast against the concrete. His handsome face bloody, his arms skinned up and scraped. It sends a shudder down my spine. “The jackets are a good idea,” I agree.

“Do you have an interest in motorcycles?” He mistakes my agreement with his safety plan as interest. But for the first time, he doesn’t look on edge to be around me. Holy’s eyebrows are slightly raised, and there’s a smile on his face. His posture says that he’s open to discussion.

I take a step forward, boldly entering his air space. “It’s on my bucket list to ride one someday,” I tell him with a grin. “But I’m afraid I’m not strong enough.”

Holy sucks in the air between his teeth, and tension settles between us. “They’re pretty heavy,” he agrees.

“I bet you have to have some thick, powerful thighs to tame a beast like that.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. They land with a resounding thud.

Mr. Pelham pulls away from his desk and starts wringing his hands together. I can see a dozen thoughts as they form in the emotions on his face. “Danielle,” he starts again, as professional as ever.

I’m about to be turned down. Again. In the most polite way that Mr. Pelham can muster.

But he doesn’t tell me to back away or give him some space. Instead, he rubs his aching temples before saying, “You have to be careful with words like that.”

A genuine frown appears on my face. “Words like what?” I inch toward his side of the desk—gradually closing the gap between us.

“You know what words I’m talking about,” he says with a stern tone of voice. “You’re going to get us both in trouble.”

My interest is piqued. “What do you mean?” Another inch closer, and I can smell his cologne. It dances through my nostrils and lands on my tongue, the taste of wood and balsam alighting my senses.

Holy lets me get closer. He notices each step that I shuffle, and he allows it. “What you said was inappropriate. We don’t want people to think our relationship is anything other than that of a teacher and his aide.”

But we’re so close that if I reach out, I’ll be able to touch him. To run my hand across his broad, muscular chest. To feel his well-kept beard. To run my thumb across his lip and see if it is as soft as I think it is. “What if I want it to be inappropriate?”

His eyes slowly drift from the floor. Sweet, puppy dog brown eyes travel over my toes and wrap around my legs. I see them linger just below my waist before trailing higher. Each tension-filled second that passes brings us closer to a mistake. And when his eyes finally climb as high as mine, I count to three.

If I can just hold his gaze for three seconds, I’ll have everything I need to move forward. I’ll know that this isn’t just in my head. And I’ll have the confidence to do what I’ve longed to do since I first came to Manhattan High School.

One second. An eternity passes before my very eyes.

Two seconds. I gear up for the moment I’ve spent four years waiting for.

Three seconds. I lean forward and press my lips to his.

I swear a choir of angels starts singing a hallelujah chorus. I melt like a stick of butter in a hot pan. His mustache tickles my top lip, and my leg pops like every princess in a Disney movie.

But the three seconds leading up to this moment last longer than the kiss.

We're barely two Mississippi in before he pulls away and steps back. His large frame hits the classroom wall, and his eyes widen with fear. "I-you-we," he stumbles over his words.

Apprehension fills the space where tension once lay. I realize immediately that I did something wrong. I step back, face struck with horror, and try to figure out where I went wrong.

"Dani," he chokes out in a whisper, "you can't do that again."

But I hear it as plain as day: he liked it as much as I did. "I have to go," I mumble. The class bell rings; lunch is over. But I grab my things and flee. What have I done?

What happens next?

HOLY



I fucked up.

I *fucked* up.

I. Fucked. *Up*.

“Calm down,” Beast groans lazily. He has a knife, and he’s picking the dirt out from under his nails. Every few minutes, I watch him flick the residue to the floor. It’s nauseating if you watch him for too long. “And for the love of Christ, stop pacing.”

His twin, Bullet, wrinkles his nose in disgust and agrees. “Yeah, you’re making me anxious. Like the cops are gonna bust in any minute and arrest all of us.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they did. I made a mistake. She’s probably telling her father right now. I’m going to show up at school tomorrow, and I’ll be fired, and Principal Fulton will have the police waiting to arrest me.” I’m spiraling. At first, I was fine, but then the guys started showing up at the house, and I kept having to tell the story over and over again, and I started realizing how fucked I was. How I fucked myself. “Say your goodbyes.”

“Jesus,” Saint scoffs, “you have to calm down. Pop a Xanax or something.”

“You need one?” Jackal grabs the bag at his feet, and everybody pretends not to hear the pills inside clicking around. He’s a walking pharmacy and not the legal kind. He has a minimum of twelve ways to get arrested in that backpack. But to be fair, he probably has handfuls of Xanax at his disposal.

“I got options. You want a Xannie, or are you up for some suggestions? I’ve got Valium and Klonopin, too.”

Drug testing is over for the school year unless the Principal suspects you of being on something, then you’ll be tested at random. I could take something right now and not have to worry, especially because it’s legal. “No, I’m fine.” I won’t, though, because I’m in a situation of my own making, and I deserve to suffer.

Jackal shakes his bag, and the pills rattle around in their bottles inside. “You sure? Because I don’t mind sharing.”

Beast shuts his pocket knife and leans forward in his chair. “Sharing, huh? What else you got in that little bag?”

The two of them start discussing psycho-stimulants, and I tune them out, returning to pace the floor. I should have spoken to the Principal first thing in the morning. But I got up late, and I was rushing to class. I figured I had time to do it tomorrow or Wednesday. I didn’t think the situation I was in could get any worse. Then Dani pressed up against me, and I felt her tight little body on mine as she kissed me, and I knew I’d made a horrible decision. I fucked up. Because now all I want to do is drive to her house, sweep her off her feet, and bury my dick inside her.

“Earth to Holy.” Saint is practically yelling, but it’s his frantically moving hands that catch my attention. “I told you not to get involved with that little hussy. She’s no good.”

For some reason, Saint calling her a hussy kind of pisses me off a bit. I open my mouth to respond, but I’m cut off.

“If you don’t want her, I’ll take her.” Bullet leans back on the couch and throws his feet up on the table, making himself comfortable. Beast and Bullet are twins, and not just twin pains in my ass. They’re honest-to-God identical twins, and the only way you can tell the difference between them is that Bullet has a tattoo on his scalp and keeps his hair cropped short.

When everyone looks his way, he throws his hands up. “What? Like you guys wouldn’t take the girl off his hands. She’s *eighteen*. She’s probably good and tight down there unless she’s one of those girls just throwing it at

anyone that'll take it."

Saint rolls his eyes. "That shit's made of elastic. It bounces back like a rubber band. She could fuck the entire football team and still be tight enough to take your tiny dick."

Bullet grabs the first thing within reach and chucks it at Saint. Thank God it's the empty soda can on the table and not the glass bottle his brother is drinking from. Little droplets of leftover Coke fly across the room before bonking Saint in the chest. "You want me to pull it out for you, big dog?" Bullet gets to his feet, and his hand is on his fly. "I'll show you how tiny I am when I'm jamming this cock down the back of your throat."

"That sounds a little gay," Beast frowns. "I don't care what you do with your dick, but I don't want to see my brother getting blown by one of my friends. Take that shit to the back room."

I want to bang my head against the wall. Why did I think asking the Kings would help me solve my problems? Why do I always do this to myself? "Shut up. All of you." My eyeballs hurt; I think I have a migraine coming on. "Just tell me what I should do to fix this. Because I know it isn't let any of you fuckers around her. Especially you," I glare at Bullet.

I've been a member of the Kings Of Carnage motorcycle club for fifteen years, and I knew some of these guys before I joined. Saint and I go all the way back to high school. He was a freshman when I was a senior, and I gave him hell for months before it turned out we had a lot in common. He's the one that gave me my name. I would ride *and* die for these men, but sometimes they're just so damn stupid that I don't know what to do.

Saint shakes his head. "I don't want your girl. I like my women more *experienced* if you know what I mean." We all know what he means. Saint is a kinky motherfucker that doesn't hesitate to tell us all about the leather he's worn in and out of the bedroom. Sometimes it seems like his singular joy in life is to make us uncomfortable by announcing what toys he was sticking up a woman's ass last night while he was dick deep inside her.

"The point is," I glare at him for interrupting me, "I need solutions, not the rest of you lining up to find her."

Jackal and Beast have finished their exchange, and the two of them are sitting comfortably again. “You said her daddy was the Principal?” I nod. “Tell him his daughter is trying to seduce you, and out of respect for your morals—which, believe me, I don’t understand in the least—you gotta get a new assistant or whatever.”

That’s what got me into this mess in the first place. I was supposed to get up this morning and do just that, but damn my alarm clock for not going off because I didn’t set it. It couldn’t just know that it was Monday and wake me up on time? I thought we were living in the future, and tech was going to take over. Where are my alarm clocks that know when I’m supposed to be awake without me telling them?

“Just tell her *father*,” Saint shakes his head distastefully at the term ‘daddy’, “that she’s a nice kid, but you don’t need an aide this year after all. Tell him you don’t have enough work for her or something. Don’t make this about her because if you do, who knows if she’ll come forward and tell everyone you made out.”

The hair on my arms bristle. “We didn’t make out.” But knowing they misinterpreted my story means others will likely misinterpret it, too. I’m between a rock and a hard place. “It was just a kiss,” I explain again. “A couple of seconds, max. There wasn’t even any tongue.”

“Criminal,” Bullet mumbles. “You’re going to lose your job over a little peck on the lips. I kiss my mama with more feeling than that.”

Beast groans and leans back in his chair. “Bro, don’t say that. That doesn’t sound the way you think it does.”

Here I was thinking that Bullet couldn’t be any further from the truth. That one singular kiss was full of so much passion that I had to pull away to keep from throwing her on the desk right then and there. “I’m not going to lose my job.” See? I didn’t even need pharmaceutical drugs. I’m getting rid of my anxiety on my own. “I’m just going to explain to Mr. Fulton exactly what Saint said.”

Saint claps his hands together in a decisive victory. “Ha, fuck you, guys,” he grins at Jackal, Bullet, and Beast. “I win.”

Bullet deadpans, “Yeah because we all wish we could win this stupid argument. Go you. Congratulations.”

I pull my phone out and set my alarm for the morning. I’ll get to the high school first thing in the morning and wait outside the Principal’s office if I have to. I’m getting Danielle Fulton as far away from me as I can. It’s good for both of us, really. She doesn’t need to be crushing on a forty-year-old high school teacher, and I have no business being interested in an eighteen-year-old. I don’t care how good our kiss was this afternoon; we need to go our separate ways. That’s all there is to it.

HOLY



The guys left by ten, which gave me plenty of time to lie in bed and think about how I needed to phrase what I wanted to say to the Principal. I swear I didn't get to sleep until sometime after midnight, but what else was I supposed to do? I couldn't just go into Fulton's office and wing it.

But the consequences of staying up late mean that I am not looking so hot when my alarm goes off at 5:30. Usually, I'd get up and try to go to the gym, but not today. My head hurts from lack of sleep, and I hit the snooze button every ten minutes for an hour. By the time I crawl out of bed at 6:30, I feel like I've been run over by a truck. I'm exhausted, and I'd rather call in sick than put on khakis and a polo and head to the high school. But then my problems wouldn't get solved, and I'd spend another evening asking for advice from a handful of men that treat everything like a joke.

I force myself into the shower and turn on the cold water first. Icy jets light up my skin and senses, jolting me into consciousness. If I wasn't awake before, I am now. I quickly turn the knob until the cold water starts to turn warm. And I try not to think about Danielle as I soap everything up. My dick is hard and begging to be touched, but if I give it what it wants, I'll never make it to Fulton's office.

I'm on autopilot when I get out of the shower. Swipe on deodorant, make sure my beard is dry, pick out some clothes, and grab a banana on my way out the door. At approximately 7:10, I make it to the parking lot of the high school. I usually take my motorcycle, but today I pulled my truck out instead. It's easier to go through a drive-thru for coffee when you're in a vehicle, and

I needed to pick up coffee this morning.

With two shots of espresso in a small cup in one hand and coffee in the other, I head to the front office to swing by Principal Fulton's office. He has a reserved parking space near the front, and his dark blue Tesla is already here.

Walking in, I go over what I'm going to say. *Danielle Fulton is a great addition to my classroom, but I don't have enough work for her.* I repeat it over and over again like a mantra.

Principal Fulton's door is open when I approach. He hums while he works, the sound of click-clacking from his keyboard the only other sound. I still knock on the wall outside his office before poking my head in. "Howard," he greets with a smile, "come in."

Danielle Fulton is a great addition to my classroom, but I don't have enough work for her.

"How are you this morning? Little early to be getting to school," he says with a frown.

I nod along with him. "I actually came a few minutes early to talk to you, sir. About my teacher's aide."

His frame tenses up. Marcus is a well-built man, and he looks great for his age, but I notice new knots in his shoulders when I speak. "What about her?"

This is his daughter; I have to play this carefully. I don't want him to get upset with her or me. "She's a great resource, really," I go off book immediately. It isn't intentional; it's as if everything I practiced fell out of my head. "She got a good head on her shoulders, and she's very good with the students. I admire her professionally, especially with the students she's familiar with."

He eases just a little. "That's great. I'm glad to hear that."

"But," I add quickly, and Marcus's shoulders sag, "I don't have enough for her to do. I think she'd be better suited to someone else's class. Maybe an English teacher with a lot of essays for her to read." And fewer men for her to interact with. If she's stuck behind a desk reading papers about *Great Expectations* and *The Great Gatsby*, she won't have time to bend over and

give everyone a view of her ass. “It isn’t that I don’t like her; I do,” I rush to add. “I just don’t want her days to be wasted when it is clear she is a bright student with a bright future.”

The tip of Marcus’s lips turns upward into a half smile. “Well, I’m glad to hear that it isn’t a behavioral issue. As I’m sure you know, Danielle is my daughter.” His smile grows as he beams with pride. “I know a lot of you were worried when she started at MHS, but I’m glad that she’s grown on all of her teachers.”

She’s growing on me, and not in a way that Marcus Fulton would approve of. “Yes, she’s a great student.” And a nuisance. She is single-handedly on a path to destroy me. I would be willing to bet my next paycheck on it.

“It’s a shame you want to have her removed from your classroom,” the Principal says with a heavy sigh. “Dani has a lot of ambition, but I’m not sure she knows what she wants to do.”

Not the guilt trip. I can turn down my friends, I can turn down my brothers in leather, but I don’t know if I can turn down my boss. “Well, that’s unfortunate,” I add awkwardly.

“Yeah,” he sighs again. “She spent all summer asking me about what it’s like to be a teacher and what the hours are and everything. She was showing some real interest in teaching. In fact, I even encouraged her to become a TA. So many of the teachers here are overworked.”

I can feel my resolve lessening with every word that he says. “Yup, that’s true.” A sense of dread fills my chest as I realize I won’t get what I asked for, and it’s all my fault.

“Anyway. If you’re *sure* you don’t need her help, I can have her guidance counselor look into reassigning her.” The smile on Principal Fulton’s face has decreased exponentially. Guilt leads me to shake my head.

“Well, now that you mention it,” the words tumble out of my mouth and seal my fate, “I guess it is nice to have her around to help lessen the work I have to do after school hours.”

Marcus smacks a hand down on the desk excitedly, and his smile returns in full force. “That’s great. I’m sure you could rustle up some work for her.

She'll do pretty much anything you ask.”

He has no idea how right he is. If I told Danielle to jump, she'd ask how high. “Thanks for talking me into this, Mr. Fulton.”

“You know you can call me Marcus,” he says with a wave of his hand. “I've got to get back to my emails, but I'll see you at lunch, Howard.”

I get up and head for the door. Marcus. He wouldn't want me to call him that if he knew his daughter had kissed me yesterday. He wouldn't be foisting her upon me if he knew what she was capable of.

I convince myself that I've done the best I can. I've tried to change the winds of fate, and I've failed. This is my destiny. *She* is my destiny. And God, what a beautiful destiny it is.

DANIELLE



I skipped Holy's class today. I think a combination of nerves and excitement made me do it. Nervous and afraid that he might tell me my behavior was inappropriate and that it could never happen again. Excited that he might ask for more. Eventually, the nerves won out, and I left school at lunchtime.

My schoolwork has been piling up even though it's only the second week. My AP literature and composition class already has a three-page paper due by Friday about a book we were supposed to read over the summer. My comparative government and politics class is diving head-first into political systems and regimes. We've been issued an entire chapter to read, outline, and summarize by next Monday, and I haven't even cracked the spine of my textbook. My Physics class is, blessedly, the only class that has yet to assign homework. But my divided attention is coming back to bite me in the ass because I've gotten nothing done.

I photocopy the pages we need to read from my government and politics textbook and start going over the text line-by-line. When my eyes start to glaze over, and words no longer make sense, I start searching Google for a deeper understanding of the chapter. I'm knee-deep in the political challenges of Russia when the garage door starts to whirr, announcing that my father is home.

I withdraw my attention and try to shake my head clear of political structures. My dad comes in from the garage and drops his things in the mudroom off of the kitchen. When he comes a little further inside the house, he smiles when he sees me. "Working hard?"

“Ask me about the Russian government,” I reply.

He snorts and shakes his head. “I’m good. But glad to know who to turn to if I have questions.”

I don’t think I ever wanted to take advanced placement classes; they just fell into my lap. I’ve always been a relatively good student, but it wasn’t until middle school that my teachers told my dad that they felt I wasn’t being challenged. They couldn’t do much in junior high besides putting me in eighth-grade classes as a seventh grader, but someone recommended college-level high school courses, and the rest became history. My four years at Manhattan High School were spent taking as many advanced placement courses as I could fit into my schedule. My dad said passing the tests meant I’d get free college credits. Who was I to turn down free?

My knowledge is vast and useless in an array of specialties I couldn’t care less about. Who needs a physics class on electricity and magnetism when you don’t plan to enter the science field after high school?

“How’s your teacher’s aide position going?” Dad asks casually. When my eyebrow shoots up, he walks to a cabinet and starts rummaging for a snack. It’s 4:30, and we’ll be eating dinner in an hour or two, but he’s always hungry. “I just mean, are you bored? Is it a good use of your time?”

I’m afraid Holy said something to him about our kiss, but I think my father would be freaking out more if he had. He’d be yelling if he knew. I respond slowly. “I think it’s been an eye-opening look into the world of being a teacher.” That’s neutral; he can’t take offense to that.

“Sure,” he waves a hand at me to continue before opening a bag of chips. “But do you have enough to do? Could your time be better spent doing a work-study or simply taking the afternoon off to catch up on homework and stuff?”

He’s making me anxious. The space behind my eyes starts to throb; a combination of reading complex textbook work and an interrogation causes the pressure to build slowly but painfully. “I mean, I’m not doing something every second of the time I’m in Mr. Pelham’s class, but that gives me a chance to flip through homework sometimes.” Not that I’ve done that, but the option is there.

My dad nods sagely before shoving a handful of chips in his mouth. The way he stares makes me uncomfortable; it's like he knows something, and he's waiting for me to fess up. This might have worked on me when I was eight, but I don't crack under pressure nearly as quickly anymore.

"Is there an issue with my placement in Mr. Pelham's class?" I ask outright after a few more moments of uncomfortable silence. My father isn't the type to beat around the bush if he can help it. He was a teacher years ago, and he's learned how to deal with students and faculty alike. He's an excellent reader of people, which has served him well on his climb to principalship.

"Howard came to my office this morning to ask that you be placed elsewhere." He speaks to me like an employee or a colleague. His words are matter-of-fact, with no inflection in his tone. "He stated that he didn't have enough work for you. I think he felt bad that you were sitting around with nothing to do so often."

I can't immediately tell what this means. For all the advanced classes I've taken and all the hours I've spent studying, I don't know how to interpret Holy's response to my kiss. He didn't directly rat me out to my father, but he made an effort to get rid of me. He doesn't want me in his class. He probably saw that kiss as a student's desperate attempt to start a relationship. And frankly, he'd be right to think that. I've been in love with Holy since I was fourteen. He's known me for what, two weeks? And he has no interest in me. I'm just some high school girl that's risking his career.

Panic sinks in. I've made a dumb, silly girl's mistake. I'm going to lose my teacher's aide position, and it's all my fault. I'm a stupid girl.

"But he retracted," my father adds after what feels like an eternity. "We talked, and he said you were a great student and assistant. Turns out he was keeping certain tasks to himself that he could easily pass on to you to free up his evenings."

The whiplash he gives me hurts like a bitch. Does he want me or not? "Wh-what?"

My father explains the situation a little better. Howard Pelham came to his office today to ask me to be placed with another teacher because he was afraid there wasn't enough for me to do during my hours in his room. But

after a little chat, he changed his mind and decided to keep me.

I can't tell if my father talked him into it or if Holy had a change of heart. All I know is that I think I should be offended.

"Did he say anything about it during class today?" Dad asks.

Even though I didn't show up, Holy didn't mark me absent. Ms. Leake didn't see my name on the list of students who missed the fourth hour; she couldn't report me to my father. If he had known that I had skipped class, this conversation would have started differently. "No," I respond quietly, "he didn't say anything."

"Probably smart." He reaches into the bag of chips and pulls out a handful. "He's a good guy. One of the quietest teachers we've had at MHS. Never gets into trouble, never has any drama."

And then I showed up with my pouty lips and fuck me pumps, and I don't even know what any of that means—I just figured I'd get everything I wanted if I paraded around like a confident woman that knows exactly what she deserves.

But Holy trying to get rid of me is confusing. And it's even more confusing that he didn't tell anyone I skipped his class. What does this all mean? And should I take a human psychology class so I can understand people better? Or just stop overthinking?

HOLY



Danielle wasn't in class yesterday or the day before. I thought about marking her absent, but that would help anything. Maybe she's embarrassed by what she did, or maybe she regrets it. Maybe she'll go to her guidance counselor and ask to be placed elsewhere. It would solve all of our problems if she aided another teacher.

But Thursday afternoon rolls around, and Danielle breezes through the door with a commanding presence. Her eyes are on her desk, and she doesn't even look at me.

"Hey," I greet tentatively, but she only graces me with a head nod. "You been okay these past couple of days? I haven't seen you."

She barely makes eye contact. "I've been fine. Do you have papers for me to grade?"

The temperature in the room plummets, or maybe that's just how it feels. Danielle's usual overtly warm personality has been ripped out of her and replaced by this cold, careless version. It puts me on edge, but I have no option but to grab a stack of homework and place it on her desk. "That shouldn't take too long. I put the answer keys on the top. There's a version A and B."

"I know," she cuts me off. Then without further ado, she sits down and pulls out a red pen. I watch her organize her desk with the answer keys in opposite corners and the homework in front of her dead center. She flies through the first page with ease, marking only one problem incorrect and making a small

note on another saying that the student needs to show their work. She's fast; she's efficient. But she's distant.

The rest of the afternoon goes the same way as the beginning. I've become so accustomed to her eyes following me in front of the class that I feel a little vulnerable when she isn't looking at me. She keeps her beautiful blue gaze on the papers in front of her, her hands flying at lightning speed to make it through five classes of statistics homework.

I check on her between the fourth and fifth periods, and she doesn't look up. She mumbles a response and continues grading, albeit at a slower rate because, technically, this is her break as well. I watch as she pulls out her phone and fires off a few text messages. Green and blue bubbles appear on her screen as she switches from one chat to another. She even heavily sighs once or twice, her fingers flying across the keyboard in rapid response.

She stays quiet through the next hour as I teach. Even though I catch her texting in the middle of class, I don't say anything. The mood around her is strange, and frankly, she isn't here as a student. I don't care if she spends a minute here and there replying to a friend. Maybe that's why she's so upset today. Perhaps she and one of her gal pals had a falling out. Or maybe there was a fight with a boy...

A jealous shiver works its way down my spine. Thinking about her dating some douchey high school kid makes me angry. *You have no claim over her*, the little voice in my head reminds me. It sounds like Savior, who has repeatedly told me to stay away from Danielle Fulton at all costs. And yet, the more standoffish she is, the more it draws me to her. God, I'm a fucking textbook of a man.

During the break between fifth and sixth hour, she completely lounges. The pile of homework needing to be graded has diminished considerably. She takes the seven-minute passing period to scroll through Facebook and Instagram. I ask her if she needs more to do, and she shakes her head; I don't even get a verbal no. Something is *definitely* wrong.

But I quell my frustrations and anger with math. I disappear into the numbers, a trick I learned in high school. I was never good at school, but I was damn good at patterns and gambling. That's how I got into statistics.

As the final hour of the day winds to a close, I find myself staring at Danielle instead of the other way around. I have to train my eyes on the window in the back of the room to keep from looking at my TA. I know there's something wrong, and I have to figure out what it is.

I'm useless for the last few minutes of class and assign homework early. I skipped over a few parts of the lesson, but they weren't crucial to understanding. Instead, as the noise level in the classroom increases while students discuss what they will be doing this weekend, I walk directly to Danielle's desk. "I'd like to see you after class."

She was studying the leftover pencil marks on the desk before I spoke to her, but upon seeing me walk up and order her to stay after school, Dani looks up at me with a frown. "Can it wait?" She asks sullenly.

I shake my head. "No. We need to talk." I know how that sounds, but in a way, that's how it should sound. She kissed me the other day and then ditched class, and now she's back acting like I kicked her puppy.

The last handful of minutes pass in slow motion. I watch the clock on the wall as the big hand ticks closer and closer to 3:05. When it finally, mercifully, reaches the right time, the bell rings overhead, and all the students are on their feet and racing for the exit. "See you tomorrow!" I announce over the roar of sneakers on vinyl. All but Danielle, of course, who manages to fend off questions from her friends while pretending to pack her bag.

"Is there something I can help you with?" She asks rudely when the last student walks out the door, and it slams shut behind him. "I have dance practice to get to, as well as homework for all of my other classes."

I push away from my desk and stroll toward her. "Why are you mad?"

A frown flickers across her features. "I'm not mad," she insists after a moment.

But I don't believe her. She's played hot, hot, hot since she walked into my class on orientation day. "Bullshit." The word is out of my mouth before I can stop it. All pretense of professionalism leaves my body with one single word.

Danielle gets up and glares across the expanse between us. Six feet is all that

separates us. “Why don’t you want me in your class anymore?” She asks with a challenging tone. The knit of her eyebrows tells me that this isn’t a joke. She is genuinely upset.

But if she isn’t going to back down, neither will I. “You kissed me,” I remind her.

“You liked it.” She scores a point of her own.

I cross my arms over my chest out of frustration. “Your father is the Principal, Danielle.”

Her tongue runs across her teeth beneath her lips. “Dani,” she corrects. “You must be on really great terms with my father, Mr. Pelham. Considering the two of you chatted the other day about removing me from my TA position.”

So that’s what this is about. She’s upset that I went over her head and talked to the Principal. “I spoke to him as a boss to an employee, nothing more. I didn’t tell him what happened.”

“Clearly,” she responds dryly. “Or else you’d be out of a job, and I’d be in trouble.”

I doubt I’d be fired, especially if I told the Principal my side of the story. His daughter has been aggressively pursuing me, not the other way around. I might be on probation while an investigation took place, but I certainly wouldn’t be fired without question. “I like my job, Dani. I love what I do, and I don’t want to lose that.”

She tilts her head to the right, the crease of her brow deepening as she surveys me from head to toe. “But you *are* interested in me,” Danielle accurately surmises.

What am I supposed to tell her? Yes? No? That I’ve memorized every detail of her face and that her curves are imprinted on my brain? That seeing her fills my stomach with butterflies? That she makes me feel young again? That she gives me hope that I might find love after all? “Do you know what you’re doing?” I bark at her. “Do you know how dangerous this game is?”

Danielle’s mask of fury grows with my attitude. “This isn’t a game to me.”

“You sure treat it like one,” I snap back. “You tease me like I’m a dog.” A student walks past my classroom door, and I hold my breath, afraid that if I exhale, the doorknob will twist open, and the moment will be lost. But the girl keeps walking, never failing to hesitate in her forward travels.

“I needed to make sure you were interested,” she insists in a petulant tone. Her body language matches mine; arms crossed over her chest while she directs her eye contact toward the ground. “If you weren’t, I couldn’t have done what I did. You would surely have gone to HR or my father, and this would all have been for not.”

Me and my stupid male response to a pretty woman. “Dani,” I begin sternly, but she doesn’t look up. Instead, I see her bottom lip poke out into a pout. Frustration wears on me like a second skin. “Danielle.” Again, she doesn’t change position. Her chin is planted on her chest, and I swear she’s intentionally being a brat.

The little voice in my head tells me that this is my last chance to let it go. If I tell her to get out of here and leave me alone, I’ll break the last connection she has to me. But it’s half intrigue, half lust, that leads me to step forward.

I have avoided her since the moment I saw her. I could tell she had a crush, and I was afraid to pursue it. But every inch lost between us is an inch in a new direction. An inch closer to the scent of her shampoo, vanilla mixed with honey. An inch closer to her face, a small, silvery scar now evident on the curve of her chin. An inch closer to touching her, soft skin calling out to me like a siren. “Danielle, this has nothing to do with my interest in you and everything to do with our relationship with one another. You are a student.”

“I’m not your student,” she says childishly. Her tone irritates me to the core.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re still *a* student,” I explain. “And you’re the Principal’s daughter. Pursuing you even a day before you graduate is asking for trouble.”

Danielle’s chest rises. “Am I not worth the trouble?”

It’s a lapse in judgment, but I reach forward to grab her by the chin and force her to look at me. “When I speak to you, I want to know you’re listening.” She shudders. “Do you have a clue what you’re doing right now?”

She shakes her head, no, her chin moving from left to right in my hand. “I’ve never done this before,” Danielle swears. “I’ve never done *anything* before.”

The way she emphasizes *anything* makes me do a double take. *Don’t ask*, the little voice in my head begs, *just let it go*. But I can’t. “What do you mean, anything?”

Her lips part, and her tongue comes out to slide across them in a way that makes me uncomfortably hard. “I want you, Mr. Pelham.”

“That’s not what I asked,” I shift my weight from one foot to the other.

Her hand comes up to grab my wrist. Her dainty little fingers wrap around my tattooed skin, and she tilts her head down to brush her lips against my hand. “I’m a virgin, and I’ve been saving myself for you. I want you to be the one to deflower me.”

I choke on my spit. “You fucking *what?*” I growl.

She looks up at me through thick eyelashes, the kind of way you want a woman to look at you when she has her lips wrapped around your cock. “I saved myself for you, Mr. Pelham.”

Christ. I need to get out of here. There are too many witnesses in this building. If she says anything else, if she keeps looking at me that way, I’m going to give her what she wants right here on this flimsy, old-ass desk. “Leave,” I mumble to her. “I-I can’t talk about this right now.”

My dick is uncomfortable. It stretches out the elastic in my briefs and makes a mold of my cock in the khaki pants I’ve got in. I don’t bother to hide it when I step away from Danielle; she must know what she’s doing.

“Think about it, Mr. Pelham.” Danielle grabs her bag and tosses it over her shoulder. “Think about *me*, Holy.”

Hearing my name on her lips breaks me open like a piñata. I need to get out of here, right now. But I can’t go home. Home will just leave me to sit with my thoughts and her temptation. I need to think about something else. I need to distract myself.

As I head for the parking lot, locking up my classroom behind me, I call

Saint. "Meet me at Drafthouse. Now." I need a drink and a good buddy to talk me out of making the biggest mistake of my life.

HOLY



A couple of hours later, I'm drunk. "The world's just a weird place, ya know?" I lean toward Saint and gesture for him to do the same. With an annoyed look on his face, he leans in, too. "It's just like, stuff should happen for a reason. But when that reason happens, it doesn't make sense."

Saint stares at me blankly. "Why are we whispering?" He asks.

I frown. I hadn't realized I'd lowered my voice, but that's a good question. "This is secret stuff," I decide after a few moments. And the excuse makes sense to me. Everything makes sense when you're a few beers deep, except for maybe calculus.

"Yeah?" He says with a singular raised eyebrow. "Do you know how drunk you are?"

Both of my eyebrows shoot into my hairline in surprise. "Moi?" I ask in French and press a hand to my chest dramatically. "Drunk?" I give him an exasperated sigh before leaning back in my chair and crossing my arms. "I don't think so. Not me, anyway." It couldn't be me. Just because I've had a few beverages doesn't mean they've gotten to my head. Nope. Not me. Not Holy Pelham.

Saint snorts in derision. "You aren't making a lick of sense, Holy."

"I don't lick things," I sneer at my best friend, transfixed on the word lick.

"Well, that's a shame." Saint grabs his beer and sips it at an appropriate speed, unlike my earlier choice to down three in the span of fifteen minutes.

“Because I want to die with my tongue in a woman’s pussy, licking until I can’t breathe.”

I wish the waitress had left the beers on the table so I could count how many I’ve had. After those initial three, it went downhill. I think I’m on beer number four. Or five. Or is it six? “I remember women,” I wax poetically. “Women are nice. Women are beautiful.”

Saint closes his eyes and groans. He isn’t used to being the only sober person at the table. Usually, that’s my job. “Jesus, you’re a mess,” he claims.

“No,” I correct, “I’m *fine*. Danielle is the mess.” That sweet, barely legal teenage girl is ruining my life with her sexy little curves and taunting smile. I don’t know how she expects me to teach when she’s in the room. She stresses me the fuck out. And for what? Because she likes me?

I’ve had dozens of girls like me over the years. Pretty little cheerleaders, the quiet ones, the ones that know how to roll their Rs and use the skill like it’s foreplay. I’ve never been interested. I’ve stayed away because I can resist teenage girls, especially the ones I teach. They’re too young and too immature for me.

So what happened with Dani? What changed? What made me lose control of my faculties and indulge her childish delusions?

“I’m telling you, leave that girl alone. You don’t want to lose everything for her,” Saint warns me again. He’s like a damn broken record; he only plays one song.

Luckily, I’m thinking clearly now. Ever since our little chat after class today, I’ve been thinking the clearest I ever have. Not according to Saint, but life isn’t according to my best friend and his ridiculous notions about who I should or should not date. “You know I jerk off every night thinking about her?”

An older woman at a table beside us scoffs in disgust at my crude language. I lean over to apologize, but she sneers and pulls away, mentioning something about going to a restaurant where the clientele isn’t so rough around the edges. “Well, excuse me,” I roll my eyes.

“You’re disgusting,” she swears as she stomps off.

“She’s right,” Saint agrees. “Do you think it’s appropriate to talk like that about a girl like *her*?” He’s trying really hard not to use the word ‘student’. We both know what’s wrong with the way I’m thinking. His disdain for Danielle isn’t even because she’s the Principal’s daughter or because she’s young. He doesn’t like her because she’s my student, and he thinks it crosses a boundary. He’s not wrong, either. “You do it once; you’ll do it again.”

I don’t need his advice. I look around for the waitress, and when we make eye contact, I point at my beer bottle and gesture for another round. “She wears these summer dresses to class every day. I swear, when she bends over, she’s an inch away from flashing her pussy. I’ve never seen a panty line, either. I think she’s in my class, commando, every damn day. And all I can think about is her hot, wet—“

The waitress interrupts us. “Here you go!” She says with a smile as she drops off my fifth, sixth, or seventh round. “Can I get you anything else?”

“The check,” Saint replies. “Cut him off.”

The waitress looks like she’s barely old enough to drink herself. A nervous smile teeters on her lips before she laughs anxiously. “I don’t really make that call. I can get the manager if you want,” she lingers.

I wave her away. “It’s okay, doll; I don’t need anymore after this, anyway.” I hate to admit that Saint is right, but if I’m going to make it to class tomorrow morning, I’m going to need to switch to water. Or, at the very least, stop drinking. I’ve never shown up to class drunk before, and I’m not going to start now.

Mercifully, the waitress walks away. She heads over to one of the computers and prints out the ticket. While she’s getting our drinks and dinner all rung up, Saint pulls out his wallet and slips a credit card onto the edge of the table. “How determined are you to have this girl?” He finally asks.

On a scale of one to ten, I’d have to say an eight. The only thing that holds me back is propriety. And, probably, a little nervous energy that she might go around and tell her friends she got with a teacher and rumors would cause me to lose my job. But I tell Saint, “Ten,” because he doesn’t need to know that I have reservations about the very things he’s warning me against doing.

“Why’s that?” The waitress returns and goes to hand him the bill, but he fends her off with the credit card. “I trust you, darlin’,” he grins. She giggles before slipping away to run the card.

“I’ve looked her up,” I explain. I don’t tell him that I check her socials every night. I’m obsessed. I check her Instagram to see what she and her friends are doing. I check her Facebook to keep up with her family events. She doesn’t update her TikTok account, but she has one, and her likes are set to public. I go through and watch the videos she watches. “I know this girl inside and out. I think I’m in love with her.”

Saint looks skeptical, and rightly so. “Let me get this straight. You stalked this girl. And you think that’s love?”

His phrasing seems a little aggressive, but he’s not wrong. I nod in agreement. “Yeah. Sounds about right.” I don’t like his use of the word stalk, though.

“You’re pretty much in lust with this girl,” he corrects. “That’s why you’re getting drunk over her on a Thursday night. Not even night,” Saint checks his watch, “it’s barely 6:30.”

Even better. More time to sober up before bed and drink water so my hangover isn’t as bad tomorrow morning. “It’s not lust, Saint.” But I have to admit, my need for her *did* increase after she admitted to me that she was a virgin.

My best friend disagrees, but he seems to know better than to keep doing so quite as adamantly. Instead of telling me I’m wrong, he purses his lips to think. I’m like a teenager myself. The more he tells me not to be with her, the more it pushes me toward her. He realizes this and changes tact. “Alright, Holy. Here’s what you do. You go and fuck the girl. Good and rough. Get it out of your system. I’m talking about filling all her holes. One night of just plain fucking and going at it. Then tell me if you still want her this badly.”

Reverse psychology. I’m a few beers in, but my brain still functions. “Don’t tempt me, Saint,” I glare at him. “I’ll do it. You know I fucking will.”

“Isn’t that the point?” He asks with a bemused look on his face. The waitress comes by and surreptitiously drops his credit card and receipt on the table.

Her number is scribbled in the corner of the guest copy. “Maybe if you fuck her, you’ll see what I see, which is that she isn’t the end-all, be-all girl that you think she is. Your dick is driving you right now, and you either need to follow it to greener pastures or suck it up.”

He’s mixing metaphors, I think. “I can’t just fuck her,” I tell him after a few moments.

Saint signs the receipt and leaves the copy with her phone number on the table. “Why not? Because you’re afraid? You’ve been talking like a guy who isn’t afraid,” he taunts.

I grab my beer and take a long chug. Just thinking about what she told me earlier today makes me hard. It reminds me why we’re here, a couple hours into dinner and half a dozen beers deep. “She’s a virgin.”

He’s not drinking anything, but he chokes, probably on his spit, just like I did. “Shut the fuck up,” he hisses. “No, she’s not.”

I nod my head. “She told me so herself. Just this afternoon.”

He’s a good puzzle man, so he puts together all the pieces of the afternoon like it’s child’s play. “That’s why we’re here,” Saint finally sighs. “She can’t be a virgin, Holy. There’s no way a girl that comes on that strong hasn’t been fucked before,” he insists, but I can see his resolve waning.

“She wants it, though,” I go on. “She wants it bad. And from me.” I hate to sound like a cocky bastard, but I know what she told me. I saw the way she looked at me. She was a bitch in heat, and she wanted me to give her what she deserved.

Saint drums his fingers on the table; his eyebrows knit together in confusion. No matter how many ways he slices it, he can’t seem to process that Danielle might be telling the truth. “I don’t get it. You said she was this sexy, gorgeous thing that was hitting on you left and right.”

I nod along with him.

“But she’s a virgin.” The frown deepens. “Do you know how rare that is?” Saint shakes his no. “No, not even just that. Do you know how fucking *hot* that is?”

I raise my beer bottle to him in mock cheers. “Now you know why we’re here.” After Danielle admitted that she’d never been with anyone and she wanted me to be the one to take her flower, I couldn’t go home. If I went home, I’d have been alone. If I were alone, I would have talked myself into going to her house and fucking her in the room down the hall from her dad.

Instead, I made a beeline for Aggieville. I barreled through the doors of Drafthouse and planted my ass at the bar. I’d already called Saint, who showed up a few minutes later. I was already getting properly wasted, at four in the afternoon, no less, but it’s what I had to do. The alternative was a surefire way to wind up behind bars.

“Alright, do it.” Saint looks up from the table with a serious expression on his face. “If you want, anyway.”

Oh, I want. I want *badly*. More than Saint or God or anyone could ever know. “I’m afraid I’m going to get in her tight little snatch and blow my load like a two-pump chump.”

Saint snorts with laughter. “Maybe that’ll teach you to stop chasing eighteen-year-olds. You gotta get that *aged* pussy,” he grins. “Those thirty-year-olds know what they’re doing. They tighten their kegels around your dick and milk you dry without even moving. Just last week, I had this girl on top that swore if I came inside her, she was going to slap the shit out of me.”

“What’d you do?” Saint is into some kinky shit, but sometimes his stories are entertaining.

“I came inside her,” he scoffs. “Then she slapped me.” Saint finishes the last of his beer. “But I flipped her on her stomach after that and came in her ass next. Made her leave without panties and with my cum dripping out of all her holes.”

Jesus. That’s kind of hot. Sometimes I think that Saint knows better than all of us. He’s the one that’s getting laid regularly, and he’s having the time of his life. “Danielle probably isn’t like that,” I murmur after a few moments.

Saint shakes his head. “Nope, she probably isn’t. She’s a *virgin*,” he emphasizes for good measure.

“A virgin,” I repeat. But suddenly, I don’t need all the thrills of a girl that’ll

let me put it in her ass. I just need Danielle Fulton. My body aches for her. And not just to stick her with my dick and pop her cherry, but to be with her. There's more to Danielle than a hot body and an unplucked flower; I just have to take the time to peel back her petals.

DANIELLE



Holy wasn't in class on Friday. When I asked the substitute why he was gone, she suggested that I mind my own business. I received an angry phone call from my father half an hour later when the substitute reported me absent for fourth hour. I politely explained that I was in the library doing homework. While it didn't exempt me from missing three hours of the day, my dad at least forgave me.

Then I was forced to spend the weekend wondering if the boy I liked, liked me. It felt very high school, something I desperately wanted to distance myself from. I was so frustrated that I called Elliot and let him take me to a party on Saturday night. On a farm ten miles outside of Manhattan, my friends and I got drunk on grain liquor and orange juice—the foulest of concoctions but a cheap alternative to paying off someone's older sibling to buy us booze.

Thank God my dad went fishing early Sunday morning. He wasn't around to hear Elliot sneak out; he would have given me hell if he knew. But it's not like Elliot and I had sex. After having a few pulls of alcohol, I just wanted to be held. Elliot wanted to do more than that, but I wasn't giving it up to a seventeen-year-old football player who couldn't read between the lines. When I got tired of letting him feel me up, I rolled over and fell asleep. He wasn't doing it right anyhow. I don't think kneading my breast and tugging my nipples is all that sexy. It felt more like he was trying to milk me than make me feel good.

The rest of Sunday passed in a hungover blur. Dad got home before lunch

and said I looked a little green around the gills—“a little fish humor,” he called it. But he didn’t ask any questions; he just made me some soup and sent me to my room. I tried to finish some homework, but my head was pounding, and I wasn’t in the mood to read about physics. It left a bitter taste in my mouth on Monday morning when I had to sit through class, not entirely understanding what we were discussing.

But by lunchtime, I was back in the right headspace. Surrounded by my girls, Elliot, and his football buddies, I was ready to take on the world. Until I saw Holy.

I don’t know why I eat in the school cafeteria. The food might be fresh, but the meat has a strange taste, almost like the lunch ladies boiled it in a bag or something. But Rosemary, Esther, Cameron, and I rarely leave campus, so boiled hamburger it is.

The weekend gossip is first up on the menu for the afternoon. Rosemary made out with a stranger at the party on Saturday night, and nobody knows who it is, not even Rosemary. She was too drunk to ask him his name, and no one knew how he got invited to the party.

“He’s probably my soulmate,” she slumps over on the cafeteria table and groans. “But I’ll never know because I was too wasted to ask.”

“Keep it down,” Elliot laughs, but we can all see him looking both ways to ensure that a teacher isn’t walking by. “I’m sure Noah knows who it was.” That’s another football player, but not one that I’m particularly familiar with.

Rosemary lifts her head to shoot Elliot a glare. “I already called Noah,” she growls. “He said his sister probably invited some friends from the private school. I made out with a rich kid, Elliot, a rich kid that knew what to do with his hands.”

Elliot pulls on a raunchy smile and nudges one of the guys beside him. “Oh, yeah? What did he do with his hands, Rosemary? He got magical fingers? He put ’em somewhere special?”

I blush and turn away from the group, trying hard to distract myself from the mundane conversation. The girls and I have discussed this three times since Saturday night; I have no interest in rehashing it with Elliot, known for his dirty jokes and innuendos.

My gaze lands on, arguably, a worse situation than the one that I'm currently in. Holy is back today, and he's standing in the lunch line with my dance instructor, Jennifer Rae. With the keen sense of a teenage girl that has flirted with Mr. Pelham before, I can tell that Jennifer isn't touching his arm in a friendly sort of way. She runs her perfectly manicured fingers across his tattoos and then smiles at him in a way that lights up the room. I hate her.

Okay, that's not true. I love Jennifer; she's the best dance teacher that Manhattan High School has had in a decade. She's twenty-five and can dance circles around half the classes she teaches, but she choreographs amazing routines for our dance team. She's everything I want to be when I'm her age: poised, graceful, beautiful. And apparently, Holy's type.

I'm proficient at detecting flirtatious behavior, and I swear the smile on Holy's lips is reserved for special occasions. I've never seen him look at me like that. He looks at me like I'm an annoyance; he looks at Jennifer like she hung the moon.

"Excuse me," I mumble as I force myself up. I'm so frazzled by the scene in front of me that I leave my tray on the table and barely manage to grab my bag before fleeing the room. In my rush to leave, I catch Holy's eye and see his head tilt in confusion when he meets my gaze. My cheeks flush again, and I look away, desperate to escape. The walls feel like they're closing in, and at any moment, I will be crushed between them.

I escape to the outside, and the August sun beats down mercilessly. It is no quieter out here than it was inside. A group of students listens to music in the quad. Various groups are hosting booths to encourage people to join their clubs. People walk past me at a leisurely pace, chatting with their friends about classes, homework, boys, and dating.

I force myself to walk straight. One foot in front of the other. *Don't break down. Don't break down. Don't. Break. Down.* I tell myself. But I can feel tears prickling at the back of my eyelids. I'm embarrassed that I've been

chasing a man that has eyes for another woman. And I'm humiliated because so many men find me attractive but not the one I want.

I make it to the ladies' room before the tears fall. I can feel them welling up like a dam waiting to burst. No one is around, so I stand before the mirror and pull my lips into a smile. It hurts because every muscle in my face wants to crumple inward and cry, but they say the simple act of smiling is enough to change your mood. I don't feel any better doing it, but the tears recede.

I practice my smile for a few more minutes until I no longer feel like bursting into tears. Instead, I feel stupid and hollow inside. I've made a fool of myself under the guise of liking a boy. I always swore that if I were ever in a relationship, I wouldn't let myself get crazy like other girls. I was different. I felt different. But now I know that I'm not. I'm just like all the other high school girls.

"Not anymore," I mumble to my reflection. She looks as depressed as I feel. "I'm done with Holy Pelham." He's too old for me anyway. He's experienced where I'm not, and that makes us a bad match. These are all things that I tell myself as I walk to his class. Maybe I'll talk to my dad tonight about giving up this teaching assistant gig after all. I know he was excited over the summer when I showed interest in being a teacher, but if I'm being honest, I was only doing it to get closer to Holy anyway. I don't think I even want to be a teacher. To be honest, I don't know what I want to do. But if I give up this TA position, I'll have plenty of time to ponder it while I apply for colleges.

I channel the prior week's energy and ignore Holy once more. I enter the classroom only seconds before the bell rings. I don't speak to him; I only sit at my desk and wait for him to drop off the weekend's homework he's collected from his earlier classes. He asks me how my weekend went, and I give him nothing, not even the grace of a look. But I can see as I stare up at him from under my eyelashes that he scoffs and shakes his head while walking away. He's frustrated.

Good riddance, I think to myself. *I don't need you*. And class passes in its usual fashion. Forty-five-minute class periods stretch into seven-minute passing periods, and it starts all over again for the fifth and sixth hour. And just like on Thursday, Holy asks me to stay after. I consider picking up my

things and leaving early, just to piss him off, but I know we need to talk. I need closure. I need Mr. Pelham to tell me that while he's flattered by my interest, he doesn't want to date an eighteen-year-old virgin that can't drink and has a curfew.

Still, I feel the pressure mounting as the students leave. One after the other, slowly whittling the classroom down to just Mr. Pelham and me. Nervous energy bubbles in my chest, and I realize that I can't turn my feelings off. I still like Holy, even if he likes someone else. I've liked him for years; you can't change that over the span of a couple hours.

"What's your problem now?" He asks the second the door closes behind the last student.

I haven't even gotten to my feet yet, but I'm floored. "Excuse me?"

"Don't get defensive." Holy walks around his desk and sits on the edge closest to me. When he crosses his arms, I see his muscle definition under the polo he's wearing. "You've been standoffish, just like the last time I saw you. What kind of hot and cold game are you playing?"

I'm not playing anything, nor do I have time to be played. I match his energy and body language. "You could have just told me that you weren't interested."

Holy's jaw tightens as he clenches the muscle. "It's complicated, Danielle."

I don't correct him this time; there's no need. His tone is intimate, unlike the nature of our relationship. "Either you want me, or you don't. But if you do, I don't want to see you flirting with my dance teacher in the lunchroom."

He opens his mouth to respond and then closes it quickly. A frown crops up on his face as he tries to recall what I'm talking about. "Miss Rae?" Holy asks, confused. "I wasn't flirting with Miss Rae."

"Well, Jennifer was flirting with you," I reply stubbornly. I know what flirtation looks like, and she was practically throwing herself at him.

"Whatever," he huffs. "It doesn't matter what *she* was doing. I'm telling you what *I* was doing. And I was just talking to her like I would anyone else."

A childish outburst explodes from my chest before I can stop it. “Okay, sure. But you don’t look at me like you look at her.”

Holy slams his fist down on the desk. He’s so fast that I hear the sound before I realize what he’s doing. “Damn it, Danielle. This is why we can’t do this. You’re in high school, you’re so young, and you jump to conclusions instead of talking to me.”

I hate the reminder of my age; it shames me. “I know.” But I admit, he’s right.

He wants to keep raging, but my admittance cools his anger. He curls his fingers around the edge of the desk, and his knuckles turn white. “It should be simple to say that I like you and want you. I shouldn’t have to fight a war with myself on propriety every time I look at you,” Holy says with a sigh. A dejected look takes over his features.

My heart swells with newfound information. “You like me?” God, I sound as young as he accuses me of being.

But Holy isn’t quite as bothered anymore; maybe it’s because I’m not pulling childish antics in the process. “Yes. I think you’re gorgeous, Dani. You’re smart, and you’re kind. You do a hell of a job making my nights easier by grading four of my five classes’ worth of homework before the final bell for the day rings. It’d be hard not to like you. But I don’t know what to do about it. Or if I should do anything about it.” The stern look on his face is in direct contrast with his words.

Maybe there’s a chance for us after all. “Take me for a ride.” I bite my bottom lip anxiously.

Holy meets my eyes with confusion. “What?” He’s visibly shaken.

“All of our interactions are here at school. That’s what’s causing the conflict in your mind,” I explain, and he nods in agreement. “I’ve always wanted to ride a motorcycle. Let’s go for a ride. Somewhere far away.” My heart is racing; my pulse is throbbing in my wrist. “Where we can talk away from the roles that we’re in. Where we can just be ourselves.”

I see him question the idea. He holds onto it tightly, rolling it around his brain for a handful of moments before he agrees. “Sure. I think we could do that.”

“A date,” I stipulate.

“A motorcycle ride,” he corrects with a smile.

“Call it whatever you want, but you’re going to be in love with me by the time it’s over.” I know how confident I sound, but I’ve waited an eternity for this moment. If it doesn’t play out like I hope it will, I’ll be crushed.

Holy’s smile doesn’t falter a centimeter. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.” He doesn’t deny my statement of fact, either.

I’m confident that if we get away from these hallowed high school halls, he’ll fall head over heels for me. Then we’ll both be in love with each other. This is the start of our happily ever after.

HOLY



Our story has only ever had one ending. I realize that now. From the moment she walked into my classroom during orientation and made her interest in me clear, she started what would become our legacy.

We meet at Top Of The World, a large hill that overlooks the west side of town. It's abandoned at 8:00 pm as families send their kids to bed and settle in to watch their evening shows. The sun is setting just beyond the hills in the distance, casting a shadow on the ground below us.

Danielle arrives in her car, parking on the side of the road. There's no lot at Top Of The World; you just park and hope no one hits you. When she climbs out, she's far from appropriately dressed. A little white dress dances a few inches higher than usual, and the peak of her nipples is prominent through the fabric.

I thought I told her to wear pants. "If we crash, you're going to get a bad case of road rash." But I admit that she looks good. So good that it feels like someone wraps their hand around my heart and pulls it out of my chest.

She points at the sneakers on her feet to show that she followed at least one of my instructions. "I wore close-toed shoes, though," Danielle says with a smile.

"So you did," I return her grin. I'm forty years old. I've been dating women longer than this one has been alive. But I'm still nervous. Call me a big teddy bear or a baby or what have you, but I get butterflies when I see a pretty girl. "I brought you a helmet."

Danielle looks at the helmet atop the seat behind me. She wrinkles her nose in a cute, innocent sort of way. "I'm not wearing that," she says at last. "It'll mess up my hair."

She wears her locks high in a clip with dark tendrils escaping in wisps. A late summer breeze catches the stray hairs and blows them across her face. "You know what would really mess up your hair?" I grab the helmet and walk it over to her. She smells like strawberries tonight, strawberries and fresh linen.

"Let me guess." Danielle brings her index finger up to her chin and taps it playfully. "Is it road rash?"

I push a few stray strands of hair out of her face. It's the first time I've touched her, and it feels like electricity kisses my fingertips. "You'd be lucky if it was just road rash. If we crash and you're not wearing a helmet, you could die."

She rolls her pretty blue eyes and sighs. Then, in a deadpan tone, she recommends, "Maybe don't crash then."

"I wish I could say I was the only person on the road and therefore the only person responsible for if we crash, but you know, other cars exist," I respond matter-of-factly.

It was a good idea to get away from the high school. Seeing her out here in the wild without the pretense of her being a student and me being a teacher changes everything. I feel comfortable around her, like this is the person I was always meant to be with.

Danielle reaches up and pulls the clip out of her hair. Dark locks fall around her shoulders as she shakes them free. "I guess you make a good point. But if I have helmet hair, I'm going to be super upset."

I help her fit into the helmet and adjust the strap under her chin. "You look adorable." I can forget that she's eighteen when we're like this. I can forget that she's my TA and I'm an authoritative figure.

"Do I look like I could be a big, bad biker chick yet?"

I almost break into a fit of laughter. I know all types of women into motorcycles, from the prim and proper girls like Danielle to the leather-clad

women I call my sisters among the Kings Of Carnage motorcycle club. The woman standing in front of me is the last person I expect to don leather chaps and get a tattoo. “I think you’re a few steps away from intimidating anyone older than ten, but I’m not saying it isn’t possible.”

Danielle reaches up to brush her fingers over the patch on my leather vest. “I used to wonder what this meant,” she admits, changing the tone of our meetup. “I always saw you or other guys around town wearing patches like this.”

I raise a curious eyebrow at her. “And do you know what it means?”

She meets my gaze and nods slowly. “I had to do some research, but I figured it out. What’s KOC, though?” Danielle runs her thumb across the patch for a second time, feeling the sewn fabric beneath her fingertips. “I know it’s your motorcycle gang or whatever. But what’s it stand for?”

“It isn’t a gang,” I correct. That notion has foiled too many of us before. I was lucky to get my job at the Manhattan High School. I had tattoos and drove a motorcycle, but when I came to my interview, I showed up in a respectable long-sleeve shirt and drove my truck. I am not ashamed of the men and women I call family, but we all need a job. Some members of the KOC haven’t been as lucky.

“Motorcycle club,” Danielle nods her head. “Sorry. I know,” she pauses and slows down, “I know there’s a difference between gangs and clubs.”

Yes. And no. We have all the makings of a gang, I’ll give her that, and some days it’s hard to tell the difference. We have members that sell drugs and do shady shit. We’re mixed up with the Valenti crime family from time to time. We’ve been known to take out our rivals and pin it on an innocent. But I like to think we’re more than the dark parts of our history, present, and future. “I think the difference is these patches.”

I bring my hand up to cover hers, and the electric feeling courses through my veins this time. “We are united by this patch. We identify brothers and sisters by this patch. If a family member is in need, we will move heaven and earth if they’re wearing this patch.” It takes a lot to earn a patch; that’s why they’re so sacred. “The KOC, Kings Of Carnage, started as an all-male motorcycle club of friends that just wanted to get together and ride. It became a

brotherhood that transformed lives over the years. Now we have sisters and mothers. We have the feminine presence needed to keep us level-headed. We aren't innocent people, but we're family. Family is the difference between a motorcycle club and a motorcycle gang."

Danielle holds my gaze. "Family," she repeats after me. "Family is good."

"Not always," I warn her with a shake of my head. "Saint didn't want me to see you. He said you'd ruin my life."

Tension builds in her fingers. I can tell as I hold her hand to my chest, and she tries gently to pry it away. "Y-you told your brothers about me?"

Not my actual brothers. I have two of them, and neither would be too keen on listening to me drone on about a girl. "Saint," I shrug, "and a few other guys in the club. Guys I'm close to." I don't tell her the vulgar things they said or admit the crude things I told them. "They're worried about your age and that you're still a student. I think they're also worried about your father."

"My dad?" She snorts and pulls away from me. "He's a kitten. He'd do anything to see me happy."

I doubt that. If he knew that she was out late on a school night having a secret rendezvous with one of his employees, he'd call the cops. "I think there's a difference between seeing his daughter happy with a boy her age and seeing her happy with a man who's forty."

A lump forms in Danielle's throat for half a second before she swallows past it. "You don't know my dad," she replies with a half-hearted smile. "We've been through a lot together. My mom left when I was really young, and it's been the two of us ever since."

Funny, we almost have that in common. "My dad left when I was five," I admit. "I can relate. My mother and I were really close until she passed a couple of years ago."

We share a sympathetic look, our emotions comprised of raw magnetism for one another and a shared connection. For the first time, I know that what I'm feeling for Danielle isn't lust fueled by late-night stalking. It is genuine and real.

“I think I could bring you home tonight, and my father would allow it,” Danielle says after a few moments of silence. “He’d be upset for a bit, but once I told him I loved you, he’d get over it.”

She loves me. It’s strange to hear those words on someone’s lips. “I think he’d be mad enough to fire me.”

Danielle purses her lips to think about it for a minute before coming to the same conclusion. “Yes, he probably would. But he’d eventually accept it.”

I don’t know what to make of that if I’m being honest. If all I can hope for with Danielle is for her father to accept the two of us together one day, then what’s the point? I always thought I’d share a special bond with my future father-in-law. Growing up without a dad was hard. I imagined that my father-in-law would treat me like his son and not some guy that stole his baby girl from him.

Danielle goes on. “Your relationship wouldn’t be with him, though, so it doesn’t matter. What matters is what I think of you. And I’ve been in love with you since I was fourteen.”

In a way, she’s right. I wouldn’t be marrying Marcus Fulton; I’d be marrying Danielle Fulton. I nearly give myself whiplash trying to come to terms with that thought. Just a few days ago, I would have traded an arm and a leg to get Danielle off my case. Now I’m thinking about our future together—getting married, her father becoming mine, and the future we’re going to have. *Don’t get ahead of yourself*, I think. *If you push too fast, you’ll push her away.*

A shiver races down my spine despite the evening heat. If I were to lose Danielle, even though I’ve barely had her, I think it would rip my soul in two. Something about her fills a part of me that I didn’t realize was empty. “We should go on that motorcycle ride now,” I change the subject.

Danielle follows me to the motorcycle, and I climb on, straddling the beast between my legs. She follows suit, asking me for tips on gracefully draping her dress so she doesn’t flash all the cars we drive by.

“You should have worn pants,” I tell her with a smile.

She harrumphs before wrapping her arms around my waist. “Where’s the fun in following the rules?”

She's right about that. If we followed the rules, I wouldn't be sitting here with a sexy young woman on the back of my Harley, sticking to me like honey to the hive. "If you need me to stop, just squeeze my arm twice." I start the motorcycle, and the engine roars to life.

"I won't need you to stop," Danielle insists. "I've only ever wanted more from you."

There's a lump in my throat now, but I can't swallow past it. Who knows how long destiny has had this woman planned for me? I could change the course of my life by forcing her off my bike and driving away. But then I wouldn't be looking down the barrel of forever, seeing my soulmate on the other side.

DANIELLE



I t's like a scene out of a movie.

Holy navigates the motorcycle down the winding road leading to Top Of The World, and we're dumped onto the highway. I cling to him for dear life, the adrenaline rush putting me on high alert. My heart flies into my lungs as he gets the motorcycle up to highway speeds. It feels like we're flying.

I'm thankful for the helmet now. The wind whips around the hair sticking out of the back of the helmet. The plastic half-visor keeps it from stinging my eyes. The sun sinks beyond the hills in the distance, but it's still hot and muggy.

We drive for a while, and I see the countryside surrounding Manhattan in a way that I never have before. My father and I have gone to various small towns in Kansas. I've taken numerous backroads and dirt roads to visit friends. But there's something more genuine about being out there without the walls of a car to keep you safe. The air smells different when it isn't filtered through a car's AC. You appreciate the feeling of the wind on your skin as you barrel down an empty road going seventy.

Holy stops when we reach an overlook. He's taken so many twists and turns, slowed down and sped up, but I don't know where we are. Tuttle Creek Lake is below us, and off in the distance, I can see the campgrounds.

After a few seconds, he shuts off the motorcycle and pulls off his helmet. "Isn't it beautiful?"

That's an understatement. I've never seen the sunset glisten on the lake like this. I've been coming here for years, but this view is different.

I follow his lead and remove my helmet, handing it to him while I climb off the back of the motorcycle. "Where are we?" I ask. The road we came up was lined with trees. Thick, green branches swelled overhead, and wildflowers dotted the roadside.

"It's a secret," Holy smiles as he sets the helmets in my seat and dismounts the bike.

When I turn to look at him, he is basking in the final rays of sunlight. His skin is golden beneath the amber beams; he is the treasure at the end of the rainbow. "Well, it's beautiful," I add, suddenly at a loss for words.

He walks up next to me, and his arm brushes mine. "My siblings and I found this place by accident when we were kids. We didn't have a lot of money growing up, but Mama always made sure we had bikes. Partially so we could ride to school every day, but in the summer, we spent hours scouring Manhattan while she was at work. We were the fittest kids you've ever seen." Holy chuckles as he recalls his youthful summers. "We probably rode a thousand miles the summer we found this place."

It was all uphill to get here. I've used the bike machine at the gym, but I don't think I've ridden a bicycle since I was a preteen. "Where did you live?"

"Redbud Estates." He lowers his head toward mine. "The ritzy part of town," Holy says with a wink.

I've heard of Redbud Estates, everyone in Manhattan has. It's a trailer park well-known for its poor management. But since the trailers cost a fraction of the price of a house, and the park isn't well-kept, people don't complain much. "That makes this a long way to bike."

He nods along with me. "And on the highway, too. People were honking at us left and right."

The highway he mentions is Seth Child Road. It cuts through town, linking travelers on K18 to Highway 24. There are a few off-ramps that lead to business districts, including the turn-off for Redbud Estates. "I'd be so embarrassed. I can't stand having so many people watch me."

Holy raises an eyebrow. I can feel his gaze on me, and I studiously ignore him. “Really?” He questions disbelievingly. “You’re on the dance team.”

“That’s different,” I say quickly. “I know people are going to be watching me when I dance. And, to a certain degree, I know that when I walk through the courtyard first thing in the morning or through the cafeteria at lunch, someone will stare. But I can’t imagine a bunch of strangers watching me bike down Seth Child.”

I am a big fish in a little pond at Manhattan High School. Part of the reason other people like me is because I’m the Principal’s cool daughter. I don’t rat people out for smoking behind the gym. I go to parties, and I get drunk along with everyone else. I’m not the prettiest girl in school, but I’m conventionally attractive. I’m not a tattletale or a know-it-all in the classroom. I’m just an average girl that lucked into being popular. I’m still not used to the attention after all these years, but I’m working on accepting my place in this world.

Holy wisely chooses not to go down the rabbit hole of deciphering my idiosyncrasies. He tells me about the summer he and his siblings spent trying to get here and what happened after they finally arrived. “I was thirteen at the time. It seemed like a cool place to hang out and build a treehouse, but I didn’t really see it as much more than that.”

His brothers did, though. With a touch of embarrassment in his tone, he admits that his brothers lost their virginity here. “Both of them.” Holy shakes his head in mock disapproval before admitting he did, too. “It was a family legacy by then. Though I swear to God, if I find out that Hope lost her virginity up here, I’ll kill the man that did it to her.”

Hope must be his younger sister. The concern in his tone and his protective nature make me smile. “But it’s a family legacy,” I tease.

He shakes his head and makes a sound of disgust. “I better never find out that Hope knew about that. I think I’d be sick.”

It’s a double standard; I see it clear as day. Holy and his brothers can have sex up here, but God forbid his sister does. I suppose it has something to do with men finding women to be the more vulnerable type. “Would it be alright for me to lose my virginity up here?”

Holy turns to look at me, his neck snapping so fast that he almost breaks it. “With who?”

I take a few steps closer to the edge of the overlook. More of the lake comes into view, along with the land below. Jagged rocks jut out of the ground, promising pain and death to anyone that tumbles forward. “With anyone. You, maybe,” I peek backward at him, “or someone else, perhaps.”

His hands curl into fists at his side, and I face forward once more. I know we’re playing a dangerous game, but what’s life without a bit of danger? What’s living if you don’t have a little fun? “You shouldn’t have sex up here,” Holy decides. His shoes crunch against the gravel as he walks up behind me.

“Why not? It’s a pretty place.” A bit of grass cushioning the ground for anyone looking to roll around under the moonlight. The view is spectacular.

Holy is closer than I imagined. I feel his hand on the small of my back and jump at the sudden touch. He grabs my wrist out of instinct to keep me from moving forward and tumbling over the edge of the overlook. “Your first time should be special, Danielle. You should be surrounded by flowers and candles. You should be with someone you love.” He chokes on the words as he speaks them. “Your first time shouldn’t be on the ground with some boy that doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“What about you?” I ask bravely. “What if it was with you?”

He corrects my course of action. “Your first time shouldn’t be in the dirt with some biker twice your age, either.” But his fingers tightening around my wrist tell me that though he says one thing, he’s thinking another.

I turn toward him; our bodies pressed together beneath the fleeting beams of daylight. “What if I want it to be?”

Holy drops my hand in favor of grabbing my hips. I can’t tell if he’s trying to hold me close or keep me from getting closer. “You don’t,” he insists. “Yeah, my brothers and I lost our virginity here, but it wasn’t great. You deserve a first time that reflects how special you are.”

Some girls know what they want their first time to look like, just like some girls plan their weddings. The only thing I’ve known is that I’ve loved Holy

since the first time I laid eyes on him. I've imagined having sex with him a dozen different ways in a hundred different places. I don't care where we do it; I just want it to be with him. "Holy, you're not listening to me."

He digs his fingers into my hip bones. "What am I not hearing?" He asks, frustrated.

"That this isn't about where. It's about with who. I want my first time to be with you. I don't care if it happens here or in a bedroom, as long as it's between the two of us."

His frustration grows. I can't quite figure out why, but there is tension in the hands that he holds me with. "Danielle," and I can tell by his tone of voice that I'm not going to like whatever he says.

I pull away from him, anger filling the well in my chest. "I don't know why we came out here," I announce stubbornly. "I don't know why you brought me here if you don't like me or want to have sex with me."

"You're in high school," he cuts me off. "You should be wined and dined and ___"

"Okay," I speak over him. "I'll find someone else to do it. Maybe Elliot Graham. Maybe some other football meathead that looks at me like I'm some piece of meat and not an actual person." I spit out the words like they're acid, and they burn through the romantic atmosphere. "I'll figure out where this stupid place is and bring one of them up here."

Holy clenches his teeth together. "Danielle," he says sternly, "that's not why I brought you here."

But I'm a ball of fury and rage now. I cannot be quieted by his fatherly tone; I cannot be put out by his seemingly well-put-together nature. "Hell, maybe I'll bring the whole football team up here."

Holy grabs me unexpectedly and forces his mouth onto mine. He pours his anger and frustration into the kiss, passion overwhelming me like too much water in a cup. "Don't ever threaten to bring another man up here," he demands when he breaks the kiss.

"You're the only man I want to be with," I promise him. "So be with me,

Holy.”

He struggles with the idea internally, but in the end, I get what I want. He pulls me to the ground, and I’m introduced to the Pelham family legacy firsthand.

DANIELLE



Sex is the marriage of body parts. It is hands all over you. It is lips taking in your delicate parts. It is arms holding you close. It is foreheads pressed against one another in passion. Holy and I are a mess of body parts just waiting to be wed.

The grass provides little comfort. We are, after all, still on the ground. But it's more comfortable than the gravel that bites into my skin when we get too close to the roadside.

Holy's lips explore as much as his hands do. He licks a spot behind my ear that I didn't realize was ticklish. He travels down the slope of my neck and dithers at my collarbone. Round and round his tongue goes, swirling against my skin like an early spring tornado.

My breath comes in ragged strips. I force air through my lungs for something to do, to distract me from the pleasure that Holy brings me. My skin tingles with electricity and desire. It seems impossible that I will explode into a million pieces, but it seems just as impossible that I won't.

The final, fleeting moments of the day disappear beyond a hill and some trees. We're bathed in a blue sky that threatens to fade into black. The sound of crickets and birds plays a melody I will never forget.

It isn't the summer heat that brings a sheen of sweat to my skin; it is Holy's fingers traveling up my thigh and slipping under the hem of my dress. The

press of his thumb against my tender, untouched skin. He strokes my inner thigh as his lips caress my clavicle, and everything comes alive.

“Tell me when you want me to stop,” he growls against the curve of my neck. Then his fingers race across the crotch of my panties. With a fine bit of fabric between us, I shouldn’t feel as on fire as I do, but it’s like he scalds me with desire. My skin heats to a crisp 120 degrees, and I feel like I’m roasting inside my delicate body.

I never want him to stop. I beckon him on by tilting my hips toward his and parting my lips to suck in more air. At first, I think the press of our bodies against one another is stealing the oxygen from my lungs, but it’s pure lust. It’s pleasure drawing breath from my chest.

I always thought my first time would be a little awkward. I was sure that Holy would know what to do, and he’d have to talk me through it. But being together feels natural, like it was meant to be.

He pulls aside my panties with his thumb, and a single digit slides through my slit. I open my mouth, tilting my head backward at the base of my skull. I press my hair into the dirt and grass, trying harder to sink into the Earth while simultaneously grinding against Holy. I need all of him and less of him, somehow, at the same time.

A few seconds later, his finger is teasing my entrance. He pops his digit past my opening, and the intrusion changes my body language. He goes to the first knuckle, barely an inch in, and drags the pad of his fingertip against my insides. While I claw at his shirt, desperate for more, he gives it to me in the form of another inch. He pushes his thumb to the second knuckle, and now I feel like he’s opening me up for what’s coming next.

“That’s it, sweet girl,” he whispers, “nice and slow. Grind your pussy against me. Take your pleasure.” Then he buries his finger to the hilt. His palm is pressed against my clit while his finger makes little circles inside me.

I won’t lie. I’ve touched myself before. It’s a right of passage for teenage girls. You get curious about what you’re hiding under those frilly panties your dad says you can’t show the boys on the playground. Next thing you know, a little button swells up the more you touch it, and somehow you touch it just enough to make yourself feel really good.

But regardless of how many practice orgasms I've given myself and how thoroughly I've tried to get to know my body, it isn't the same. Holy touches me in all the right ways, and it makes my fumbled attempts at self-pleasure look amateurish in comparison.

He grinds his palm against my pleasure center until I'm arching my back and scrambling to get just the right amount of pressure to get off. He curls his finger and drags a wealth of sensations out of me from within. While I'm holding onto his biceps to keep from falling off the edge of the world, he has his lips on my neck, and he sucks like a Hoover vacuum. He brands me with a hickey, blood vessels bursting beneath my epidermis.

"You're mine, now," he promises. "This is endgame, princess."

And I don't know if I can prove him wrong because he applies the slightest pressure to his motion below my waist, and I explode like a firecracker. The moon is still rising in the sky, but I hail it in with a moan and a "*holy fuck*" whispered from my throat like a demon clawing its way out. Endgame, indeed.

He doesn't stop moving just because I'm finished. If anything, Holy picks up pace. He touches me like I was made for touching. With his lips a couple of inches from the first, he adds a second hickey to my throat. He drags his teeth across my skin and marks me like I'm his forever.

"You'll always feel this good when you're with me, baby." It's another promise, like being his will suddenly change my life. As if, in no uncertain terms, I would never want to leave him.

And he's right. Because I could never give up the pleasure that he gives to me. I'm not walking away from how he makes me feel. "I don't ever want to hear you talk about another man," he says. "Not those fuck boys on the football team and not the stupid fucks you meet in your English class."

Holy's touch is like magic, binding me to him with twisted words spoken in lust. I'm this close to nodding my head and promising to never look at another man again. That's the power that he has over me.

As if reading my mind, Holy stops all movement. My body yearns for more, demands more, but he stays absolutely still as he hovers above me. "Do you

hear me, Dani?" He meets my gaze, the intensity penetrating my very existence. "Tell me you hear me. Tell me I'm yours, and you're mine."

This isn't the same man from before, the one that was worried about sharing a kiss with me. Now he has his hand in my panties, his finger inside me, and he's making me promise myself to him.

"I'm yours," I whisper, unable to speak any louder.

Holy doesn't notice or doesn't care because he presses his lips to mine and says, "And I'm yours."

It is the most passionate of love stories, a forbidden dance to the music of the woods. Every second feels like a minute, and every minute stretches an eternity. I want to stay in this moment forever, hard ground and freshly cut grass included. As long as I'm with Holy, nothing else matters.

HOLY



The conditions aren't ideal. We don't have a blanket to shield us from the dirt and grass or to throw over us if someone drives up. The path to this overlook isn't well-frequented, but it's still available to the public. Any car that drives up here and sees us might be willing to turn back around at first, but the second they notice Danielle's youth next to my burly, tattooed existence, they're going to start asking questions.

But when the train is barreling down the tracks, it's hard to put on the brakes. And that's what it feels like being wrapped up in Danielle right now.

She has her leg hooked around my waist while I dip two fingers inside her. She's as tight as I imagined she would be. Her pussy clenches my digits like she never wants to let go. I rock them back and forth, not just to feel her writhe with pleasure beneath me but to prepare her for my cock.

The last time I was with an eighteen-year-old, *I* was eighteen. I wouldn't say I've always dated my age, but the older I've gotten, the older the women I date has gotten. I almost forgot what it was like to be a barely legal teenage virgin. They're so responsive to touch, even the tiniest things, like the breeze blowing across their nipples.

I can't get her fully undressed. Being in public puts us in the precarious position of someone coming across us by accident. The last thing we need is an indecent exposure charge. But I can pull the top of her dress down and wrap my lips around her erect nub. I can see the other pucker as the evening breeze sweeps across it.

I can't do everything to Danielle that I'd do in the bedroom, but I can get her off and make her feel good. And that is enough for a woman's first time. It's far more than many get. This may not be romantic, and we don't have floral-scented candles setting the mood, but we have each other and pleasure. And it's nice. Perfect, even.

I don't know when it becomes apparent that we should have sex. I know somewhere between her second and third orgasm, she's reaching between us and unbuttoning my pants. We roll around a few times, and there's a moment when she's on top. She grinds her pelvis against mine while I fumble with my jeans. If I had known that this was going to happen, I would have trimmed up down there. But instead, it's a jungle of dark red curly hair that matches the shade on my head.

Danielle's eyes widen as I pull my dick out. She drives her bottom lip between her teeth and bites down, an expression of interest. "And that's going to fit?"

I grin up at her, palming the shaft of my cock. "It will," I assure her. "You'll expand the more turned on you are. You'll be able to take all this and more when I'm through with you."

Her cheeks flush a beautiful shade of red as she looks away. "Is it normal to be a little afraid?"

It makes me love her more. The hesitation in her tone, the embarrassed look on her face. Even the way she tightens her thighs around my waist as she straddles me, an unconscious response to her body trembling with fear. "It's perfectly normal. And we don't have to do this right now." I grab her hips and hold her in place, digging my fingers into her skin until she's forced to look at me. "We can wait and do this some other time, Dani. Or I can take you back to my place, and we can fool around there. Or I can take you back to your car, and we can pretend this never happened." I'd be hard-pressed to convince my brain that I hadn't been knuckle-deep in her pussy, but I'd try my hardest.

Danielle shakes her head. "I want to do it," she admits, "I'm just a little afraid, that's all. And you said it's normal."

I nod. "It is. We can go as slow as you want. I want you to be comfortable.

Tell me what you want.”

Her tongue swipes across her bottom lip, and she waits for a moment before saying, “I just want you, Holy. We don’t have to make love or anything. I just want to be with you.”

I don’t know if she knows this, but I would move mountains for her. Danielle acts like this moment doesn’t have to be special, but she doesn’t realize how special her vulnerability and her trust are to me.

I reach up and bring my hand to her cheek. The moon rises overhead and casts a glow on her face, making her shine like a star plucked from the night sky. “And I only want to be with you.”

She wraps her fingers around my shaft and directs me to her entrance. Her panties lay in a heap a foot away, removed and forgotten in our earlier foreplay. With the tip of my dick at her opening, her wetness makes my heart race.

Danielle lowers herself on top of me, hands positioned on my pectorals, and she clenches her teeth as she braces for pain. But it doesn’t come the way she expects.

I stretch her out. There’s no doubt about that. I can feel her pussy expanding around me, and it’s a tight fucking fit. But in the best possible way. She knocks me breathless as she slides down my pole and rests her ass comfortably on my thighs.

With a couple of deep breaths, I feel her muscles unclench. She relaxes into the sensation of being full. “That’s not bad,” she insists after a minute. “That didn’t even really hurt.”

She moves up and down a few times, getting used to the feeling of her pussy expanding to hold me. I have to bite my tongue to keep from losing my mind. She feels so good that it’s driving me crazy just to lay here and let her take me at her own pace. But I’d rather die than be anywhere else.

After a few minutes, Danielle stops. She looks at me, unsure at first, as if she doesn’t know what she’s supposed to do yet. I take control so she doesn’t have to figure it out.

I sit up with a hand on the small of her back and another on her hip. “Hold on,” I tell her, then flip her onto her back. Danielle lets out a small yelp of surprise as she finds herself on the ground, her white dress now filthy. With her pretty blue eyes staring up at me, all big and vulnerable, she draws the dirty talk out of me without trying. “You ready to be fucked, little girl?”

Danielle slowly nods her head yes, and that’s all the encouragement I need. I start moving inside her like a pistol, firing rapid shots at her G-spot with the tip of my dick. She reaches up to wrap her arms around my neck, and I feel her fingernails on my shoulder blade.

With one hand on her thigh, I fling it around my waist for a deeper fit. Every time I sink inside her, it takes her breath away. She’s coated in a layer of sweat from pleasure; I’m dripping with sweat from exertion. It’s a mental game to keep from coming inside her right now.

I pump in and out like my life depends on it. I’ve never been closer to spilling my load in a woman like this. I’ve always worn a condom or ensured the woman I was with was on birth control. But Danielle brings out an animal inside me. She makes me want to defile and ravage her while simultaneously protecting her from other predators.

“The first time I saw you, I wanted you.” She walked into my class on orientation day with her shapely calves and beautiful smile, and it took my breath away. “I wanted to make you mine. I wanted to lock you up so no other man could ever look at you and think about you the way I did.”

I couldn’t bear it if I saw Danielle with another man. I think, in some ways, I’d react the way she did when she saw me with Jennifer. Maybe even worse because I’m a man, and I have to mark my property. “I want to make pretty babies with you. With your eyes and your brains. You’re so God damn beautiful and smart that I want our kids to be just like you.”

I shouldn’t say this. Not to a woman this young, not to a woman that was a virgin just a few minutes ago. But she turns me into a monster, and I say all the depraved, ugly things I’m thinking. “I want you to take my load, baby girl. I want to see my semen dripping out of your pussy.”

Danielle orgasms like a fucking bullet train. I don’t expect it, but the next thing I know, she’s almost tearing off the skin on my back as she claws at

me.

I go down with her. The repetition of my dick thrusting in and out, combined with the pressure of her muscles shuddering around me, is too much. The look on her face as she comes on my dick is so fucking erotic that it sends me over the edge.

I coat her walls with my juices, and it's over. What started as a sunset motorcycle ride ended in a moonlight orgasm. I press my forehead to hers, look into her sex-crazed blue eyes, and know it's all different now. My life, hers, the relationship we once had as student and teacher. I fucked up. I did the very thing my buddies warned me not to do. I came inside the eighteen-year-old daughter of my Principal.

But the world doesn't crash down around us. In fact, the birds still chirp, and the crickets make their music. We add our heaving breaths to the mix, and you can't even tell that we just shared an earth-shattering orgasm.

"We can stop by Walgreens," I tell her. "I can get Plan B." I know it ruins the moment, but I should say something. I did a bad thing by not wearing a condom or pulling out.

Danielle doesn't care, though. She shakes her head and brings a hand up to my forehead. "No," she insists, "it's fine. If something happens, maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing."

The animal inside me roars its approval. "But a baby," I begin to say before she cuts me off.

"Would be the greatest expression of our love for one another," she finishes for me.

This will be my undoing, but I don't care. It's worth it.

She is worth it.

HOLY



“**W**hy the fuck would you nail a student?” Ghost raises a hand to stop me from responding. “No. Don’t answer that. I already know why. Because you’re stupid as fuck.”

I frown at my brother. “For starters,” I begin, but I don’t get a chance to finish.

Saint cuts me off this time with a disgusted sigh. “The God damn Principal’s daughter, no less,” he adds, pursing his lips in judgment. “As if we don’t have enough trouble with the police.”

“She isn’t an officer’s daughter,” I tell him, disgusted.

“No, because that would be worse.” Razor, half-heartedly interested in this conversation, yawns. “Could you imagine, though?” With a chuckle and a shake of his head, we can tell he’s taken something from Jackal’s backpack pharmacy. “We barely survive under them as it is. I got pulled over the other day for going thirty-six in a thirty-five. One fucking mile per hour over the speed limit,” he scoffs. “Officer made me do a whole intoxication test, too. For fucking *funsies*.”

This immediately changes the entire tone of the conversation. “He did *what*?” Saint asks with a clench of his fist. “Were you swerving or some shit?”

Razor shakes his head. “I was headed to see my girl. It was still broad daylight. Plenty of people were zipping past me, going faster than thirty-six; I’ll tell you what.”

“Fucking ridiculous,” Ghost piles on with disapproval. “Hey, can’t you talk to the Valenti boys?” He asks Saint. “Don’t they got an *in* with the cops or something?”

Saint snorts in derision. “If by *in*, you mean Raniero is married to the Chief’s daughter, then yeah. But I don’t think father and daughter have a good relationship.”

With a roll of his eyes, Ghost throws himself back in his chair. “What a waste. If I were gonna fuck around with a police officer’s daughter, I’d pick one that was near and dear to Daddy’s heart. I got a couple of traffic tickets I need officer daddy-o to fix.”

The room breaks into laughter, including me. It’s a brief reprieve from the tension that’s been welling up in my chest for the last two days. Though I’ve seen Danielle in class, we haven’t made any plans to see each other again. We exchanged numbers on the overlook the other day, and all I’ve heard from her was an obligatory text that she made it home fine.

“Anyway,” Saint directs the conversation back to me with a smile, “Romeo here got involved with the Principal’s daughter. She can’t do shit for us except get our buddy sent to prison.”

“She’s not going to do that,” I sigh. Though if I’m being honest with myself, I don’t know exactly what Danielle is capable of.

The men in the room exchange a look with one another. I can feel the weight of the implications of their looks. There are a lot of unanswered questions about what took place between Danielle and me. Not just that night at the overlook but everything that *hasn’t* happened ever since. “Alright, fine,” I admit with an uncomfortable shift in my chair, “she probably won’t do that. I don’t know for sure,” I grumble.

Saint nods his head like he knew all along I was bullshitting. “Exactly,” he says with a cluck of his tongue. “You went and fucked a girl without knowing all the facts.”

I know that the guys have mixed feelings about what I did. After all, we all want to see each other happy. But when another member’s happiness interferes with daily business, it becomes a subject of gossip. If it gets back to

the President, who knows what will happen next?

But I didn't tell them all the details. I intentionally skipped a couple of items because I didn't want them to freak out. I think I have to come clean, though. If anyone is going to help me through this, it's my guys. "I also might not have used a condom." Inwardly, I cringe, waiting for the deafening roar of anger.

It doesn't come, not immediately. The room becomes so silent that you can hear a pin drop. Every eye is wide open, even Razor's, and they stare at me like I have three heads. "She didn't want to get Plan B, either." If I'm going to drop a bomb, I might as well drop two.

Ghost is the first to talk, and all he says is, "Run."

Saint thumbs at his friend. "What he said."

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Razor asks.

I wasn't thinking. I took her for a ride and expected a few kisses, not the girl throwing herself at me on a filthy hilltop. "It's not that serious." I try to downplay it, but the men won't let me.

"Not that serious?" Saint gets up and starts pacing. That's usually my move, but I don't own it, I suppose. "You're going to get that girl pregnant, Holy. Then what? How are you going to hide that? This little affair you're having," he gestures with his hands, "that's all fine and dandy. You can hide that, or at least I assume you can."

Ghost makes a grunt of dismissal. "Depends how good she can keep a secret," he mumbles.

I shoot him a glare, and he looks away, uninterested. But Saint points a finger at Ghost. "Exactly. That," he emphasizes with another forceful stab of his finger in Ghost's direction. "I know damn well if this was one of the women and she'd fucked a male student, that shit would be all over campus by lunchtime. But what exactly do you know about this girl? Can she keep a secret or what?"

It's been forty-eight hours, and no one has shown up at my door to arrest me. Danielle's father hasn't come to my classroom to beat the shit out of me. The

context clues tell me that this remains a secret, or at the very least, that Danielle has chosen some quiet people to share our news with. “I think so, yeah,” I shrug. “It’s not like anyone knows.”

Saint keeps pacing. “Do you wanna knock this girl up, Holy? Or was this a one-time thing? A mistake,” he adds.

I want to tell him that it was an accident. I didn’t bring any protection because I didn’t expect to have sex. I didn’t ask whether Danielle was on birth control because, in the heat of the moment, the only thing that mattered was that the two of us were together. I want to tell him, yes, it was a one-time thing, and it’ll never happen again.

But I’m forty years old. Every day I get a little older, and every day I watch my buddies find women they want to spend the rest of their lives with. Even Saint has started talking to some woman online that he swears is his soulmate. Razor’s girl is pregnant. Everybody is living their happy little lives, and I’m just going to school every day, feeling as left out as I did when I walked the halls of this place.

“I want kids,” I admit shamelessly. “I know you don’t think I should have them with her or whatever, but I want them, Saint. I want my happily ever after.”

“Fuck you.” Saint stops mid-pace and crosses his arms over his chest.

I get to my feet and square up with my best friend. “Fuck *me*?” I ask with a glare. “For admitting that this beautiful, sexy, smart woman I’ve met wants the same damn things as me?”

He snorts. “Oh, she wants to have your babies?”

“I know damn well that she wouldn’t mind if I put a baby in her belly. Can you say that about your little online girlfriend?”

Saint shoves his finger in my chest, and it feels like a bullet piercing my chest bone. “I know more about Meredith than you do about your preteen girlfriend.”

It becomes an all-out brawl, and I don’t remember exactly how it happens. Saint’s finger is in my chest one minute, then the next, I’m on top of him

throwing punches. The room is in an uproar as everyone is on their feet, trying to haul me off of him. People are screaming at us to knock this shit off. No one holds Saint back, and that ends with him launching himself at me. It's a mess.

We must look like a bunch of hooligans. Five of us roll around the floor, yelling and kicking one another. Blood stains the pristine cream carpets in Razor's living room, and he swears he'll kill the man that did it. The fight goes out of us when the front door opens, and the twins stand in the frame.

"Jesus Christ," Beast roars over all of us. "What the fuck is going on here?"

Bullet raises an eyebrow in mock boredom. "Y'all want me to get you some guns?" He asks with a yawn. "That'll clear this shit up faster."

The minutes that follow are tense and long. The skin above my eyebrow is busted open along with Saint's knuckles. Razor has a black eye from catching an elbow in the face. Ghost and Jackal have a few tender spots but are no worse for the wear than when this fight started. However, both of them are reasonably upset with Saint and me.

"I love you," Saint says after a few minutes, "and I can't stop you from making dumb ass decisions, but I want you to know that I don't approve of this."

"You told me to fuck her and get it out of my system," I remind him.

Saint is holding his shirt to his bleeding knuckles like a bandage. "Is she out of your system?"

Never. If anything, having sex with Danielle tattooed her existence on my soul in indelible ink. "No," I admit.

He gives me the finger. "Exactly. You fucked up by fucking her, Holy."

"I love her, though."

Saint is torn. I can tell by the look on his face that he isn't sure if he should support me as my best friend or chastise me as a brother of the MC. He settles for silent condemnation. "This is a bad idea."

Razor puts butterfly bandages on the cut above my eyebrow. "Someone owes

me a new carpet.”

It’s just what we need to break the tension. Everyone laughs, and the air feels lighter all of a sudden. I know I’m not making the smartest decision, but when has intelligence ever factored into love?

DANIELLE



I stare at myself in the mirror as if my reflection has changed since last night. I am still svelte, despite wishing that my stomach would start expanding. My face is still made up with products. My hair is freshly washed. I look the same as I did a week ago before I lost my virginity.

Cameron swore that she looked different after she had sex for the first time last summer. She said she lit up any room that she walked in. She was sexually awakened, and everyone could tell.

Esther didn't feel like she *looked* different, but she said she *felt* different. She felt like a woman.

I look and feel the same. I was achy for a day, but the feeling faded quickly. The world had been turned on its head, but somehow, it kept spinning, and no one noticed but me. Even in the classroom, Holy didn't look at me any differently.

Rosemary is the only one of my friends that knows who I lost my virginity to. I told Cameron and Esther it was some guy from the country club, and they swooned with excitement thinking that I'd had sex with a rich man. But Rose knows the truth.

She urges me to talk to Holy. "You want more, right?" She asks on the drive to school.

I want everything. I want the man, the wedding, the white picket fence, and the handful of babies I know we'll pop out like bunnies. But I also want to go

to college and figure out what I want to do with my life. I want a career that fulfills me. I want to be happy as a person, not because I'm married and have a family, but because I do something I love. "I think so, yeah."

"Why are you hesitant?" She asks. Rose curls her feet under her and makes herself small. "Was it not what you expected?"

Being with Holy was everything I expected and more. It was the perfect blend of pleasure and romance. If we had gone to his place, lit some candles, and put on soft music, there would have been the added pressure of expectations. What we had at the overlook was exactly what I needed. "There's just a lot to think about." I nibble on my bottom lip before asking the one question I've only asked myself since that night. "What if I wasn't good, Rose? What if that's the reason nothing's changed?" Giving a voice to my fears makes me feel sick. My stomach flips over, and a nervous fluttering fills my belly.

Rosemary makes a sympathetic sound before running her hand up and down my arm. "You told him you were a virgin. He shouldn't have expected you to do like, hardcore porn stuff the first time. And I hear guys really like to be with virgins."

"Maybe," I add quietly. But I'm still afraid that the reason nothing has happened between Holy and me since that fateful night is because he wasn't impressed.

I drift through the morning in a haze. My lit and composition teacher talks about the book we're supposed to be reading. She drones on, and I think about Holy. At lunch, Elliot sits too close to me and wraps an arm around my waist. I push him away because I don't feel like being fondled by him today. I've made it clear that I'm not his girlfriend, but he thinks that means I want to be his little plaything without a label.

I'm irritated and forlorn by the time I reach Holy's class after lunch. He looks like he always does. He's dressed in a form-fitting, dark blue polo shirt that hugs his pectorals. His hair has started to grow out, and I almost can't see the tattoo on his head anymore. He talks to me the same way he talks to every other student. Maybe it's because he doesn't want me anymore. Now that he's had me, he's no longer interested. I'm no longer a virgin; I am damaged

goods, and I don't know what to do in the bedroom.

I barely make it through the first stack of homework that Holy puts on my desk. I flip from page to page at a leisurely pace, marking answers wrong and totaling up their scores, but my heart isn't in it.

As the last hour of the day comes to a close, I bring the barely touched stack of papers to Holy's desk. "Sorry I didn't finish, Mr. Pelham. I'll make sure to do better tomorrow."

He gives me a frown and then quietly looks past me to the students milling about. "Are you okay, Danielle?"

I'm depressed, but men don't like to hear about that. Cameron explicitly told me that I needed to act nonchalant and wait for the man to make the first move. But the more I wait, the more I'm starting to wonder if I did something wrong. "Can we speak after class?" I ask hopefully.

Holy nods his head. "Of course."

No one is the wiser. It's a simple conversation exchanged between a teacher and a student. There's nothing to see; there's nothing memorable.

There are only four minutes until the end of class, but they feel like they pass slowly. I pretend to tinker on my phone, but all I'm doing is scrolling through Facebook. My eyes glaze over, and I can't even read the words in front of me, but to maintain the illusion, I keep scrolling.

The final bell rings and the class is dismissed. Everybody gets up, and there's a bottleneck at the door for a few seconds. People quickly leave for the weekend, ready to start planning sleepovers and parties.

It isn't until the last student leaves that I turn to look at Holy. He's sitting at his desk quietly, his hands folded together on top. "Hey," he greets with a slim curve of his lips.

"Hey," I return, suddenly feeling shy.

There's a moment of silence while we adjust to the awkwardness between us. I thought having sex would change the dynamic of our relationship. We'd spend our spare time together and have sex like bunnies. I wasn't prepared

for discomfort and the feeling of mild embarrassment.

Holy takes the lead. “How are you feeling? I-I should have asked sooner,” he says with a wince. “But I wasn’t sure what you wanted from me.”

My brow furrows in confusion. “I wanted you. I told you that.”

He starts tapping his fingers against the wood. “You’ve been pretty distant in class since *that night*.”

It’s a tale as old as time: miscommunication. I expected Holy to reach out; Holy expected me to reach out. Then no one did the reaching, and we both felt like we were out. “I guess I thought if I said something, you would think I was clingy.”

Holy snorts in amusement before leaning back in his chair to make himself comfortable. “I’d prefer clingy, frankly,” he admits. “Clingy means you care. Whatever has been going on,” he gestures at the space between us, “hasn’t felt very caring.”

I suddenly feel like a heel for listening to Cameron’s advice. What does she know? It isn’t like she has a boyfriend. “I’m sorry I didn’t say something sooner.”

“I’m sorry, too,” he lowers his head to his chest. “I shouldn’t have left it on you. We were both there.”

God, he’s such a good guy. I never should have doubted how he felt about me. He was reluctant to even be with me in the first place because he didn’t want to do something he’d regret. “You know, I’ve been thinking about you ever since.”

I’ve never seduced a man before; I’ve never had to. But as I get to my feet and walk toward his desk, I feel like I’m a seductress in a bright pink dress and wedges.

Holy’s Adam’s apple bobs up and down nervously. “Oh, yeah?” He asks. “What have you been thinking about?”

The little voice in my head reminds me that we’re on school grounds. At any time, a student or another teacher could walk through the doors. But that fuels

my excitement for Holy. “I was thinking about being with you again.” I walk around his desk, and Holy stays utterly still.

“Danielle,” he warns, “this is my place of work.”

I don’t want him to get fired, but the danger is a little exciting. I slink down the side of the desk until I’m kneeling on the ground. “Then I’ll hide,” I tell him with a wink.

The space under his desk is just big enough for me to fit. I situate myself until I’m comfortable, or at least as comfortable as a girl can be when she’s kneeling on the ground.

“Danielle.” This time when he calls my name, it’s because I’m fiddling with his belt buckle. There’s desperation and a hint of fear in his tone. He wants this, but he’s afraid.

I keep going. I’ve never given a blowjob before, but I know what to do. I’ve read Cosmo articles and watched some videos. Once I have his semi-erect cock out of his khakis, I run my hands along the shaft and look at it from a different angle.

He’s just as big as I remember, but now I can make out the vein running under his skin. I press my thumb against it, and he doesn’t even notice. Holy’s hands are wrapped around the arms of his chair, and he’s staring at me with dark, lustful eyes. “You don’t have to do this,” he says in a restrained whisper.

I wouldn’t if I didn’t want to. I never do anything I don’t want to do. “Shh,” I tell him, “relax.”

“Relax?” He snorts. “I can hear people outside the door getting into their lockers and chatting about the weekend.”

I can’t hear anyone, but I’m not listening for them. “Don’t relax then,” I shrug my shoulders. “Do whatever you want.”

He opens his mouth to respond, but whatever he’s going to say doesn’t interest me. I lean forward and take his tip between my lips. Holy’s rebuttal dies.

He tastes like skin and warmth. The more I take him into my mouth, the wider my jaw has to spread. He digs his fingers into the arm of the chair so tightly that his knuckles turn bright white when his tip reaches the back of my throat.

I have to pull back for a second. He triggers my gag reflex, and my eyes start to water. But I can hear him mumbling curse words under his breath when I run my tongue across the underside of his cock.

I use my hands to help jerk him off. I've seen it in the videos, and every article says it makes him feel like you've taken all of him in your mouth. I can only handle half of him at once before I start choking.

Holy pumps his hips as I bob up and down. The words he's mumbling become incoherent the longer I have him in my mouth. When he grabs my hair, fingers tangling my dark locks, I can tell he's close to the edge.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do next. The articles I read had mixed reviews. Do I let him come in my mouth? Do I swallow it? Do I spit it out? Do I just pull away and let him jizz all over his pants? There are so many options, and a woman is just supposed to know what to do.

"I'm gonna come," Holy swears after a few seconds. It's a warning. If I don't want to take it in my mouth, I don't have to.

But how will I ever know what it tastes like?

The first few droplets on my tongue are salty, and they're immediately succeeded by a flood of the same flavor. It isn't bad; it just tastes like I could use a cup of water. I swallow as much of him as I can, but it dribbles out of my mouth and down his shaft as he pumps his hips and tries to get out every last ounce.

There's still a mess in his lap when I pull away. His pants avoided the majority, but there are still stains around his zipper. "Shit," he mumbles.

"I'm sorry," I apologize immediately.

Holy grabs a few tissues from his desk before pushing back a few feet to let me out. "You don't need to apologize, Danielle. That was hot. And absolutely terrifying," he adds with a half-smile, "but mostly hot."

My knees ache as I climb out from under the desk and roll over to sit on my butt. I watch him from the ground as he dabs his pants to try and make the stains less noticeable.

“Christ. These pants are going to have to be dry cleaned,” he says with a shake of his head.

I can’t tell if he’s frustrated or if that’s a compliment. Either way, I make myself comfortable by leaning up against his desk. “What are you doing this weekend?” I could still use a cup of water, but I’m afraid if I leave now, I won’t hear from him again until Monday.

Holy tosses the used tissues in the trash can before looking down at me. “Why are you sitting there?”

I shrug my shoulders. It seemed like a lot of work to get to my feet. “It’s comfortable.”

He shakes his head. Holy pushes his chair back a few more feet and then gets on the floor with me. The two of us look silly down here, but at least we look silly together. “I think it’s high time I took you on a date. If you’re free this weekend,” he adds quickly.

My heart feels like it’s going to jump out of my chest, but I counsel myself to calm down. “I think I could make time for a date.” *Act casual*, the little voice reminds me. *You don’t want him to think this is your first date...* even though it is.

“Do you have any allergies or food preferences I should be aware of?”

The question highlights just how much we don’t know about each other. For me, it was love at first sight. But now I need to get to know all the little details. Like his favorite color. And how he takes his eggs in the morning. If he wants kids. What he wants to do with his life. How he vacations during the summertime. “No allergies.”

Holy reaches over to grab my hand. It’s warm and inviting; it makes me feel at home. “I’m allergic to shellfish, but we usually don’t have to worry about that here in Kansas.”

One fact down, a million to go. I think I’m going to love getting to know

Holy Pelham.

HOLY



“Relax.”

I am not relaxed. My asshole is puckered so tight I could choke an ant.

“My father isn’t going to be home for hours. And even if we drive up and he’s here, you can drop me off at the end of the block, and I’ll walk the rest of the way back.” Danielle is so nonchalant about this that I’m beginning to think she wants us to get caught.

I transfer my phone from one hand to the other, switching ears. “Are you sure? Because I would be just as happy picking you up in the Dara’s parking lot a few blocks away.” I don’t want to get castrated by an angry dad tonight. Or any night, frankly.

Danielle giggles on the other end of the phone. “It’s seriously fine, Holy. He’s on a date, too, actually. Though I’m not sure who with.”

I can hear the frown in her voice. “You okay?” I check my reflection in the mirror one last time before I head for the garage. “You sound a little disconcerted.”

“My dad just wouldn’t tell me who his date was, is all,” she sighs. I can tell that it weighs heavily on her by the sounds she makes. “It just seems silly to keep secrets from one another.”

“Aren’t we keeping a secret from your father?” I deadpan. If only she could see my face right now.

There's a long pause on the other end of the line before Danielle harrumphs in response. "Whatever," she shakes it off quickly, "just pick me up. You have my address, right?"

She lives closer to me than I would have guessed. The Valleywood neighborhood is only a five-minute drive from her secluded neighborhood near the lake. She lives on a winding road that leads to a lesser-known entrance of Tuttle Creek Lake. "Right," I reassure her. "And you're wearing close-toed shoes and jeans?"

Danielle snorts before saying, "As if. See you soon." Then she hangs up before I can protest.

I shove my phone into the front pocket of my jeans and mount my motorcycle. I told her last night that I'd take her to a restaurant outside of Manhattan for our peace of mind. I explicitly told her to wear pants and be prepared for a motorcycle ride. But knowing Danielle, she'll come out in another summer dress.

One of these days, I'll have to enforce my bike rules. They're meant to keep her safe if something bad happens. I can't let her keep getting away with breaking the rules just because I like the way her dress rides up when she's straddling the back of my bike.

I work my way toward the lake and up Tuttle Cove Road, winding my way through the hillside until I happen upon her driveway. There's no way to tell if anyone is home because there are no cars parked outside the garage. But as I approach the house, she comes trotting outside.

To her credit, she isn't wearing a dress, but she didn't do much better. Tonight she has on a little black skirt that sways with every step she takes. "That's not bike-appropriate," I remind her as she walks up.

"Bite me," she says cheerfully.

"I'd love to." Our conversation stops there as she succumbs to a fit of giggles. It's 6:30, and the sun is still high in the sky, shining a light on Danielle's beautiful face. "You ready for dinner?"

She finishes putting on the helmet that was left in her seat and then starts to climb on. "Of course. Where are we headed?"

“Away,” I tell her and rev the motorcycle engine before she can ask any more questions.

This ride is different than her first. She held onto me tightly that first ride, afraid she might fall out of her seat if she didn’t have something to anchor her to the motorcycle. I could feel my heart pounding out of my chest with her on the back of my bike.

Tonight her touch is a little more lax—less fearful, more enjoyment. I can feel her movements as she looks over my shoulder at the oncoming traffic.

We don’t drive far, only forty-five minutes away. Tonight we’re out at Milford Lake, just outside of Junction City. The restaurant on the lake is nice, giving us a perfect view of the water. We’re seated away from everyone else—a personal favor from a manager who owed me one.

“Wow, this is breathtaking,” Danielle smiles as she sits next to the window. “I’ve never been this close to Milford before.”

I frown across the table at her, confused. “Haven’t you lived in Manhattan your whole life?”

“Oh, yeah,” she says with a wave. “But half the time, Milford is under blue-green algae warnings, and you can’t come out here. Or if you do, it’s in the middle of winter, and you can’t swim unless you want to plunge head-first into freezing water. And personally, I don’t like the cold.”

“I’m the opposite,” I tell her in a conspiratorial whisper. “But that’s just because I’m so big. I’m always hot. Winter is the only time I get chilly enough to feel comfortable in my own skin.”

Danielle looks away from the lake and makes eye contact. “Really?” Her eyes drift to my shoulders and down my body, taking in my size. “I didn’t realize.”

The waitress comes by to grab our drink orders. I catch her looking at young, beautiful Danielle and then at me. She keeps her conclusions to herself before wandering off to grab our water.

“Tell me about yourself,” Danielle asks as the waitress departs. “What did you want to be when you grew up?”

“A mechanic.” Becoming a teacher wasn’t my lifelong dream, I’ll admit. “I remember when I was four or five, my dad and I would tinker under this old beat-up truck every weekend. He couldn’t teach me much because I was young,” I grin, “but I’ll never forget righty-tighty, lefty-loosey.”

Danielle brings her elbows up onto the table and makes a rest for her head in her hands. She looks enthralled as she asks to hear more.

I tell her that I wanted to be a mechanic until I was thirteen. “I was sure if I was good with cars, my dad would come back one day.” I hate how idealistic I was; I hate that it never worked out how I thought it would. My father never came back; I never became a mechanic. “But then, when I was a teenager, I got really into cooking. I thought I would leave high school and head straight to Paris to go to culinary school. I would get a real world-class education in the heart of France.” Another dream that never materialized.

“What happened?” Danielle asks in the painful silence that follows my admission.

“Life,” I tell her with a shrug. “Or something like that.” I couldn’t afford to go to college; I could barely afford the \$20 it cost to take my ACTs, not to mention all the application fees. I thought I’d spend my summers mowing lawns and cleaning pools to raise the money to go to France, but after the first year, I realized I wasn’t making enough money to pursue my dreams.

“But something interesting happened my sophomore year. We used to have to take a mandatory home economics class at MHS.” I couldn’t sew worth a damn. To this day, I can barely thread a needle. My hands are too big, and my fingers are too clumsy for the fine art of hemming pants and embroidering pillows. “When we got to the food section, though, I’d picked up so many tips from cooking shows and recipe books over the years that I became the star of the class. The teacher even let me teach others when she was busy some days.”

That was when I learned I had a passion for sharing knowledge with others. It was silly at the time. Teaching others about baking and making omelets didn’t feel like my life calling, but something about working toward a common goal made me feel good about myself. My mom was the one that suggested I become a teacher.

I gesture to the table in front of us, and the room filling up around us. “As you can see, I never made it to Paris. But I think I made a good life for myself anyway.”

We’re interrupted before Danielle can respond. The waitress drops off our drinks and takes our order. She keeps a weathered eye on my date the entire interaction and promises to come back soon. “I think she’s worried that you’ve been trafficked or something,” I whisper to Danielle as soon as the woman leaves.

“Yeah, she seems a little concerned, but I’m fine,” she shrugs as if that somehow solves all our problems. “It isn’t like I was *actually* trafficked. If she has a problem, I’m sure she’ll confront me when I go to the bathroom or something.”

Or she’ll call the cops. But I don’t voice that fear. Technically, Danielle is eighteen. She’s an adult in the eyes of the law, and while they might look at me judgmentally, they wouldn’t be able to arrest me. The sticky part is when you consider my job and the fact that she’s my student, but I doubt the police are going to ask that pointed of a question.

Danielle changes the subject. “So why are you still single at forty?” She swirls her finger around the rim of her water glass, carefully not making eye contact. “If that’s okay to ask,” she adds quickly.

“You can ask me anything.” I would never lie to Danielle; I would never want to hurt her. “Honestly, I think I’ve been picky. I’ve been waiting for something special to come along.” I don’t know how to explain it, but I do the best I can. “I want that *can’t eat, can’t sleep* kind of love. I’ve seen so many of my friends settle over the years. Then a couple of kids later, they realize that they don’t want to be with the person they’re with, or that they never should have gotten married.”

The divorce rate among my friends is staggering. I don’t blame them. I’m proud that each of them could come to the conclusion that their happiness would be best found elsewhere. I think it’s better than staying in a lifeless marriage that isn’t fulfilling. That’s what my mother did until my father left. She became a different person after he was gone, but I don’t think she ever fully recovered.

“I’ve become an expert at going on dates and picking out the worst qualities in the woman I’m with,” I admit with an embarrassed blush. “Then I spend the entire date analyzing whether I can live the rest of my life with someone who has a weird laugh or refuses to eat vegetables. They’re little things,” I tell her sheepishly, “but for some reason or another, by the end of the date, I realize they aren’t things I want to sacrifice. I mean, I love cooking and eating vegetables. I love to hear the woman I’m with laugh. I can’t give those things up for an uncomfortable existence.”

Danielle’s finger speeds around the rim of her glass, going faster with each revolution. “What are my worst qualities?” She asks the second there’s a break in the conversation. “I’m sure I have plenty.” There’s a nervous smile on her face as if she’s afraid I’ll tell her what I think her worst quality is, and it won’t match up to what she thinks it is.

But it occurs to me that I haven’t thought about it. Besides her age and the fact that she’s my student, I haven’t taken the time to mull over what Danielle’s worst quality would be. We haven’t spent as much time together as I would like, but the same could be said about all those first dates that never materialized into a second. I judged them the moment we got together; I didn’t do that with Danielle.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I shrug. “I haven’t even thought about it.”

She purses her lips before telling me to come off it. “I’m immature, and you can’t take me to a bar,” Danielle insists.

“Women mature faster than men,” I tell her. “If I were an eighteen-year-old boy, you’d be more mature than me. Besides,” I grab my glass and take a sip, “if I want to drink, I’ve got buddies I can go out with. I don’t want to sour our memories with alcohol. *This* is pure,” I gesture at us, “and I don’t want to ruin it.”

Danielle reaches across the table to grab my hand. Hers is so dainty in my grasp, but I examine every curve and cut of her skin, memorizing it. “You’re too good for me.”

But I know the thoughts that I’ve had about Danielle. Dirty, disgusting thoughts. I mean every word about keeping what we have between us pure, but that’s only because I keep the filth to myself. “You deserve to be treated

well, Dani. If a man ever treats you as anything less, leave him.”

It's fatherly advice; I hear it as I say it. But I expect that one day Danielle is going to wake up from this fantasy and realize that she wants a younger man, one capable of bending over and touching his toes. My back cracks every time I stand up. My joints have started to hurt in the mornings. Hangovers last two, sometimes three days now that I'm forty. I can't expect Danielle to put up with my aches and pains when she's entering the best years of her life. I will be a fond memory when she's older; I am not the man she'll end up with. But I'll enjoy her while she's around.

I'll love her as long as she'll let me.

DANIELLE



Our date is like sitting down to dinner with an old friend. It feels like nostalgia and comfort all rolled up into one. Holy laughs at my jokes and asks insightful questions about what I'm doing with my life.

“My dad would be thrilled if I became a teacher.” I lean back in my chair and eye the lake outside the window. The sun shines on the water's surface, reflecting beautiful rays of the waves. “He loved being a teacher. He always said his favorite years were the first couple.”

“Bullshit,” Holy calls out immediately. “I remember my first year as a teacher; it was hell. I was terrified of the kids, and they could smell it on me. It was like my own special cologne. Eau de *you can pull anything over on this guy.*”

People turn our way when we burst into laughter. I see the way they look at Holy and then at me, wondering how a man his age could be out with a woman so young. I know they have questions, but I keep my eyes trained on Holy. “I'll keep that in mind for the next time my dad brings up being an English teacher.”

“Don't get me wrong,” Holy corrects swiftly, “being a teacher has its perks. I've never felt more fulfilled than when I help a student struggling to understand histograms and scatterplots, and it finally clicks in their brain. It's a unique feeling to know that I taught someone something they'll remember for the rest of their lives.”

With a snort of derision, I make myself comfortable. “I doubt they're going

to use histograms for the rest of their life. I barely even remember what a histogram is, and I've taken stats within the last year."

Holy clucks his tongue while shaking his head in prominent disgust. "That means you had a bad teacher. When I teach scatterplots, people don't forget."

He looks a dozen years younger. When Holy smiles, it gives him a youthful appearance. I can almost forget we're at two very different points in our lives. I'm writing essays for college applications, and he's in a well-established career. "Do you think this will work out?" I ask after a few moments of silence, changing the subject without warning.

A frown flickers on his face. The rapid change of topic catches him off guard. "You and me?" He confirms. Holy takes a deep breath and leans against the table. "Maybe, maybe not. It's hard to tell, honestly. But you're twenty-two years younger than me. You have your entire life ahead of you while I've spent the last four decades living. I think you'll get bored of me after a while. You'll realize that I'm not what you want, and you'll move on. Unless, of course, we have a kid or two before then." Holy purses his lips, and I can tell that it's a struggle for him to figure out what to say next. "If we have kids, you'll stay with me for a while. You'll convince yourself that you can make it work. Then one day, you're going to wake up, thirty-five years old, and realize that this was never what you wanted for your life. You'll leave me. You might leave our kids, or maybe you'll take them with you. But either way, our marriage will be shattered, and we'll lose everything we spent the last fifteen years fighting for."

He paints a bleak picture of our future, one designed to end in disappointment instead of happiness. It is another example of the stark differences between us. I still believe in happily ever after; he's grown up enough to know there's still a story after the credits are read.

But in the same way that I need someone to ground me, Holy needs someone to show him some fun. "I don't believe that for a second," I contradict.

Holy raises a single eyebrow. "And what experience do you have to back up your knowledge?"

Everyone discounts the young. Whether you're eight or eighteen, no one takes you seriously until you're in your twenties. But by then, you realize that

the knowledge you acquired began in your youth. Every traumatic experience you went through, how your parents raised you, the choices you made when you were with your friends. They shape you into the person you become.

“I don’t,” I respond. “I don’t have any experience. But we both know what it’s like to have a parent leave. I don’t think I’m going to wake up one day and walk out on my family because I wouldn’t build a family with someone I wasn’t sure of.”

“You can’t be sure, though.” Holy’s jaw ticks as he clenches his teeth. “My mother was certain that my father was the love of her life. You’re saying that she was wrong?”

I shake my head no. My father was in the same position; I know how he feels. But I also know myself on a deeper level because of what my dad and I went through after my mom left. I was too young to go through the heartbreak with him, but it has affected us year after year ever since. “I’m saying if you believe in us and I believe in us, we can’t fail. I don’t care if you’re forty, fourteen, or seventy-four. The first time I saw you, I knew I was looking at the rest of my life. If you can’t believe for a second that we can make this work, then all this is useless. We might as well go our separate ways before we get hurt.”

Holy wears an inscrutable look on his face. The seconds pass slowly, feeling like an eternity stretching between us. I prepare myself for the worst, whatever that may be. I don’t know what I want him to say or how I want him to react. I just wish he’d do something other than stare at me.

“I thought at first that your worst quality was your age. You’re eighteen, after all.” His unemotional characterization of my youth hurts. I’ll admit that I expected it earlier, but not now. “Your prefrontal cortex isn’t even fully matured until your mid-to-late twenties. You have a decade to go before someone would consider you fully mature.” Holy pauses for a minute and the weight of the silence feels like an anvil crushing me into the ground. “And yet, you have a better understanding of love and relationships than people twice your age.”

Tension deflates my lungs, expelling carbon dioxide from my lungs. “What?”

Holy signals to the waitress that he’s ready for the check. “I’m saying maybe

twenty years of watching my friends break up with people they thought they'd marry and divorce people they said were the love of their life may have colored my opinion, and not in a good way. I forget that I'm a jaded old man of forty. I keep thinking you don't know what's best for you because you're young, but I keenly ignore that youth has the perks of optimism and chance."

The waitress brings Holy a leather-bound black book with the check; he doesn't even bother to look at it. He slaps three \$20 bills down on the cover and tells the waitress to keep the change. "Let's go, Dani."

I pull the napkin from my lap and place it on the table as I get to my feet. "Where are we going?" I ask, suddenly feeling anxious.

"To my place." Holy reaches out to grab my hand. "I want to make love to you."

Good thing it's a short walk to Holy's motorcycle because my knees suddenly feel like jello.

HOLY



The drive from Milford Lake to my place in Manhattan takes what I can only assume is forever. Even though the time on my watch seems to be moving at a reasonable pace, I'm not convinced the digital numbers are accurate.

We pull up in front of my place an excruciating forty-five minutes later. I want to take Danielle upstairs, throw her on my bed, and have my way with her. But she wants a tour.

"It's small," I warn her, but Danielle doesn't seem to mind. She looks through the downstairs bedroom and peers into the bathroom cabinets. "Are you looking for something?" I ask when she starts going through the drawers in my kitchen.

Danielle shakes her head. "Not really," she admits with a shrug. "I guess I didn't realize until I met Esther and Rose that I'm what you'd consider upper middle class. My grandparents started their own restaurant when they were in their twenties," she explains. "They would have passed the legacy to my dad, but he didn't want to be a restaurateur. His parents didn't fault him because teaching is a noble calling, and they had other kids to take over the family business. But they had several restaurants across the state by the time Dad married my mom, and they sold a couple when my mom left to help Dad get on his feet. The rest is history. He invested in real estate and other small businesses in town and made the money back in spades." Danielle smiles as she recalls the history of her family's inheritance. "For a high school Principal, he has one hell of a mind for finance. You know he made me set up

a Roth IRA on my eighteenth birthday?”

I lean against the dark, faux marble countertops and smile at her. We grew up so differently that it almost doesn't seem possible that we should be together. We're like Baby and Johnny from *Dirty Dancing*: the rich girl and the poor teacher she falls in love with. I bet her father will hate me.

“I have a retirement account through work, but that isn't a privilege a lot of people have,” I shrug.

She rifles through my snack cabinet, a smile popping up on her face when she grabs a box of Nutri-Grain bars. “I figured. But now, whenever I go to someone's house, I look at the little things to see what I take for granted—skincare products, food, home,” Danielle gestures at the space around us. “My dad shielded me from a lot of evils in the world. I was fourteen before I even found out that Manhattan had a homeless population on the south side of town. I've seen people asking for money at Dillons or outside Walmart, but it was so rare that I thought Manhattan was a thriving, wealthy community.”

Danielle walks into the living room and looks around. Her eyes take in the sepia-tinted photographs of my grandparents and the intricately patterned patchwork quilt draped over the couch. As she walks toward the couch, her hand trails along the faded fabric and brings a nostalgic smile to her face.

When she turns to me, she says, “Manhattan is *not* a wealthy community like I suspected. Manhattan *has* wealth, but its people aren't inherently wealthy. There's a lot of people that need help here.”

I nod in agreement because I grew up being one of those people that needed help. We were never homeless, but I was embarrassed to invite friends over. “You're right,” I respond. “There are more people in this town that need help than people willing to help.”

“I want to help people,” she says after a few seconds. “I want to bridge the wealth gap. It isn't fair that my father and I have so much when others have so little, or sometimes even nothing at all.”

Her words spur me forward, and I walk over to Danielle and take her in my arms. She smiles at me, her youth and beauty warming every inch of me.

“You have a good heart, you know that?”

She wraps her arms around my neck and stands on the tips of her toes to press her lips to mine. All the rom-coms in the world couldn't stand up to the kiss we share. “My dad wants me to be a teacher, though,” Danielle says as she pulls away. “He thinks that a good education is the best way to help kids in need.”

Marcus Fulton is right, to an extent. A good education can take a student far, but sometimes the most challenging part is getting that student to pay attention in class because their stomach aches from not eating for three days. “If you want to be a teacher, I think you'd be a great one. You seem pretty level-headed, and you're incredibly smart. You can also relate to people in an empathetic way that's harder for male teachers to do.”

Danielle sighs. She tries to suppress it, but I still feel the warmth on my chest as she looks at the space between us and avoids making eye contact. “But,” I add, “if you want to be a social worker or a child advocate, that will also help kids in need. Getting kids the food they need could be the difference between going to class or going to the store to steal whatever they can get their hands on. You could be the person that keeps them out of jail, giving teachers like me a reason to do our jobs.”

She looks up, and we lock eyes. With fingers tracing patterns along the back of my neck, Danielle presses her forehead to my chest and mumbles into my shirt. “Thank you.”

I put my chin on top of her head and ask her, “For what?”

“I don't know,” she replies. “Nothing. Everything. This. Us.” Danielle twists her head until her cheek is flat against my chest.

It's the right thing to say. She holds me tight, and the rest of the night is a blur.

The first time I taste her, she's on the edge of the couch with her panties on the coffee table and her shoes digging into my shoulder. She's sweet like honey, and I lap from her delicious center until she's screaming my name.

She tours the guest bedroom upstairs. There's a wall full of closets, and the doors are full-length mirrors. I make her watch herself come as I sink to my

knees and suck on her erect clit once more. “That’s right, baby girl,” I growl into her pussy when she’s clinging to my shoulders to hold herself aloft, “come all over daddy’s face.”

God, she brings the animal out in me. I nearly ravage her right there, but I take her to the bedroom down the hall. Past the main bathroom that she doesn’t get to tour. Into the master bedroom that’s shrouded in darkness. I lay her down on the bed and slowly undress her—shoes left on the ground, skirt discarded on the foot of the bed, cute little shirt tossed somewhere into the unknown, followed immediately by her bra.

The sun has long set before we finish. Danielle leaves fingernail tracks down my back. Bright red streaks of blood brought to the surface mar my skin like a tattoo.

I leave my own marks to match. Teeth pressed to her inner thigh, the curve of her neck, the space above her hip bone. I write a love letter on her skin in bruises.

“Do I need to take you home?” I would hate for her to leave my bed, but she’s still eighteen. She might still have a curfew with a father who’s concerned about her whereabouts.

But Danielle shakes her head no. “I’ll text him when I get up. My phone is somewhere,” she frowns as she looks around the darkened room. “I’ll tell him I’m staying the night with Cam or Rose or something.”

I don’t want her to lie to her father for me, but I could lose my job if she tells the truth. And frankly, I’d rather stay in this perfect little bubble we’ve made than face reality.

DANIELLE



Life is pretty much perfect, or as perfect as it can be when you're secretly dating your teacher.

Rosemary is the only one that knows. She's positively thrilled for me. Whenever we're alone, she asks how things are going with Holy. She's the only one that knows about our secret rendezvous. She tells lies for me whenever my father asks what we did one night or another.

But she's keeping something from me. Sometimes, she can't be my alibi. I don't know what she's doing or where she's at, but I'll text her to ask if she can cover for me so I can spend some time with Holy, and she never responds. The next day, she waves it off and says that she didn't hear her phone go off or she went to bed early. There's something fishy going on with Rose, and one of these days, I'm going to figure out what it is.

Cameron and Esther know that I'm seeing someone. But Cameron is convinced it's some older guy at K-State. "Maybe a young professor," she giggles. I never correct her; she isn't far from the truth. It's one thing to date a professor at a school I don't attend. It's another to date a teacher that I'm working for. I'd rather have Cameron believe that I'm banging the entire staff at the college before she finds out that it's Mr. Pelham.

Esther thinks I'm lying. "There's no one at all," she says breezily one afternoon, "you're just making it up to make yourself sound cooler."

I snort into my soda and feel the burn of carbonation in my nose. It's an embarrassing moment when I have to cough the soda out of my lungs and

nasal cavity. “Yes, a boyfriend makes me sound *cooler*, Esther,” I roll my eyes.

“It does,” she says with a pout. “I don’t have one.” But I know for a fact that she’s been sleeping with Elliot every now and then. Neither of them will tell me, but frankly, I don’t care. Elliot isn’t mine to be jealous of.

He sure gets jealous over me, though. When we agreed not to date at the beginning of the year, I thought that meant he’d move on eventually. But Elliot still looks at me like a piece of property he bought and paid for, and he’s determined to get his money’s worth.

Every party I go to, he has his arm around my waist at one point or another. I try to shove him off, but the drunker he gets, the harder it is to shake him. “C’mon, Dani,” he slurs one night, “let’s go out to the barn and fool around.”

I don’t tell Holy about these moments. I carry them with me like a secret shame. Holy already does so much to make my life easier that I can’t burden him with a high school boy’s over-exuberant crush. He picks up on it, though.

One day at lunch, I’m at my locker preparing for the rest of the afternoon when Elliot pulls up. “Hey, good lookin’,” he greets with a smarmy grin. “Why don’t we head to the football field and make out?”

I don’t look at him because I can see Holy walking down the hall out of the corner of my eye. “Uh, I don’t think so, Elliot. I’m seeing someone.”

“What?” He asks in a sharp tone. “Who?”

I close my locker, straighten my back, and firmly tell him it’s none of his business. “We aren’t dating, Elliot. I don’t owe you an explanation.” I start to walk off when he grabs my forearm and shoves me into the locker.

He starts to tell me that I’m being disrespectful when Holy arrives on the scene. He watched the whole thing happen, and the second my body slammed into the locker, I watched his face go from pleasant to high alert. “Hey!” Holy yells as he comes up behind Elliot. “Take your hands off her.”

Elliot releases my arm and backs up, both hands in the air in defense. “Sir, it isn’t what it looks like.”

Holy looks at me in concern and asks if I'm okay. I'm a little shaken, but I nod my head yes. Then he turns his full attention on Elliot and glares at him. The two are roughly the same height, but Holy has fifty pounds of muscle on him. "It looked like you were physically assaulting Danielle."

"Do you two know each other?" Elliot scoffs.

"Th-that's Mr. Pelham. I'm his TA." The words escape my mouth in a stutter.

"And who are you?" Holy asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

Elliot puffs out to get bigger, but he still looks pathetic next to Holy. "I'm Elliot Graham. I'm on the football team."

Holy snorts at him, unimpressed. "Good to know. I'm friends with Coach Baize. I'll be sure to let him know why you're being sent to the Principal's office."

A second passes between Holy's announcement and Elliot's understanding. He looks at Mr. Pelham and then at me, but the look in his eyes when he meets mine is scared. "Mr. Pelham," he laughs nervously, "it was a misunderstanding between Dani and me. There's no need—"

"To the Principal's office, Mr. Graham. I'll let him know you're on your way." Holy doesn't budge an inch.

"Danielle," Elliot begs in a lower tone, "talk to your dad. Tell him that this was a mistake."

But I turn away from him because, mistake or not, he put his hands on me. And I don't accept that kind of treatment from anyone.

When Elliot has left the building and is on his way to the office, Holy asks me if I'm alright. He gestures me down the hall to his classroom and shuts the door behind him. He can't lock it with a student in his room, but he stands against it to prevent anyone from coming in. "Did he hurt you, Danielle?" His jaw ticks in anger. "Because I saw him put his hands on you, and I'll kill him if he hurt you."

The possessive tone of his voice calms my nerves. "I'm fine," I reassure him. "Elliot and I had a thing over the summer. We didn't date or anything; we

just fooled around a few times.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better,” Holy growls under his breath. “If anything, it makes me want to punch that kid in the mouth.”

I smile wanly and shake my head. “It’s over, Holy. You’re the only person I want to fool around with anymore.”

His demeanor softens a touch, but not much. “I wish I could hug you,” Holy swallows past the lump in his throat.

“I wish you could, too.”

Holy calls my father and lets him know what he saw. I sit on an idle desk, kicking my legs as I listen to him recant his version of events. He tries to soothe my father’s anger when he says that Elliot Graham shoved me into a locker. I can hear Dad yelling through the phone from across the classroom. “She’s in my class right now,” Holy explains gently. “After you talk to the Graham boy, if you want me to send her down, just let me know.”

It’s sweet to see the two of them bonding over my safety. If only my father knew that Holy Pelham was more than just a kind teacher doing his job.

A little later, the phone rings while Holy is teaching, and I answer. My dad is on the other end of the line, and he breathes a sigh of relief when he hears my voice. “Honey, are you okay?”

I’ve heard that question a lot today. I give him the same answer that I gave Holy. “I’m fine, really. Elliot startled me more than anything. His behavior was unexpected.”

He tells me he loves me and can’t wait to see me at home later. It’s a short conversation, but I can feel every ounce of fear in his tone. He was afraid that some boy had hurt his daughter. It’s been his fear since I was born, but today was the closest it’s ever come to happening.

When I see him later, he holds me tight. “I suspended him,” he announces. “Only for a day because I couldn’t justify any longer, but I stuck him with a week of detention, too. Coach Baize might bench him for the next game, too.”

I feel bad for Elliot, but he brought it on himself. I don't know where that conversation would have led if Holy hadn't been there to break it up. "He didn't even hurt me," I mumble into my dad's chest. He has his arms wrapped so tightly around me that I feel like I'm being crushed. "He just scared me."

When Dad finally lets me go, he breathes a sigh of relief. Like seeing me made it real for him that I'm perfectly fine. "I know you know how to take care of yourself, honey, but I'm your dad. I worry about you all the time. When you have your own kid, you'll understand."

My heart skips a beat and jumps into my throat. "Yeah," I mumble, "one day."

I'm inundated with texts and calls throughout the evening, but the only person I want to hear from is Holy. He stays on the phone with me until I fall asleep.

Life is pretty much perfect. There are a few blips here and there, but I manage my time between friends, school, Holy, and family. It's a juggling act, but I love every minute of it.

HOLY



O ur relationship exists in the daylight and shadows.

During the daylight hours, Danielle is *just* my teaching assistant. We share little moments here and there, like when she texts me first thing in the morning to tell me that she loves me. It puts a smile on my face and gets my day started right. It's even better when I see her across the lunch room with her friends and a text bings on my phone.

I wish you were eating me right now instead of that slice of pizza.

I choke on my soda when I read it, and Danielle's dance instructor, Jennifer, moves closer to pat me on the back. "You okay?" She asks in a concerned tone.

I shift away from her touch and manage half a smile through the tears in my eyes. Expelling soda from your nose is a unique, painful experience that I don't wish on anyone. My nostrils burn, and everyone stares at me; I'm red with embarrassment. "I'm fine. Just went down the wrong pipe," I tell her swiftly.

Jennifer turns back to the others at the table, and they go back to discussing extracurriculars and which students are pissing them off lately. It comes up in

passing that Elliot Graham was recently sent to the Principal's office and benched for the latest football game. A game that they lost, and some people blame the Principal for benching their star player.

"He physically assaulted another student," I glare at them, interrupting even when I know I should keep my mouth shut. "He deserved more than a single-day suspension and losing his starting privileges at one game." If I had my way, I'd have knocked his head off his neck. But I'm a reasonable man, and I don't want to go to prison.

My outburst silences everyone at the table, but Jennifer dares to say, "I heard it was Mr. Fulton's daughter." And it kicks off another discussion entirely.

Gossip travels fast in high school. Not just among the students but among the teachers, too. I've spent years listening to idle gossip about Danielle Fulton and never knowing what to expect. I have loads of useless information in my head about who's dating who and who got in a fight at lunch. It's like watching reality television, except these people are right in front of me. They're fifteen and sixteen-year-old kids making out and making up.

In hushed tones, my coworkers start discussing the intimate relationship between Elliot and Danielle. It's all speculation, of course. I know the truth because I asked her about it the next time we saw one another. She told me everything she did with the bastard, including all the cuddle sessions and late-night make-outs. It hurt to hear, but I can't fault her for fooling around with high school boys. When I was a high school boy, I would have cut off my left arm to fool around with her.

During the shadow hours of our relationship, Danielle and I are a couple. She comes to my house because we can't go to hers. We transition from teacher and student to boyfriend and girlfriend. We become our purest selves.

Some nights we go for long bike rides stretching across the Flint Hills, visiting little towns like Alma and Enterprise. We thrive in the fading summer sun and through the early days of fall. Danielle loses the mini skirts and dresses by October because the chill in the air when she's on the back of my motorcycle brings goosebumps to her flesh.

"You didn't win," she tells me one day, "I'm just cold."

And I hold her in my arms for as long as she'll let me. We stand before the Scenic Overlook and watch the sunset at 7:00 pm, so much earlier than when this all began.

On other nights when I have meetings with the Kings, Danielle switches between joining us or lounging in my bedroom. While her presence is noted by everyone, everyone kindly ignores the obvious: I am dating a teenage girl that oozes sexuality and virtue like two sides of the same delicious coin.

When there's serious business to discuss, we send Danielle home. The other Kings do it because they don't want her to spill the beans. I ask her to leave because I don't want her to be implicated. I am not as involved with the criminal aspects of the Kings Of Carnage as some of the men, but I occasionally do business for the Valenti crime family. I've been known to peddle drugs in my younger years. I've gotten in a fistfight or two on behalf of my brothers.

More nights than not, it's the two of us sitting in the living room or curled up in bed together.

When we're in the living room, we're working. She types on her laptop at a mile a minute or annotates papers she printed in my classroom earlier that day. I work on lesson plans and grade papers she didn't finish during her TA hours. We're so domestic it makes me want to go to the jewelry store and pick out a ring.

When we're curled up in bed, it's after exploring each other's bodies. One night I lie down and tell her to mount me. Danielle smiles as she tosses her leg over my waist. I stop her a second later and point to my face. "No. Here."

Anxious energy fills the room as she finds a position that works. Danielle has her hands on the headboard as she straddles my face. "What if I suffocate you?" She asks nervously.

"Then I'll die a happy man." I pull her down until she's sitting on my face, and I make love to her pussy. I write love letters in the satin of her folds. I tell her how much she means to me in the hearts I draw over her clit. One forbidden tongue swipe across her puckered back door entrance has her popping off like a firework.

We are explorers, uncovering the secrets of each other's bodies. Where many women have traveled the paths of mine before, I am the only man to touch hers. And I thank God every night that a woman as sweet and innocent as Danielle would give me the gift of her vulnerability.

I'll admit that I keep an eye on her stomach. I've come inside her so many times that I swear my seed has to be growing. I'm terrified that she'll tell me she's pregnant, and we'll lose this beautiful life we've made together. I plan for the moment she tells me she's carrying my baby, and we can begin a real life together as man and wife. I'm full of contradiction and emotion.

Sometimes when she texts me during the school day, it's to tell me that she can still feel me inside her, wetting her panties as I slowly drip out of her center throughout the school day. I find myself in the teacher's bathroom on more than one occasion, yanking my dick until I'm coming into the cheap, mass-manufactured paper towels. Danielle drives me over the edge; she drives me to insanity. And I love every moment of it.

Our relationship exists in the daylight and shadows. But every day we're together is one day closer to our two worlds colliding.

HOLY



November springs upon us without any warning. Our relationship has been chugging along for weeks. The blip with Elliot Graham came and passed and is now forgotten. He still looks at me in the hallways like he's wishing the Earth would split in two and swallow me whole, but his opinion means nothing to me.

With Thanksgiving fast approaching and family obligations mounting, our time together is halved. Danielle spends more time with her friends at the mall, shopping for Christmas gifts. She's told me a dozen times that she's spending Thanksgiving on the slopes with her father and extended family. The trip was paid for by her grandparents, and she can't see a way out of it. "I won't see them at Christmas since they're going back east to see my uncle and his family, so we're doing a gift exchange at the cabin in Colorado."

I watch her painstakingly wrap presents on the floor of my living room. A beautiful cashmere scarf is lovingly placed in a box and tied with a bow before being gingerly set in a bag. "My grandma loves soft stuff," she says shyly.

I tell her about my Thanksgiving plans while she works and how I'm spending the holidays with my brother.

"Saint?" Danielle teases, and I can't stop the smile that appears on my face. I love that she's gotten to know my best friend. He still isn't her biggest fan, but I reckon that'll change after she graduates.

"No, not Saint this time. He has a girl." In fact, he has a whole host of

problems on his hands, but that's not my concern. The last time I offered to help Saint with his female troubles, he told me to go fuck my teenage bride and leave him alone. We're having a little lover's spat right now, my best friend and me, but we'll get past it someday soon. Tensions have been high lately.

"My actual brother, Harrison. His wife is pregnant with their fourth, and I'm going down to be fun Uncle Howard for the holidays."

Danielle twists her head sharply to look at me. "Howard?" She asks with a frown.

"You didn't think my name was Holy, did you?" Now that I think about it, she's never called me Howard. But now that I think about it, I never told her what to call me at all.

"No," Danielle allows, "but I guess I haven't really tasted your name on my tongue before."

I slide down onto the carpet beside her, affectionately rubbing my shoulder against hers. "If you want to taste Howard on your tongue, I'm sure I can give you that," I tell her with a wink.

Danielle smacks my arm playfully and moves the bag containing her grandma's Christmas cashmere out of the way. "I just meant I've been calling you Holy for so long that I was calling our fictitious kids Holy Jr. and Holly if it's a girl."

My eyebrow raises in twisted fear and excitement. "You got something to tell me?"

Her smile softens. "No, of course not," Danielle sighs. "I'm just thinking about our future."

Just a few months ago, I didn't have anyone to think about the future with except the Kings. I love my Carnage family, but I've seen so many of them find happiness of their own. It feels right that I finally have that chance myself. "Plan away, gorgeous." I lean in to kiss her. "If you want to go to the moon next week, let me know, and I'll make it happen."

When she leaves for the night, my heart breaks. It'll be the first time since the

early days of our relationship that we've spent so long apart. It's only five days, but it feels like a lifetime.

I spend my Thanksgiving torn between playing hide and seek, making food, napping, and texting Danielle. She pops up in my notifications from time to time. When she isn't skiing with her grandpa or making homemade hot chocolate with her aunt, she shoots me a quick hello. Both of us are busy, but we're thinking about each other, and that's what the texts say.

Our five days apart pass at a strange rate. One minute, time feels like it's flying. The next, it feels like it's standing still. And when it's time for me to start my drive back to Manhattan, I'm worn out and thrilled at the same time.

"Next time, you gotta bring your girl with you," Harrison says as he leads me to the exit. "If she's going to be around for a while, of course. I don't want the kids to get attached to someone you aren't serious about."

I pat my older brother on the back and grin. "I've never been more serious about someone. I'm gonna marry this girl."

Harrison nods his head, impressed with my response. "Does she know how you feel?"

I've told her every night for the last month that I loved her. Sometimes it was over text; other nights, it was when we were tucked in bed together. "She knows my feelings, but maybe not my intentions."

"You better make your intentions known then," Harrison advises. "Women move on quickly when they realize that they aren't going to get their happily ever after."

"She might not want a happily ever after with me," I reluctantly tell him. "She's a bit younger, and she might be interested in finding someone closer to her age."

Harrison waves me off. "Nonsense. You're one of the best guys I know. She'd be crazy not to want you."

It's a four-hour drive to Manhattan, shorter than the drive Danielle and her father are making. They're coming from the opposite direction, probably singing show tunes and talking about the memories they made. I wish I'd

been with her. I want to make lifetime memories, too.

I didn't give myself much of a vacation buffer. School starts again tomorrow, and by the time I get home, I'm exhausted. It's been a long weekend, and I'm ready for bed even though it's only 4:00 pm. But a single cryptic text keeps me up.

I have a surprise for you.

Danielle is somewhere between Manhattan, Kansas and Colorado Springs. I nap on the couch while I wait for her return.

My dreams are filled with laughter. My brother's kids drift in and out of scenes among kids I've never seen before. Somehow I know they're mine. And we throw snowballs at one another and bake cookies in my galley kitchen. I'm almost disappointed when the doorbell rings.

I hear it in my dreams at first, a single ring, and I head for the door of my brother's home. But then, as I'm twisting the handle, I hear the doorbell again. I'm caught between reality and sleep, the scene before me fading as I'm slowly brought back to life. The third time the doorbell rings, I awake with a jump. It takes me a minute to realize that I'm in my house, on the couch, listening to my doorbell ring for a fourth time.

"Coming!" I yell as I struggle to get up. I feel a little off-kilter, and my brain is slow from the nap. The clock on the wall says 6:42 pm. I don't know how long I've been asleep.

I open the door to a smiling Danielle. She looks even more breathtaking than when she left. Her dark hair is pulled into a severe bun, and she's holding a box in her hands. It's small, perhaps the size of a book, maybe a little bigger. "Babe," I grin, and she launches at me.

I'm caught off balance for a second and stumble backward, but having

Danielle in my arms is like reaching the right side of heaven. She fits perfectly, like a puzzle piece made for me. And she peppers my face and neck with kisses, telling me in between how much she missed me.

This is why I told Harrison that I'm going to marry this girl. When someone greets you like you just returned from war, you never want to let them go.

I carry Danielle to the couch and set her down gently before sitting beside her. She instantly shoves the box at me. "Open it," she insists.

"Tell me about your vacation," I smile.

"I need you to open the package."

I shake the box, but all I can hear is a soft rustle. "You didn't have to get me anything while you were gone," I tell her. After all, I didn't get her anything. But I was also holed up in a sprawling home with my carpenter brother and his lawyer wife. We never left the house unless it was to play outside.

Danielle impatiently bounces in her seat. "Please, Holy, for me," she begs.

I sigh heavily before adhering to her request. I make a mental note to get her something special for Christmas. I'm not sure what, but I know it'll come to me.

When I open the box, I'm met with tissue paper. I pull it aside gently and find a small bit of cloth neatly folded. With a frown, I grab the item and pull it out. Quickly it unfolds, turning into a baby onesie. On the front, it says *Hi Daddy, I can't wait to meet you!* And I'm so dumbfounded by the present that I miss its meaning at first.

The seconds tick by as I stare at the white onesie, reading the words on the front repeatedly until it clicks. "Holy shit," I whisper under my breath. "Are you pregnant?"

Danielle is tearing up as she nods her head. "Yes," she manages to whisper.

I drop the onesie and pick her up instead. "Oh, god, Dani," I whisper in her ear.

"I'm scared," she whispers back. "And excited."

That last little bit sounds like an unholy admission, as if being excited about being pregnant at eighteen is a crime. “Me, too, baby. But I swear on my life that I will do whatever it takes to keep you happy and safe.”

“I’m six weeks pregnant, due in late July.” We can both count. Danielle will be fine for a while. She’ll make it to February, maybe March, before she starts to show. With the right dresses, she might even make it to graduation in May before anyone finds out. But we have to start preparing. “If we can wait a few months, my dad can’t fire you for dating a student. Not if I’ve graduated.”

Maybe so, but by the time graduation rolls around, she’ll be seven months along. She might be able to hide her growing belly during the school days, but what about around the house? What about her position on the dance team in those skin-tight outfits they compete in?

Nerves pop up like little fires, heating my skin from head to toe. There are a thousand things we need to worry about, but right now, all I do is hold my girl and think about the life we’re making. Danielle is just as nervous as I am, if not more, and it’s my job to protect her. Come hell or high water, I’ll make sure no one gives her grief.

Pregnancy is her cross to bear, but I’ll take up all the rest—anything to lighten her burden.

DANIELLE



Holy can take care of everything; he told me so himself. And yet, I'm the one with the aching breasts and all-day nausea. I'd rather be researching OBGYNs than waking up every morning at 6:45 to puke my guts out.

All things considered, one puke a day isn't bad. I have my own bathroom, so my dad can't hear me expelling the previous night's contents from my stomach. After my early morning vomit, I may be plagued by a roiling stomach, but all the contents stay put until the next day.

One day in early December, my dad asks me to have breakfast for him. He's grim when he asks, and I know I can't say no. Though the smell of eggs makes me queasy, and I'd rather die than eat a strip of the bacon he prepared, I sit at the table with a plateful of toast and feign a stomachache. The lie is primarily true; my stomach muscles hurt from vomiting and pulsating with nausea. But this stomachache won't go away for a while.

"You've been spending a lot of nights away from the house lately," he begins. "I know you're eighteen and technically an adult, but I just want to ensure you aren't staying away because of something I've done."

He couldn't be further from the truth. The nights I've spent away from home were spent a few minutes down the road at Holy's. "Of course, it isn't, Dad." I breathe a sigh of relief that this conversation isn't about him overhearing my new early morning routine.

"I also wanted to talk to you about drinking." He brings a forkful of eggs to his mouth and slowly chews as if waiting for me to admit something. "I was a

teenager once,” Marcus explains, “and I went to parties back in the day. I know there’s always beer available at the least, usually the harder stuff, too.”

I open my mouth to tell him I’m not drinking, but he only raises his voice and keeps speaking. “If you’re staying out with Rose or Cameron all these nights because the two of you are drinking and partying together, I want you to know that you can always call me, honey. I won’t ask any questions. I just want you to be safe.”

His concern is touching. I realize at the heart of his worry is a parent that just wants to protect his child. I hope when I become a mother, I will be as good to my kid as my dad has been to me. “I’m not drinking, Dad, but I promise, if I ever need your help, I’ll come to you,” I reassure him.

Relief washes over him, and the grim look disappears, quickly replaced with a smile. “You can come to me about anything. I’ll always have your side.”

The little voice in my head says that now is the time to tell him the truth. Tell him that I’m dating my teacher. Tell him that we’ve been having risky, unprotected sex. Tell him that I’m pregnant.

But the moment passes when my dad asks what I’m doing for the day, and my *‘nothing’* echoes off the walls. I was going to see Holy, but now I feel like crawling into bed and taking a nap.

School days feel different now that winter is upon us. I bundle up in pea coats and scarves and hide in the library. I tell my friends that I’m preparing for finals, but the truth is, the smell of cafeteria food turns my stomach. I eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the back of the stacks with books surrounding me in case the librarian walks up.

Holy does his best to take care of all my needs. During class, he’s torn between the whiteboard and watching me. Behind closed doors, he’s giddy with excitement over the prospect of our future child. He holds my belly and tells me every day how far along I am, as if I don’t know.

My favorite moments are when he has his head on my lap and he’s looking at my stomach, talking to a baby that is no bigger than a blueberry. “I hope

you're a boy," he says one night. "You and I are going to protect your mama against the whole world. But it'd be cool if you were a girl, too. We'll go on daddy-daughter dates, and I'll learn how to braid hair."

I never thought I'd be a teen mom, not even when Holy and I were having unprotected sex. But watching him interact with our baby in-utero is a touching scene. I can't imagine having this child with anyone else.

I haven't gained any weight yet. I've been watching the scale, and I fluctuate within the same five-pound range I always have. Holy thinks it's because of the morning sickness, but I know it's because our bean-sized child hasn't developed yet. In a few months, it'll be the size of a watermelon, and there will be no hiding it under pea coats or scarves.

"Women's Health Group can see you the Tuesday after Christmas. You'll be ten weeks around then. Eleven?" Holy frowns up at me, a question in his expression.

I nod. Just after the new year, I'll be past my first trimester. All the books say that the morning sickness gets better after twelve weeks. That's when the miscarriage rate reduces as well. Holy and I don't plan to tell a lot of people about the baby just yet. The more people we tell, the more likely it is to get back to my dad or the school board. Both of those would be bad. But at least after the first trimester is over, we'll feel comfortable telling our closest friends.

Holy is back on speaking terms with Saint. Neither of them will tell me what happened around Thanksgiving, but they settled back into their normal routines a week later. I suspect Saint will be the first person Holy tells about my pregnancy. He knows that the only person I'll speak to is Rosemary. She's been my confidante since I set my eyes on him; she's the only one who could possibly understand.

Over winter break, I fend off half a dozen party invitations. The ones I do attend are thrown by my closest friends. I turn down drinks left and right and text Holy from the bathroom.

I miss you. I wish I were with you.

When I can't turn down a beverage, I carry it around until I'm out of sight, then dump it the first chance I get. "I'll never hurt you, little bean," I whisper to my baby as if it can hear me. I'd rather waste perfectly good beer than risk my child.

The worst part of this pregnancy is resigning from the dance team. Holy and I talk about it all winter break. When I give him cons, he provides me with pros. When I tell him I want to keep going with the team, he reminds me that my body isn't my own anymore. He is the level head I need when I am upset about quitting or excited about staying on as long as I can.

In the end, I sit down with my father and tell him that I have to quit because I know the news will travel back to him. I explain that between studying for my AP tests in the spring and planning for college, I won't have time to keep up with the dance team. He understands, but I can see that he's disappointed. He's paid for dance classes and boot camps since I was five. Once when I was eight, I said I wanted to go to Juilliard. I didn't have the skill or training for it, but he always encouraged me to follow my dreams.

"You don't want to stick it out until graduation?" He asks one last time.

I shake my head no. "I just won't be able to commit to it like I want to." And the skin-tight outfits will make it clear to anyone with eyes that I'm putting on weight. At first, they'll think it's a few extra stress pounds. But after a few months, when the baby starts forming, they'll start guessing it's more than that.

My first appointment at the OBGYN is eye-opening. I meet the doctor that will deliver my baby, and she has Holy step outside during the examination. Carefully, in neutral language, she asks if I have considered my options.

"I know what people think when they see us together, Dr. Robles." He's

forty. I'm eighteen. The age difference is so noticeable that we attract attention when we're in public together. "But I'm not a misguided teen. I haven't been trafficked. I'm not here because he forced me to get pregnant. We love each other, and this baby is very, very wanted."

Dr. Robles doesn't offer any further disparaging comments. She tells Holy and me that everything looks good but reminds us to get involved with baby groups in the area. "It'll help you feel less alone through this process. While you may have friends and family here that understand your situation, it's always helpful to have a friend going through this that you can talk to."

We write off her suggestion because we can't afford to be open about our pregnancy with people in the community. Too many people know me; too many people know *of* Holy. "Will do, doc," Holy says, but we both know the truth. We'll do no such thing.

We walk out of there with our heads down, carefully avoiding the knowing gazes of other women in the waiting room. Holy holds my hand in the car and brings my knuckles to his lips. "Everything okay?"

The answer stretches before me. Physically, I'm perfectly fine. But there's a war brewing in my head. *It's just a few months*, the little voice reminds me—*just a few months*. Then we'll never have to worry again. "I'm with you," I tell him, "everything is perfect."

HOLY



I don't know where the time goes. One day Danielle is telling me she's pregnant, and the next, we're at our first baby appointment. I watch the winter days pass in a blur of math classes and stolen moments. The students stay the same while my personal life is turned upside down.

I would do anything to take the weight of the world off Danielle's shoulders. I could never manage the symptoms she's going through with as much grace. If she isn't nibbling on saltines during her TA period or stifling a yawn when we're together, she's swinging from one mood to the next or complaining about new and scary body aches. And I understand, probably better than most men.

I understand that she needs to eat saltines to settle her stomach. The cafeteria smells perfectly normal to me, but it turns her stomach. It's a combination of mystery meat and boiled vegetables. Not to mention we're in a high school where the students are either caked in body spray or haven't learned about basic personal hygiene yet. I've stopped asking Danielle to pass out homework in class because there are too many smells that might trigger her ongoing nausea.

I understand that she's always tired, too. She's growing a human from scratch. No one but a woman could take a seed and create a fully formed person. She fell asleep a few days ago while we were watching Sons Of Anarchy. I was pointing out what was realistic to the motorcycle club life and

what wasn't. The next thing I knew, she was softly snoring against my shoulder. I turned off the television, pulled a blanket over us, and let her sleep.

I understand that hormones are raging through her body and upsetting the delicate nature of her easygoing personality. Sometimes she gets angry when she and Esther don't see eye-to-eye. A few weeks ago, she cried when she broke a plate as she pulled it out of the dishwasher too fast. She's moody, and she has a right to be.

I understand that every new cramp makes her nervous, even when we're past the first trimester. I do my best to remind her that if she isn't bleeding and the twinges of pain aren't severe, to remember what the doctor said. As her body stretches to accommodate the baby, she's going to be uncomfortable. Pelvic pain may crop up as the baby grows, and they said not to worry if she's a little sore from time to time.

I understand all of this, and I wish I could help her. I wish I could take something off her plate so it was easier for her to deal with the rest. But all I can do is offer my services and pretend I'm not hurt when she grumpily says she can do it herself.

Pregnancy isn't all bad. Though Danielle's hormones are driving her crazy, they're also driving her insane with lust. If I had known sooner that pregnancy would cause a girl to hop on your dick and ride it until you don't have an ounce of cum left, I would have developed a pregnancy fetish early on.

Danielle can't get enough of me. When I'm drinking a Gatorade to replenish my fluids and eating a power bar to prepare for the next round, she's licking my cock from base to tip to get me hard. "Come on, Holy daddy," she looks up at me through thick eyelashes, "stick it in your little girl." I don't know what comes over her, but I come all over her to show my appreciation.

As Danielle starts gaining some weight when she enters her second trimester, her tits and ass get bigger, and I worship her newly enhanced appendages. The books all say they'll go away a few months after birth.

"I'm going to keep you pregnant forever." We're lying in bed, and I admire her cute baby bump. She's showing just enough that she's glad she left the

dance team when she did. I love running my hand across her stomach and feeling our baby growing beneath it. She feels kicks some days, but they're so few and far between that I haven't felt one yet.

Danielle taps the back of my head with a laugh. "Why?" She asks. "I feel fat and ugly."

"You're beautiful," I scold her. "So fucking beautiful that it hurts. I can barely walk into class anymore without getting a hard-on. That's the effect you have on me. And you're not fat." I don't want to hear her call herself that ever again. For one, it isn't true, and even if it were, she'd be beautiful at any size. "You're growing a baby, Dani. Probably the most beautiful baby known to man."

She giggles and taps my head again, harder this time. "Stop," Danielle commands. "You don't even know what this baby is going to look like. It might have my feet."

It takes all my self-control not to laugh at her unfounded concern. "Excuse me. Your feet?" I roll over onto my side to look down at her feet. I've never noticed them before.

Danielle struggles to hide her feet under the blanket. "Don't look at them!" She yells, her tone fraught with laughter. "They're dancer's feet."

I crane my neck to show her I'm skeptical about her claims. "And what, pray tell, is the difference between regular feet and dancer's feet?"

She gives me an impatient sigh before explaining. "I've shoved my feet into ballet flats since I was five years old. They're deformed." She pushes them a little deeper under the covers. "What if our kid gets deformed feet?"

I snort over her worry that she might pass on her feet to our child. "Baby, you spent years deforming your feet all on your own. That isn't a genetic condition you can pass on to our kid. Your cute nose? Absolutely."

She hides her nose behind her hands. "Holy!" Danielle scolds. "My nose is not cute. I've been asking my dad for a nose job since I turned thirteen. But he keeps saying no and that I have to pay for it myself if I *really* want it."

That plucks a chord in my chest. I never realized that there were parts about

Danielle that she didn't like. "I hope you don't *really* want it." I try to keep my features passive so she doesn't think I'm judging, but it's hard when she's criticizing a body and face that I fell in love with.

Danielle slowly brings her hands away from her face and shrugs after a long second. "I guess I don't, but I'm still self-conscious about it." She admits.

"Don't be," I tell her. "It is part of what makes your face so unbelievably beautiful." That's the end of the conversation. I climb up the bed on my forearms and press my lips to hers until all her well-formed arguments are forgotten.

DANIELLE



At the end of February, I feel like a balloon. Holy insists that I'm perfectly proportioned for how far along I am, but I'm not used to weighing this much. I'm also not used to my body feeling foreign to me. Sometimes I run into walls that I swear weren't there before. The doctor says I'm not used to my new size yet, but I think the walls are moving to keep me on my toes.

But as we rapidly approach the halfway mark, we're permitted to see an ultrasound technician to find out the gender and do measurements. Holy is so excited that he checks out every baby naming book from the library. "We've got to be prepared," he told me as he swiped his library card. I've been inundated with ideas ever since; not all of them are good.

"Daniel if it's a boy, Holly if it's a girl," he decides at first. "Or should her name be more similar to Howard?" He steers the truck absentmindedly down the sides streets leading to the Women's Health Group for our anatomy scan. "Or maybe we go a little crazy and name our boy Jett or James. You know, something cool."

I snort in derision. "James is cool?" The last James I met was in junior high. I had a crush on him for months until my friend said something to him about it. He nudged me in math class the next day and said it was cool that I liked him, but he couldn't be seen dating a girl with no tits. I swore off boys named James after that.

Holy shrugs his shoulders, unaware of my run-in with boys named James in my prepubescent years. "I mean, James Dean was cool."

Much cooler than a twelve-year-old boy that made fun of me because I hadn't developed yet. "How about no," I decide. "But I guess Jett can stay on the list." I concede in spirit. In truth, we are not naming our little boy Jett.

"1 out of 2," Holy grins, "that's a good start. Alright. How do you feel about Bradley or Sampson?"

I choke on the spit in my mouth and have to cover it with a cough. "Those are certainly names," I manage to get out.

Thank God we turn into the medical complex for the Women's Health Group. I don't know if I can stomach any more name ideas right now. I was never the girl that sat around thinking about what I would name my future kids. I'm not married to any family naming traditions, either.

"This isn't over." The way Holy says it sounds like a playful threat. I pray that inspiration strikes when we find out the gender, and we never have to have this conversation again. Being from two different generations means we have very different ideas of a good name for our child.

As usual, we check-in, and the receptionist tells us to have a seat. We wait the obligatory seven minutes until my ultrasound appointment is set to begin before a nurse calls my name and leads us back to a room. She provides me with a blanket for the lower half of my body and announces that the ultrasound technician will be in shortly.

Shortly turns out not to be soon at all. I'm not sure what the standard unit of measurement is for shortly, but after drinking thirty-two ounces of water to prepare for this appointment, my bladder is aching after the first fifteen-minute wait, and Holy apologizes when he has to excuse himself. "I know you can't pee," he winces, "but I'll have a sympathy pee for you." He drank the same amount of water so we could do this together, but he doesn't have to keep holding it.

If I had something to throw at him, I would. I know he's just trying to lighten the mood, but I feel so full that I might *actually* explode. Thankfully, the technician knocks on the door and pokes his head in a few seconds after Holy departs. "Miss Fulton?" I nod, and he slips inside. "I'm Don. I'll be performing your ultrasound today."

Don, short for Donald, as his name tag suggests. He's a handsome young man, entirely too young to be breaking out medical jargon and firing up an ultrasound machine. Thank God he just has to spread some goo on my stomach and take measurements. If I had to spread my legs for him instead, I don't know if I could handle it. There should be a law that only women can be OBGYNs because the last thing I want is an attractive young man to be staring at my intimate parts when I'm pregnant and can't trim up down there.

"Wow, look at this little tike," Don announces with a smile as a black and white image appears on the screen. I follow the technician's gaze and see my baby. It's bigger than the blip I remember from a few weeks ago. In fact, I think I can make out a head and shoulders. "Sure seems butted up against your stomach, though. These are the shoulders," he confirms as if reading my mind.

A couple more minutes pass, and Don takes measurements. His fingers fly across the keyboard as he snaps pictures and records the length of my baby's spine and the circumference of its head. I keep a watchful eye on the door, waiting for Holy's return.

"Your baby is a cutie." Don makes eye contact and smiles flirtatiously. "He probably gets that from his mama."

I blush and look away. In another life, if I were a single mom, I'd be flattered by his flirty banter. But there's a tattooed teacher somewhere outside this room that has my entire heart in his hands. "Thank you. You're too kind," I fend him off.

Holy promptly enters the room with a thunderous clap of his hands. "Great! You're here!" He announces when he sees the tech running the ultrasound wand across my belly. "What did I miss?"

Don looks from me to Holy. I can't say what exactly goes through his head, but he ultimately makes the wrong call about our relationship. "Hey, Grandpa," he smiles, "I was just telling your daughter that the baby looks happy and healthy and is probably getting its looks from its mama." Don brazenly winks, and I know without another word being said that he fucked up.

Holy stops in his tracks and stares at the ultrasound technician like he's trying

to decide if he should punch him. “Grandpa,” he repeats blandly.

The smile on the tech’s face falters, the corners of his lips no longer tilting up. “Er, pop-pop?” He suggests playfully. “I know grandparent names are special. Sorry if I got yours wrong.” He looks to me as if I might save him, but I’m busy praying that Holy doesn’t get arrested for choking the ultrasound technician.

“Unless you want me to permanently affix that wand to your prostrate, you better cut the cute shit and focus on my baby’s measurements. Do you hear me?” Holy balls his hands into fists at his sides. “And don’t flirt with my girlfriend again.”

Poor Don. All the blood drains from his face, and I can feel his hand shaking the wand pressed to my stomach. He turns to stare at the screen and anxiously calls out the measurements as he goes on. “Do you, uh, want to know, or keep a surprise, the gender?” Don stutters.

Holy holds my hand and nods. We discussed this when we booked the appointment. Some people like to be surprised, but not us. We want to know if we’re buying pink or blue.

Don avoids making eye contact with me and looks to Holy. “You’re having a boy!” He says with nervous enthusiasm. One, two, three seconds pass without a word from either of us. Don pulls the wand from my belly and grabs a towel from the stack beside his computer. He mumbles something about wanting to leave the happy couple to mull over the news before getting up and stumbling out of the room.

The second the door closes, I glare at Holy. “Was that necessary?”

“He thought I was your dad.” His jaw ticks. “He didn’t even bother to ask. Just assumed.”

I sigh because I know that this is going to happen for the rest of our lives. I’m getting used to it. When I’m Holy’s age, people will tell me that he looks good for sixty-two. “I don’t care what he assumed, Holy. We know what we are to one another.”

“You’re eighteen and gorgeous,” he mumbles. Holy’s hand lets mine slip as he steps away from my bedside to grab some towels. “I couldn’t help myself.

Men are going to want you every day for the rest of your life.”

I take the towels from him and start wiping the ultrasound goo off my stomach. Holy is spiraling into a jealous rage, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. “But I don’t want any of those men,” I point out in a cranky tone. “I want you.”

Holy is too lost in his stream of conscious thought to hear me. “My seed is growing inside of you. What man could possibly think he has a chance with you? What man dares to challenge me?”

It’s all caveman shit. He’s swinging around his club and daring any man within a five-mile radius to fight him. It’s exhausting. Once upon a time, I would have found it attractive. But now I’m just tired, and I want to go home. My home. Where my bed is. Where there are no men, just peace and quiet. I want to be alone and think about the future of my baby boy. I love Holy, but this is supposed to be a happy moment, not a jealous one.

“I wish there were a way that I could, could brand you,” he growls, “a sign to every over man that you’re mine. Forever.”

Frustrated, I chuck a towel at him and say, “Fine. Then do it. But can you help me off this fucking table first?”

Holy is pulled from his trance, and his face softens. “What?”

I swing my legs over the side and hold out a hand for him to help me down. In a second, Holy is at my side, holding my weight and lowering me to the floor. “Mark me, if that’s what it takes, whatever you need to do to make yourself feel better.”

With his hands on my hips, Holy tightens his grip in desperation. “You can’t mean that,” he says in a low whisper. “You’re just saying it to shut me up.”

But as I look into his beautiful eyes and see hope and love staring back at me, I know that even though he is right, I mean it now. I would do anything for Holy. I would let him etch his name into my skin with a knife if that’s what it took to satisfy him. “Tattoo me,” I tell him. “Write your name on my body forever so everyone knows I’m yours.”

Holy sweeps me into his arms and swings me around the room. I can’t help

but squeal with shared excitement. “My love,” he grins, “my forever love.”
Hearing those words on his lips comforts me. “And you, mine.”

HOLY



Black Mammoth Tattoo is run by my buddy, Joker. But even though we've known each other for over a decade, he looks unsure of my request.

"She's about to pop," Joker insists as he gestures toward Danielle's stomach. "What if her water breaks while I'm tattooing her?"

Danielle's jaw drops as she holds her belly protectively. She is rightfully offended. "Excuse you," she glares at him. "I'm only twenty-two weeks pregnant."

Joker throws his hands up defensively. "My bad," he apologizes. "I don't get a lot of pregnant women in here. I'm not familiar with the whole baby bump thing." The side eye he gives the curve of her stomach seconds his admission.

"Stop staring." I smack Joker in the arm, drawing his attention to me instead of Danielle. "Can you tattoo her or not?"

I came to Joker because he's the best guy in the business. Or at least in the state of Kansas. He's been perfecting his craft since he was sixteen years old. No one would give him a chance back then, but he didn't care. He opened a shop out of his garage at eighteen and has been tattooing ever since.

Joker crosses his arms over his chest and tilts his head forty-five degrees to the right. It takes him a long minute to think it over, but finally, he says, "I don't usually tattoo pregnant women during the start of their pregnancy."

I feel like smacking him in the head or maybe banging my head into a wall. I can't tell which would be more effective at this moment. "She isn't at the

start of her pregnancy either, genius. She's midway."

"I don't know about these womanly things." Joker does a good impression of Jack Sparrow with his fingers, jiggling them in Danielle's direction to make his point. A second later, he turns on the ball of his foot and walks away from us.

"What the fuck, Joker!" I yell after him.

"I'm going to get my stuff." He doesn't even turn back; he just waves at the two booths. "Pick a seat, any seat."

Danielle looks ill at ease when I lead her to the booth on the right. She watches Joker's disappearing frame and shakes her head when he's out of eyesight. "Is that man okay?"

I'm hesitant to tell her about Joker. Not because I don't trust her to be kind and sensitive, but because he could return at any moment. I don't want him to come back and find me gossiping. "He's one of the Kings," I tell her, a careful eye on the back room door. "No one knows for sure what's wrong with him. We've theorized some form of autism or maybe ADHD because he's the type to hyper-fixate on something, sort of like he did your stomach. He's good at what he does, though. Damn good."

Understanding dawns on her features. As I help her onto the tattoo bed and help her get comfortable, she mulls over what I told her. Danielle doesn't add or detract from Joker's backstory. She doesn't say she knows someone like him. She simply nods her head after a few moments and asks where I plan to mark her.

"Well, it's quite simple." I step away from Danielle to grab a curtain shoved up against the wall. It races along the track hooked up to the ceiling, creating a circle of privacy around us. A light hangs overhead, highlighting Danielle in its glow. She is radiant, as usual. "My first thought was right here," I gesture to my collarbone. "In big, giant letters. HOLY. Right across your chest."

Danielle giggles and folds her hands over her stomach. Her eyes sparkle with delight, and it's impossible not to share her attitude. "Oh, really?" She bites her bottom lip to keep from bursting out into laughter. "And what changed

your mind?”

I place one hand on each side of the black leather tattoo table, so close to her that I can feel the heat of her breath on my chest. “Who says I changed my mind?”

“You’re giving me big bad wolf vibes right now,” she suggests in a flirty tone.

I lean down to her ear and whisper, “Are you saying you want me to eat you? Right here?” I drag my tongue along the curve of her lobe. “Right now? With Joker somewhere outside the room listening?”

Danielle breathes in sharply. “Holy,” she mumbles, her fingers reaching up to play with the fringes of my shirt. “Maybe we should come back later.”

“Oh, no,” I chuckle low and slow against the skin on her neck. “We’re doing this now.”

She groans with disappointment as I pull away from her quickly and turn to the desk beside the tattoo table. It has been freshly cleaned, but I find what I’m looking for. A small, empty bottle waits for me, and I grab it, exiting our love nest. Danielle asks what I’m doing, but I hum loudly as I head to the sink to fill the bottle with warm, soapy water. There is a single-use razor in a drawer beneath the sink and freshly laundered washcloths beside them. I grab one of each and head back to the enclosed space, now whistling a happy tune.

Danielle raises a single eyebrow as she looks at the items in my hands. “And what, pray tell, do you think you’re doing with all that?”

I gesture toward the front of her dress. “I need you to pull up your skirt,” I insist as I pull the razor out of its package. “And pull down your panties. I need to shave you.”

She blushes red hot. “Is-is this because I can’t do it myself? My belly—“ she begins, but I cut her off.

“It’s because Joker’s going to need a clean patch of skin to tattoo,” I explain to her gently.

Danielle reluctantly follows my order with a look of irritation on her face.

“Care to tell me more?”

When her panties are off and balled up, I whisk them away into my back pocket. I’ll be saving these for later. When she goes home for the night, they’ll be my memento from our great day together. “Spread your legs, baby,” I order.

“Oh, so we’re doing this after all,” she teases with a grin.

I wish we were. As she opens wide, I see her glistening slit winking at me. I’d chop off my left hand to fuck her here and now. “Any man that ever gets close enough to see your pretty pink pussy will have my name staring back at him. From now until we’re old and gray.”

“What if you’re already graying?” Danielle asks with a disrespectful grin.

“You, hush,” I point the razor at her, “before someone turns you over and smacks your bottom for misbehaving.” I hope Joker never returns.

I perch in front of Danielle with my equipment and place the towel below her while I squirt her mound with the warm, soapy water. She shivers as the droplets trickle between her legs. “Holy,” she says my name like she’s whispering a prayer to God.

I splash some water on the razor before bringing it to her mound. “Shhh,” I glance at her, “I’m working.” With a mischievous smile, I start the delicate process of shaving her.

“I wish you were working deep inside of me.” She says it so low that I almost don’t hear her. But my cock does, and he pricks up with excitement.

Danielle’s done a decent job of shaving herself despite the belly. There are a few missed hairs here and there, but I’ve never really noticed before. Usually, when I’m down here, I’m worried about more important things, like rubbing my tongue against her throbbing button until she dings like a microwave.

It only takes a couple of minutes to get her all cleaned up, and I’m almost sad that I have to drag the towel across her mound, finished. “You’re ready,” I tell her in a gravelly voice.

“For you.” Danielle licks her bottom lip seductively. “Let’s go home,” she

begs. “I didn’t know that you shaving me would be so hot.”

I’d love to give her what she wants, but I can’t fuck over my buddy like that. I told Joker my girl was getting a tattoo, and she will. But that doesn’t mean I can’t satisfy her in the meantime.

I hover over the tattoo table and drag my fingers between her open legs. She is wet and sticky, her desire coating my middle finger as I press it past her opening. Danielle opens her mouth to gasp, and I cover her lips with my own. Slowly, I pump my finger in and out, curving the tip until it dances past her G-spot. She moans into my mouth, and I disguise her sounds with my tongue.

She is utterly depraved, and I love it. Danielle is drenched with desire as I put another finger inside her and work them back and forth in tandem. I almost forget we’re in a tattoo shop until...

“Hey!” Joker pulls back the curtain with his bag in hand. “Are you guys ready?”

DANIELLE



I'm mortified. Holy and I were in the middle of a passionate moment—albeit in the wrong location, I must admit—and Joker interrupts us. He stands there with his stuff in hand as if he hadn't just caught Holy trying to get me off. Joker dares to ask if we're ready for him to begin my session even though his friend's fingers are still inside me.

Holy handles the intrusion better than me. He calmly asks Joker to step outside for a minute. But without an explanation, Joker argues. "But this is my station."

With his free hand, Holy points somewhere behind me. "Get out, Joker. We'll be ready in a minute." A second passes before Holy sighs in frustration and adds, "Close the damn curtain behind you."

"I can't go through with this," I fret in a whisper. "He just saw us—"

Holy kisses me again. "It's fine, baby. There should be something around here to place over your pussy while he works." He starts looking around but doesn't immediately find what he wants.

I fret again, to myself this time. I shouldn't have agreed to this. I never should have said I'd get marked to prove my love. I mean, I want to, but I didn't think it would be so intimate. I didn't realize that another man would be up close and personal with my vagina in order to give Holy what he wants.

Holy grabs all the stuff we were using and escorts me to the bathroom to clean up. I notice that I'm missing my panties, and there's a bulge in Holy's

pocket, but I don't have the courage to ask for them back with Joker watching the two of us. When I return to the chair, everything looks sanitized and ready for business. There's even a towel placed on the leather. My boyfriend helps me back onto the table and holds my hand as Joker makes small talk, but not about the activities he caught us in the middle of.

"Have you ever gotten a tattoo before?" He applies a piece of paper to my mound, and I have to admit that I feel self-conscious about him rubbing his fingers along my skin. Joker's wearing gloves, but still, I never thought anyone would touch me except Holy.

I shake my head no, then verbalize it because I realize he isn't looking at me. "No, this is my first."

Joker talks about what he's doing while he's doing it. "I'm applying the stencil. Holy said MC patch and name. How does this look?" He asks as he removes the bit of paper.

Unfortunately, I can't move my belly aside to see how it's placed. Luckily, Holy does the checking for me. But having both him and Joker staring at a private part that I never shared with anyone before a few months ago makes me shift in discomfort. Luckily, their gazing only lasts for a few seconds.

"That looks good," Holy decides with a smile. "I love the detailing you got on the MC logo. The shading on the skull is perfect."

Joker looks pleased with himself but doesn't say thank you. I notice he's a man of few words, only saying what he feels is essential. Instead, he gets his machine ready. "This may hurt a little bit," he warns me. "Especially because this is a more sensitive area." But Joker is all business now.

"Don't you worry about her sensitive area," Holy warns his buddy. I can tell he's joking, but his words have a threatening edge.

Joker doesn't notice, though. He gets down to business and turns on the machine. The whir sends my heart into overdrive, and I grab Holy's hand as I wait for the first application of the needle. I don't realize I'm shaking until he runs his thumb along my wrist and tells me it'll be okay.

It isn't as bad as I thought it'd be. It's a small prick, over and over again, as Joker outlines the tattoo. He works quickly but precise. I rely on Holy to tell

me how the tattoo looks because I can't see what Joker is doing. Every few seconds, he drags a paper towel across my mound. The first couple of times, it is followed by an eruption of pain as he clears away blood and ink from freshly tattooed skin, but it fades within a few seconds. Soon it's just a dull ache as he applies the black and grays to their final position.

"I'm hard as a rock," Holy whispers in my ear at one point during the tattoo.

I look over at him, and indeed, I can see the outline of his cock in his jeans. He cuts an impressive figure, making me want to reach over and stroke him, but I don't. "Calm down, cowboy; I have a feeling this tattoo isn't finished."

"You also shouldn't rub up against this for a minimum of twelve hours," Joker adds with a concentrated look on his face.

Holy closes his eyes and shakes his head. "Joker, what have we told you about eavesdropping?"

He looks up from my mound for a minute, and a frown is etched into his features. He looks like he's struggling to remember the handy advice his friends have given him over the years. "Not to?" Joker asks hopefully.

"Right," Holy agrees in a tone that insinuates Joker is like a child. "But good to know about the rubbing thing. Guess I'll take you from behind later."

I smack him in the arm, hard, and try not to blush. Redness fills my cheeks as I turn away from both of them. Luckily, Joker doesn't say anything else about it; neither does Holy.

When the tattoo is finished, Holy leads me to a mirror in the back of the tattoo parlor and stands behind me so no one can watch me lift my dress and admire the ink freshly applied to my mound.

Seeing Holy's name on such an intimate part of my body nearly makes my heart explode. It is so intricately done; I love it. "It's beautiful."

"No, you're beautiful," Holy replies. "That's why we need this. So every man alive knows I've staked my claim on the most beautiful woman in the world." He wraps his arms around me, and I let my dress fall into place.

In this light, without a jacket to cover my bump, it's apparent that I'm

pregnant. In a few weeks, it's going to get even harder to hide our secret when the winter days turn nice and ring in the spring. My anxiety grows. Thank God Holy is around to keep me grounded. Otherwise, I'm afraid I'd be spinning off the map into insanity. "Promise you'll love me forever."

"Until the day I die," Holy swears. "Come hell or high water."

Hell and high water may be coming sooner than we'd like.

DANIELLE



Everything goes right... for a while. Isn't that how life works? You go through sunny days riding high on the mountaintop, then the clouds start rolling in, and you find yourself in a valley.

My mountaintop is the double life I'm leading.

Holy and I convert the spare bedroom on the second floor into a nursery. We paint the walls pastel yellow on a beautiful spring day. To ensure my safety, I wear a mask, and every window in the house is open so the fumes can't hurt me. Still, Holy makes me take lots of breaks, just in case.

When the paint has dried and a second coat has been applied, we spend a weekend furnishing the room with everything our baby boy will need, like an expensive Grace Hadley 5-in-1 crib with changing table and storage drawer. "This might be the most expensive piece of furniture I've ever bought," Holy laughs nervously as he loads the box into our cart. It's large and awkward, kind of like me right now.

"I can buy it." I reach for my purse at the top of the cart, and Holy grabs my hand to stop me.

"That's not what I meant," he corrects. Holy brings my hand to his chest and spreads my fingers over his heart. "I've bought a lot of cheap crap for my house. Or got stuff handed down to me from one of the Kings. I haven't cared about what was in my house before because it was all just stuff. And frankly,

I didn't have anyone to share my stuff with, so who cared if it was new? But this stuff," he pats the box, "this stuff matters. This stuff is important. This stuff I'm sharing with the love of my life and my beautiful baby boy. And it's worth every penny."

After that, we never really talk about money, even though I know it should be a bigger discussion than we're letting on. Holy pays all the bills and buys everything from onesies to the adorable little hangers we put them on. He never complains. He never says the Diaper Genie is just a fancy trash can marketed to parents. He does more than his fair share, and it endears me to him.

On the nights I can't come over, he's in touch with me the entire time. He sends me cute little text messages or calls me. He understands that I am studying for my AP tests and preparing for graduation. He even understands when I tell him I'm going to prom without him. Holy is the most understanding man in the world, and I feel so lucky to have him.

But the valleys are all the moments in between.

Though my morning vomit ritual has decreased exponentially, I am still nauseous all the time. I have stretch marks on my hips and dark tiger stripes emanating from my belly button. I wear baggy clothes all the time, and with nicer weather finally coming around, it's getting harder and harder to justify wearing a sweatshirt all day.

A few days ago, my dad called me downstairs and slid an envelope my way. In the sender's address, I saw the Women's Health Group, and I paled. Before I could make up a lie, Dad asked if I was okay.

"I know I haven't always been as involved with your feminine health as I should be." The color on his cheeks tells me he is as uncomfortable having this conversation as I am. "I'm still grateful for your grandma talking me through how to deal with periods." He shudders like it was a horrifying time in his life. In reality, his mom just told him what kind of tampons and pads to buy and then talked me through how to use them.

"But if you're going to the feminine doctor for birth control," Marcus shifts

from one foot to the other, “or some kind of STD testing, you can tell me.”

Once again, the little voice in my head warns me that this is the moment to come clean. And once again, I ignore it. I calmly open the letter, telling him, “It was my annual physical. I figured since I was eighteen, I didn’t need your name on my account anymore. That’s all. Do you want to see?” I offer him the bill. It’s a dangerous move because if he takes it, he’ll see the charges for my most recent maternity appointment and tests. My heart thunders inside my chest, and I pray that he says no.

My prayer is answered. Marcus looks at the folded-up piece of paper and then smiles at me. “I trust you, honey. Do you need my checkbook?”

Despite the gesture of confidence I just displayed, I am relieved by his response. I’d say yes, but the second he sees a charge for \$150, he’s going to start asking questions. I wave him off instead. “I got it.”

“You sure?” He raises an eyebrow. “I don’t want you wasting your trust fund on stuff I’m supposed to pay for, anyway.”

When I was born, my grandparents set up a trust fund in my name with money from one of their restaurants. Year after year, they put a percentage of the profits into the account. The trust fund was designed to get me started when I came of age. It would help pay for college, put a down payment on a house, and keep me from having to work myself to death when I turned eighteen. “I’m sure. I’m an adult now. I can pay my own bills.”

Marcus steps forward to envelope me in a hug. I try to twist sideways so he doesn’t feel my bump against his stomach. “I’m so proud of you, Danielle. You’re becoming an amazing woman.”

His words warm my heart but also pluck the strings of my discontent. I’m still keeping secrets from everyone I know. I’m still risking Holy’s future by being with him and not coming clean. I’m still hiding my pregnancy from the one person that loves me almost as much as the man that got me pregnant.

Not to mention that I feel like I’m drifting apart from my friends. Even Rosemary seems busier these days. I’m not sure what she’s doing, but she’s never around. Worse than that, she can’t even be my alibi because she doesn’t pick up her phone.

My dad is willing to overlook a lot of weird behavior because he's a busy man and works with teenagers every day. The way he looks at it, at least I'm not doing drugs. If I'm away from the house but still keeping up my grades, he's willing to give me a pass.

But one day, he might look at me in a baggy shirt and see the curve of my stomach beneath it. He might realize that I haven't just gained stress weight; I've gained baby weight. And when he gets to that conclusion, will he be as accepting of me as he's always been? Or will he fly off the handle and demand answers?

Only time will tell. And time is not on my side.

HOLY



Prom is on April 29th. I plan to go, not as Danielle's date, but as a chaperone. It is the closest we'll get to being together on prom night. Also, it'll give me a chance to keep an eye out for her. She'll be at the start of her third trimester, and she'll inevitably be showing.

A week before prom, at 27 weeks and five days pregnant, we stand in a dress shop in Kansas City looking at gowns. Danielle said I didn't have to come, but I don't want to miss a single moment with her. I already miss her most nights of the week because she's playing the dutiful daughter. A two-hour drive to KC is plenty of time for us to discuss her birth plan, which came up at her most recent visit to the OBGYN.

"It has to be black," Danielle stipulates to the sales representative pulling dresses.

She looks at Danielle's protruding stomach with a raised eyebrow and says, "I see." Somehow those two words carry the weight of every judgmental person we've encountered since this whole thing began.

When the woman disappears into the shop to grab a few options, Danielle flips the bird. "Bitch," she mumbles under her breath.

I trail my hand down her spine to calm her down. "Ignore her, baby."

The waiting room is conveniently empty today. The sales associate says it's because most Kansas City high school proms happened the weekend before. We have the whole dressing room to ourselves, and I watch Danielle try on

outfit after outfit. She discards each with a frustrated sigh. Either they're too big, too small, or make her baby bump seem too noticeable.

"We did not think this through," she says from her enclosed room. She's on the last dress, a little black number that she already decided wouldn't work. "I should have gotten on the pill."

"I should have worn a condom," I offer.

"Why?" Danielle pulls the curtain back enough to show her face. She wears an angry look. "Do you not want to be a dad anymore?"

Her hormones have sent her on a roller coaster lately. Everything I say is wrong and upsetting. "I want nothing more than to be the father of your children, Dani. You are the love of my life."

This soothes her temper. She returns to fitting herself into the gown and zipping it up in the back. "Oh, god," Danielle mumbles, "I look like a sausage."

She's said that about every dress. To quell her self-conscious rage, I ask her to step out and let me see.

"You're biased," she announces as she swings the curtain open. "You'd think I was beautiful in anything."

She's not wrong. But in truth, she *does* look beautiful.

The dress has a sweetheart neckline and a loose, flowing bodice that hides her stomach. It's black, but the silky fabric has flecks of white and swirls of silver and gray. Strands of silver beads are scattered like shooting stars accented against the dark fabric. The skirt flares out, almost like wings, and is made up of tiers. She looks like Cinderella, but she is a dark beauty compared to the blonde Disney princess.

"Do you know what you look like right now?" She takes my breath away.

Danielle steps in front of the large dressing room mirror to look at herself more closely. I think she sees what I see because she's stunned into silence.

I come up behind her and place my hands on her hips, feeling like the luckiest man alive to be with a woman so gorgeous. "You look like every

dream I've ever had coming true."

She twists in my arms and places her hands on my chest. "I wish I were going to prom with you," Danielle admits in a small whisper. "All my friends have dates. I wish I could show off my boyfriend."

I pull her as close as her swollen belly will allow. "We have the rest of our lives to be together, Dani. And I'll be at prom."

"But we won't get to dance together," she says with a pretty little pout.

I kiss it away. "But at least we'll be there together." It won't be the same, but I hope it'll be enough.

The sales rep packs up the dress and runs Danielle's card. She warily eyes the pregnant belly beneath Danielle's shirt but wisely says nothing. Still, her silence is deafening.

"Where to, now?" I ask as we exit, carrying her prom dress box for her.

Danielle runs through a list of places we could go for lunch or to shop. She even mentions the zoo. "It's not as big as the Omaha Zoo," she adds, "but it's huge. There's so much to see, so many animals. I follow them on Facebook, and their tiger just had babies."

"The zoo it is," I grin.

Everywhere in Kansas City feels like a thirty-minute drive from everywhere else. We have to get back on the highway and cross from the far south side of the city to get to the zoo. "God, I hate driving in Kansas City traffic," I grumpily announce when we finally get onto a side street. "There's no reason they need five lanes on the highway."

Danielle chuckles and keeps her eyes on the phone. It is directing us turn-by-turn to the Kansas City Zoo's parking lot. "At the next stoplight, turn left," she says a few seconds before the generic computer voice says the same thing.

"I'm glad we live in Manhattan," I continue. "The worst traffic is when there's construction and the students are in town. You might spend ten minutes waiting for a light because the road is backed up, but at least you

don't have to merge four times to—”

I'm cut off before I get to finish the sentence. The light has a green arrow summoning me forward, and as I turn left, we're t-boned. A truck rams right into the passenger side of Danielle's Jeep.

My head slams into the glass window from the sudden impact, and I stomp on the brakes out of muscle memory. The sound of metal on metal crushing will be stuck in my memories forever. Luke Bryan sings about margaritas on the radio as the Jeep crashes into a car stopped in the oncoming traffic lane. When we make it to a halt, there's glass everywhere and people screaming—everyone but Danielle, who is slumped over with blood dripping from the corner of her mouth.

The driver of the oncoming truck steps out of his vehicle with a rattled look on his face. He has his arms up as if to surrender, but the damage has been done. Danielle sits unmoving beside me, her head propped up by the airbag.

Instinctively, I want to jump out of the car and rush to the other side to ensure she's okay, but I can't move. My head is singing with pain, and every limb in my body feels like it weighs a ton. Witnesses in the surrounding cars start getting out and rushing toward us. Someone opens my door. I hear someone else say they're calling 911. Another person opens Danielle's door and swears under their breath.

“She's. Pregnant.” I struggle to get the words out. My chest hurts for some reason.

The man on Danielle's side of the car starts frantically working to free her from the wreckage. Someone reaches across me to brush her hair back, revealing a gash on her forehead.

“Save her,” I mumble, feeling lightheaded. “Save our baby.”

DANIELLE



I t's funny what you remember when your life flashes before your eyes.

I thought that only happened in the movies, but it's real. And when the truck slams right into my side of the car, I am inundated by a strange set of memories.

My first dance competition. I was six years old, and my father washed my outfit the night before. It shrunk, and now I was wearing my practice outfit from my class. My dance teacher told me they wouldn't judge me on my clothes when they saw how good I was. But I was nervous.

The time my father sat me down to tell me why I didn't have a mom. I don't remember how old I was, but he said he would always love me and take care of me.

Once in the fifth grade when I won the weekly spelling bee by spelling *constituent* correctly. Everyone in the class was bored, but the boy beside me looked proud. His name was Tony, and looking back, I think he liked me.

Finding a grass spider in my room once. I screamed and stood on my bed, yelling for my dad. He chased the spider around the room for a full two minutes before he finally cornered it and killed it. I think I was twelve.

When James told me that I was mature enough for him physically, I could feel the pain of his words even as sirens screamed through my consciousness.

My junior high graduation. The last day of school dance. Shaking my butt to Apple Bottom Jeans and screaming the lyrics at the top of my lungs.

Throwing out the dark green robe after graduation was over. But keeping the tassel because it was a reminder of what I'd accomplished so far.

My first day of high school.

My first high school dance.

The first time I had to read from Shakespeare in front of the class.

Getting on the dance team.

Getting my first 4.0 in my freshman year.

Taking AP classes in European history and US government.

Vacations with my dad.

Birthday presents from my grandparents.

The first time I saw Holy.

The first time we spoke.

The first time we kissed.

The first time we made love.

Holy takes over my memories until the darkness comes. Our first baby appointment. Our first ultrasound. The first kick we felt together. He is my last thought before I slip into nothingness.

I wake up an unknown amount of time later. There are hands all over me, picking me up and moving me to a stretcher. My head feels heavy. Everything feels heavy. It weighs my eyelids down, and I drift out of consciousness.

My next patch of awareness comes with the sterile scent of the hospital. I am plunged into reality with the sharp insertion of a needle. "Danielle?" Someone calls my name. I look in the direction of the voice and see a woman standing above me with a mask on and a ferry boat scrub cap.

"Derek," I mumble, thinking about Grey's Anatomy. I've woken into my favorite television show.

She smiles. "I'm Dr. Steele. You're okay, Danielle. Your baby is okay."

Maybe the needle that poked me was full of drugs. I pass out before she says anything else. I dream of my baby, or maybe it's just any baby. I'm sitting in the nursery Holy and I created, rocking back and forth in a chair passed down in his family for five generations. I'm holding a small bundle of blue, and his eyes twinkle as he stares at me.

My sweetest love, I say to the child. We sit there rocking for a while. In truth, I could do this forever. I am serene here in my dreams. I am at peace.

But eventually, I am drawn into consciousness. The lights in the room are dim, and everything hurts. The smell of antiseptic turns my stomach. "My stomach," I groan, bringing my hand to my belly.

The curve I have been afraid of showing off for so many months is still there. "My baby," I whisper, tired even though I've been asleep for hours. The sun no longer shines outside my hospital room window.

"Dani?" I turn to the sound and see my father stretched out in the corner of the room in a chair meant for a much smaller person. "Dani, are you awake?"

Tears spring to my eyes. "Daddy." My words sound like a croak, but I don't care.

He gets up and opens the door to my room, calling for the nurses. He tells them that I'm awake before rushing to my bedside. "I was so scared, honey." Tears fill his eyes, too. "When the hospital called and said you were in surgery, I nearly killed myself trying to get here."

Surgery? "What surgery?"

I watch his eyes drift from my face to my stomach, and I realize he must know about the pregnancy. "The hospital had to call in a fetal surgeon," he says neutrally. "Your placenta was leaking, and they were concerned that you would have to deliver early. But the surgeon arrived with enough time to repair the issues and keep the baby in there for a few more weeks. You'll have to be on bed rest, though."

"But he's okay?" I rub the swell of my stomach and feel it, a bandage. That must be where they cut into me.

My father nods his head. Before he can say anything, the door to the room opens again, and there's a rush of white coats and scrubs. The light in the room gets brighter as they check my vitals and ask a bunch of questions about how I feel.

I'm overwhelmed by the attention and thoroughly exhausted. Dr. Steele says that's normal. "You went through a traumatic event. Your brain has to heal as well as your body."

Traumatic event. I say the words to myself slowly, tasting them on the tip of my tongue. And it reminds me of the last time. "Howard," I frown, "where's Holy?"

The room quiets, and every professional eye turns toward my father. He has the grace to look ashamed. "He's uh, he's in his own room."

"I want to see him." I make every effort to sit up because my abdomen hurts, and the nurses force me to stay lying down.

"Miss Fulton, if you'd like to see Howard Pelham, we can arrange that. But your father will need to leave the room for the duration of the visit." Dr. Steele's tone is careful and controlled.

Something happened. I can feel it. I just don't know what it was. "Why?"

Once again, everyone looks at my father. Marcus Fulton sighs heavily and says, "We got in a fistfight, and the staff said they wouldn't call the cops as long as we kept our distance."

A fistfight? How long have I been asleep?

"I'm sorry, honey," he says contritely after a few moments. "When he said he was the father of your child, I lost it."

HOLY



A doctor hovers over me, his eyes studying every inch of my face as he shines a light in my eyes. I pull away with a wince, and the doctor makes a sound of interest. He turns to the nurse and says something I don't quite understand.

The doctor turns back to me and asks, "Howard, do you remember how you sustained this head injury?"

I nod, which makes my head hurt and exacerbates the ache in my neck. I have an unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach. I remember being in the car with Danielle, driving to the zoo, when we were hit by a truck.

Danielle.

The truck hit the passenger side of the car. I remember seeing blood dripping from her mouth and forehead. Her slumped over body as we waited for emergency vehicles to arrive. "Where's Dani?" I ask, my stomach churning with anxiety.

The doctor examines the bandage on my head. It almost matches the one they put on Danielle when they shoved her in the back of the EMS van. I remember her beautiful face, marred with injuries. His face is solemn as he tells me what he knows. "She sustained serious injuries during the crash and is currently in surgery. The doctor that saw her said she had an issue with her placenta, and they rushed her into the OR. Unfortunately, I don't know the extent of her injuries or how the surgery is going. But when I find out, I'll let you know."

My stomach drops, and my brain grapples with what will happen to me if Danielle doesn't make it. Or, if God forbid, our baby doesn't make it. "She's in surgery?" I repeat.

The doctor sighs heavily and steps back. "Yes, Mr. Pelham. We've discussed this. Miss Fulton was taken into surgery for placental abruption. From what I understand, they called in a fetal surgeon to determine if she needed to deliver early or if something could be done to keep the baby in utero a little longer."

It's all coming back to me. We just had this conversation five minutes ago.

"You have a concussion, Mr. Pelham," the doctor reminds me gently. "We'll monitor you over the next few hours to ensure you're alright. A nurse will come in every ten minutes to check on you and observe your symptoms. We've called your emergency contact, and Mr. Monroe said he would be here as soon as possible. I understand he's coming from Manhattan?"

I nod. Saint. Saint is coming. I don't remember contacting him. Did I call him? Or did the hospital? "We were in a car accident," I tell the doctor with a hopeful look. I know I'm repeating myself, but my brain is trying to understand what happened. And doing a miserable job of it, quite frankly.

The doctor politely says yes. "You sustained mild to moderate injuries, including the concussion and the broken wrist." As he reminds me, I stare down at my wrist and see it's casted. I don't remember when they did this. "You have other scrapes and bruises, but most of them are minor and won't even scar. The laceration to your temple came from the impact of your head on the driver's side window. It's mostly superficial, but the force with which you slammed into the glass is responsible for the concussion."

As he finishes addressing my injuries, he checks the clipboard on the front of my bed to ensure he didn't miss anything. When the doctor is pleased with his explanation, he announces that he'll be back in an hour to check on me.

Before he reaches the door to my room, it opens, and a nurse appears. "Oh, doctor," she startles, "there's a visitor for Mr. Pelham. Can he have guests?"

The doctor looks at me and asks if I'm up for company. When I shrug my shoulders, I hear him discuss with the person outside the door that I have a

concussion and to treat me gingerly. I want to complain that I'm fine, but I stare blankly at the door, the words refusing to form on my tongue.

In walks my boss. Marcus Fulton stands in the doorway looking madder than a bull. "Howard," he greets angrily.

Something in my brain tells me he isn't supposed to be here, but I can't figure out why. "Mr. Fulton," I frown. "What are you doing here?"

He huffs with exasperation as he steps closer to my bed. I watch his eyes comb over me, and he forms an opinion that I can't seem to identify. "I'm Danielle's emergency contact. I think the better question is, why are *you* here?"

It seems obvious to me. Maybe the hospital didn't tell him about the accident. "Danielle and I were on our way to the zoo when another car failed to yield. We were t-boned in the intersection."

Marcus cracks his knuckles at his waist. "Is this some sort of class field trip?" I shake my head no, confused. "Then why the *fuck* are you with my daughter, Howard? In Kansas fucking City."

Concussions are no joke. When the truth dawns on me, it comes with a massive headache. Marcus is Danielle's dad. Marcus doesn't know that Danielle and I are dating. Marcus doesn't know that Danielle is pregnant with my child. "Mr. Fulton, I can explain." I toss my legs over the side of the hospital bed and try to get to my feet. The room starts spinning, but I know I need to face Marcus. I need to tell him what happened before this gets out of hand. I know what I need to do, but between his angry tone and my aching head, I can't make the words come out right.

"You can explain why the hospital called to inform me that my *pregnant* eighteen-year-old daughter is in the middle of *surgery*?" Marcus looks murderous, and I don't blame him. "You can explain why, when I showed up, the nurse told me that her *boyfriend* was okay, but she would still be in surgery for another couple of hours?"

I think my head is going to explode. It certainly feels like my forehead is coming unglued from my skull, and my cheekbones are threatening to detonate. "We were going to talk to you." I'm mucking this all up; I know it.

But my stomach is churning, and everything aches. I can't think straight. Did Marcus say that Danielle was in surgery?

“And say *what?*” Marcus roars, taking a step closer. I've got weight and muscle on him, but right now, he has consciousness on me. “That one of my teachers is fucking my daughter? Is that what you were going to say?”

“I am in love with your daughter, sir,” I tell him. I get to my feet, and the cold, hard linoleum brings me a sense of stabilization. “And we're having a baby.”

The door opens, and a nurse steps in. She wears a cheerful smile as she says, “I heard yelling and—” but she never gets to finish her sentence.

Marcus's fist connects with my jaw, and I hit the ground, caught off guard by the surprise attack. He's screaming something at me, and I can make out the words ‘fired’ and ‘cops’, but the rest is a blur. I kick at his ankles until he's on the floor with me.

I look at him through unsteady eyes and see him seething with rage. His face is a mix of anger, disbelief, and pure hatred as he launches himself at me. “You motherfucker,” he yells as he's throwing fist after fist at my face and chest.

My head spins from the new explosion of pain in my jaw. I try to give as good as I get, packing an extra twenty pounds behind each punch. “Listen to me!” I roar at him, trying to get the man to see sense.

But neither of us can get in a word in while we're rolling around like children. It takes three security guards, two doctors, and a nurse to break us up. Marcus's nose is bleeding, and if I didn't have a concussion before, I sure do now. The entire room is spinning like I'm on a tilt-a-whirl, and I feel like throwing up.

The security guards haul Marcus out of the room while the nurse gets me into bed. A different doctor takes inventory of my new injuries and provides me with some prescription Tylenol.

I knew that telling Marcus about my relationship with his daughter wouldn't end well, but I didn't suspect it would end this badly.

I curl up with a blanket and my throbbing head and do something I haven't done in years. I pray. For Danielle to make it through surgery. For our baby to be okay. For Marcus to forgive us for what we've done. By the time I'm finished asking God to make things right, I'm exhausted. And thankfully, my best friend is here. Saint steps into the room with a bevy of companions, and I've never been happier to see my brothers in leather.

DANIELLE



My heart sinks as I listen to my father explain the events leading up to the knockdown fight he and Holy had while I was in surgery. His words are heavy with shame and guilty, his voice low with remorse as he apologizes for his reckless actions.

I feel like I'm going to be sick. I want to bend at the waist and vomit over the railing of my hospital bed, but I am frozen in place by my father's admission. His voice is barely more than a whisper now as he explains how they argued heatedly until things got physical. It was only when the security guards showed up and tore the two of them apart that he snapped out of his rage.

The thought of my father fighting with Holy is too much for me to comprehend. When my father finishes explaining their fight, a long, tense silence stretches between us. I want to fill it with my own explanation about how this happened and why we're here, but Marcus speaks first.

"The hospital was going to call the cops, and I was ready for them to do it. I was going to have them arrest Howard," he admits, unable to meet my gaze.

"Dad," I groan, "*I'm* an adult. *He's* an adult. This isn't an arrest-worthy offense. We didn't even get together until a couple of months ago. *Well* after I turned eighteen," I stress.

Marcus sighs heavily, and he says that he knows. The tone of his voice makes me wary.

"You know?" I frown. "How could you know?"

He starts pacing the floor, and suddenly I'm anxious. I haven't seen my father look like this before. He runs his hand through his hair, and a thin sheen of sweat appears on his forehead. "Listen, honey; I haven't been entirely honest with you, either."

I'm not even sure what to expect, mainly because my dad has never kept a secret from me before. I mean, I'm sure there's stuff he keeps to himself, but if it's something important to both of our lives, he's always been open. Of course, so have I before I got involved with Holy.

"The hospital staff wanted to call the police. I think on me more than anything because the nurse saw me throw the first punch," he says with a wince. "But I was urging them to do it for a different reason. I wanted to see him handcuffed and thrown in the back of a police car. I was angry, Dani, so, so angry. Then my phone rang."

He pauses, and the silence is eerie. I can hear the tick-tock of the analog clock on the wall. I can hear my own breathing. I can hear my heartbeat making small little beeping sounds from the machine I'm hooked up to.

"Rose called," Marcus adds after a few moments. "She wanted to make sure that you were okay. That," he pauses, pursing his lips together, "she wanted to make sure that *I* was okay."

Maybe it's the anesthesia I was under, but I'm not picking up what he's putting down. "Rose called you," I repeat, and he nods his head yes. "To make sure *I* was okay." Again, he nods. "To make sure *you* were okay?" Marcus takes a deep breath and then nods again. Even though I repeat what he said, "I don't understand."

He walks up to the end of the bed and places his hands on the hard plastic surface. I watch as his knuckles lose all color when he squeezes the footboard. "Rose told me everything about you and Howard. She told me about when you got together and how much you care about one another. She made it abundantly clear that nothing illegal *actually* took place. But I was startled and upset, so upset that I hung up on her."

I can't understand why Rose would tell my father anything. I knew she had his number and vice versa. My dad has had Cameron, Esther, and Rosemary's numbers for years. In the event that he couldn't get ahold of me,

he had their numbers so he could track me down through them.

Marcus goes on. “I was ready to have Howard thrown behind bars for what he did. But then Rose called back and told me that I was being a hypocrite.” His grip on the edge of the bed loosens just a tad. “Because I’ve been dating Rose since Thanksgiving.”

Suddenly I understand why my father hauled off and clocked Holy. I kind of feel like rising from the bed and doing the same to him. And my best friend. “You’ve been *what?*”

“So you see,” he dodges my question, “I couldn’t call the cops on Howard because I might as well call them on myself. Rose isn’t pregnant,” Marcus eyes my stomach, “but we have, well, we’ve been intimate,” he says with a blush.

All these months of worrying about what my father would say about Holy and I being together and for what? For him to tell me that he’s just as guilty as Holy? For him to throw in the towel on being an ass because he and Holy have a penchant for high school girls?

“Rose didn’t turn eighteen until December,” I point out.

He throws his hands in the air and takes a step back. “I didn’t touch her until she turned eighteen. Before that, we were only talking. I swear.”

I can’t believe my best friend didn’t tell me she was dating my father. I thought we were closer than that. “Did you go out with her in September?” I remember when Holy and I went on our first date, he was on a date that night, too. And he wouldn’t tell me who he was with.

“No,” Marcus replies solemnly. “I went out with your dance teacher, Miss Rae. But we didn’t have much in common, and it ended there.”

Oh, my God. That woman doesn’t quit. First, she flirts with Holy, and then she goes after my father?

But I get it. They’re both attractive men. Holy makes me feel like if the apocalypse came, he would save me from being eaten by a zombie. And my father is a very stable man who is comfortable in his place in life. They’re good men, and they deserve good women, which brings me back to my best

friend, who is one of the greatest women that I know.

Rose and I have been best friends since we were twelve. We've told each other our deepest, darkest secrets, or at least, I thought we did. I may have told her about Holy, but she hid her love for my father from me. I can't be upset about that, though. She also saved my father from making a terrible mistake. She saved him from firing the man I love and getting him arrested.

"I want to talk to Rose," I decide.

"Not Howard?" He asks.

I almost forgot about my boyfriend. There's so much that I need to address with everyone in my life that I don't know where to start. "Holy first," I say after a moment. "But then I want to talk to Rose."

My father goes to make the arrangements. I'm surrounded by the whir of medical machines and my thoughts. I'm angry that my best friend and my father would hide something like this from me. But I'm also glad that their forbidden relationship saved mine. I have mixed feelings, and I'm not quite sure what to do. I sit with them and wait for the love of my life to be brought to me, wondering if, perhaps, he might have the answers.

When Holy arrives, he has an arm slung around my father's neck. Now that I know the two of them fought, I can make out my father's swollen nose. But Holy's injuries could be from the car crash or the fight; I'm not sure which.

A tear slides down Holy's face as he walks over to my side of the bed, leaning down to press his lips to my forehead. "Baby," he whispers, "you're okay."

I feel dead inside. Between the surgery, the accident, and the truths that came out because of both, I am ready to sleep for a week. But I press my forehead to Holy's and revel in our closeness. I wish I could wrap my arms around him, but it hurts to move. "I'm okay, and so is our baby. The doctor said if we can make it another five weeks, we'll be in good shape." I'll be thirty-two weeks along then. Our baby's chances of survival will skyrocket if he stays in the womb for a few weeks longer.

Holy reaches out with his casted hand to touch the swell of my stomach. "Five weeks, huh? You just gotta make it to graduation," he jokes.

We've said those words before, but back then, we were talking about keeping this secret from my father. Now Marcus knows everything, but graduation is still the finish line. "It's going to be okay," I tell him.

My father clears his throat from the back of the room. When we both turn to look at him, he wears an impossible-to-decipher look on his face. "Howard, I'll be honest, you aren't the kind of guy I thought my daughter would date. I thought she'd find a nice boy in college or something. I didn't expect her to get involved with some motorcycle-riding thug."

"Hey!" I chastise.

Marcus presses on. "But your buddies seemed real nice back there. A little predatory, but I'm guessing that you told them about our fight."

Holy nods and looks at me to explain. "Saint is my emergency contact. When we got brought in, the hospital called him. He and some of the guys headed right over." Best friends. They're something else. "They showed up about an hour after my fight with your dad and have been waiting around ever since. Saint kept pestering the nurse for updates about you," he says with a grin. Leave it to the man that hated me in the beginning to be my biggest cheerleader.

"As I was saying," my dad interrupts, "you all seem nicer than I thought you'd be. Less leather and gangster."

"That's because they're a club, Dad, not a gang."

He smiles softly at me. "Nevertheless. There's a lot that the three of us need to talk about, but for now, you have my blessing. As long as you continue to keep your relationship under wraps until the school year ends," he stipulates.

I don't know when I started crying, but tears are spilling down my cheeks. I can't believe it took an accident to get us here. "Thank you, Daddy." All I've wanted since this all began was his approval.

And now we have it.

DANIELLE



Being young means compromising.

Compromising who you want to be with the person that your parents expect you to become. It is a seemingly impossible balancing act trying to be the obedient daughter your parents want and the free spirit you feel like you could be if you spread your wings. It leaves a mark on your soul when you can't be yourself, a mark that you'll look back on for the rest of your life.

But I'm one of the lucky ones.

My father expected me to become a teacher. He wanted me to help kids by helping them get a proper education. He wanted good things for me, like a safe man with a good heart.

But when I told him I wanted to become a social worker, he was okay with that, too. When I told him I was going to go to K-State so I could be close to friends and family while raising my baby, he couldn't have been happier. When I told him that Holy and I were going to get married, he asked to walk me down the aisle.

My father has had expectations for me since I was born, but he has tempered those expectations with reality. I am not the woman he thought I would be; I am so much better.

"It's a good thing you live nearby," Marcus's face twists into a scowl as he heaves another box into the bed of Holy's pick-up truck. He wipes his aching hands on his jeans and steps back, letting out an exasperated sigh. "I'm going

to need some serious grandson time to make up for this loss."

I roll my eyes at his dramatics. "Dad, please. It isn't like you're going to be alone. Rose has wanted to go to K-State since she toured the campus at fifteen."

He sniffs and shakes his head. "It's not the same. I'm losing my baby girl." Dad drops the box on the ground and comes over to hug me. His beard is scratchy against my cheek, and his arms are strong as they wrap around me. He holds me as if I'm going off to war.

"Oh, god," I groan at him, "you aren't losing me. I'm literally moving five minutes away. I'm going to be in town. I can still come over for dinner every night if you *really* want me to."

He pulls away dramatically and puts his hands on my shoulders. "Do you mean that? Because I'd love to have you come back for dinner tonight. I'm thinking ribs on the grill."

Holy snorts as he grabs the box my father just dropped and loads it into the truck. "We're having HuHot for dinner, Mr. Fulton. You should come with us," he invites.

Marcus slowly pivots to face Holy, a man only a decade younger than he. His brow knits, and his jaw clamps tight as he glares at my fiancé. "HuHot is going to give Danielle acid reflux," he chastises.

"Hey, don't look at me," Holy defends himself by throwing his hands in the air. "She's the one that asked to go."

I rub my growing belly for sympathy and push my bottom lip into a pout. "Guys, this might be the last chance I have to get HuHot before the baby is born."

Holy shakes his head. "She's been using that excuse for a month now. Ever since she passed thirty-two weeks," he says with an exasperated roll of his eyes. "Don't listen to her."

"But it's true," I whine. "The doctor said he could be born any day."

"I hope he is," Holy grins, "it'll give you more time to rest before classes start

in August. If you keep him in until the end of July, you'll only have three weeks to recover. Maybe four."

That seems like plenty, but all the baby books say six weeks or more are ideal. "Regardless," I ignore Holy, "I think we deserve HuHot after a day like today. It's hot and gross, and I don't want to cook."

That's something we can all agree on. My dad shrugs his shoulders, and Holy nods his head. I know I've won the battle when they start discussing when we will meet up.

Marcus exhales heavily and gives me a resigned expression. "Alright, fine," he says finally, "but you should get the mildest sauce possible. Or plan to drink a lot of milk. I hear that helps with heartburn when you're pregnant."

I grin triumphantly and clap my hands together in excitement. I'll be honest; I never thought we'd get to a place of peace and happiness between the three of us. Or if we did get here, I expected it to be with a lot of kicking and screaming. But fate has a funny way of working out when you least expect it to.

Holy and Marcus will never be best friends. They're in the same age group, but the most I can hope for is a friendly relationship between my father and my fiancé. And frankly, that's enough for me.

"Maybe you can invite Rose," I suggest in the middle of their conversation about back-to-school activities in the fall. "To dinner, I mean."

The two of us are still working on repairing our friendship. When I got out of the hospital and spoke to her, we both said some things we didn't mean. Anger got the best of us, and we've apologized a dozen times since, but we're still working through the tense moments that occasionally crop up.

My dad leans against the truck to think about it. "You'd be alright with that?" He asks after a minute.

I know he's struggled with whose side to take in this fight. Rose makes him happy, but I'm his daughter, and he doesn't want to lose me over a relationship. He tries to remain neutral, but I can tell this is killing him.

"Of course," I reply breezily. "She and I can talk about the fall semester at K-

State while the two of you discuss what events you're going to put on for the high school kids." It's a friendly jest, but both of them roll their eyes.

Life isn't perfect. I'm not sure it ever will be. But it's a comfortable work in progress, and I am embracing every twist and turn it has to throw at me.

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